

VALÉRIE BELIN / BIOGRAPHY

Born 1964 in Boulogne-Billancourt. Lives and works in Paris.

Valérie Belin trained at the École Nationale des Beaux-arts in Bourges from 1983 to 1988, then went on to study the philosophy of art at the Université Panthéon-Sorbonne in Paris, where she was awarded a Diplôme d'Études Approfondies in 1989.

Even at the beginning of her studies, Belin's practice of photography was informed by a concern with the medium's intrinsic properties, leading her to explore and develop its aesthetic potential. She often compares her approach to that of American minimalist artists such as Robert Morris and Robert Ryman. Her first works were photographs of light sources, looking like X-rays, or pure imprints of light.

In 1994 Belin had her first exhibition in Paris, featuring a series of black-and-white photographs of objects in crystal. To make this series Belin worked to a strict, minimalist protocol: the photographs were taken on-site, in ambient light, without any kind of set. What arises from these pieces, paradoxically, is an aesthetics of presence, the vehicle of which is an imprint, experienced as a trace or a memory of the object. Up until the late 1990s, Belin's style developed through a number of series, bringing out a "truth" of the object by stripping it of the anecdotal background and any expression linked to its individuality. The object here is subjected to an uncompromising process of objectification, and its representation seems to turn against itself because of its over-insistence; the philosophical subject that it legislates is kept at a distance, defused, stripped of its drama, as if completely dissolving in the photograph.

In 1999 the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs exhibited her *Bodybuilders* series, marking the first appearance of the human figure in her work. The knobbly, metallic bodies of these subjects convey the ambiguity that always obtains in Belin's work: objects and beings are photographed as if "beyond themselves," for their capacity to convert their image into a kind of evocation of absence.

In 2000 the HSBC Foundation for Photography published the first monograph on the artist.

Between 2000 and 2003 Valérie Belin worked on a number of monumental, black-and-white series exploring existential questions and the nature of identity. The *Transsexuels*, for example, focused on the frontiers of identity in relation to gender, while the intensely sculptural faces of the *Femmes*

noires examined the filter of culture and its projections. The culmination of this work on the portrait was the *Mannequins de vitrine*, shop-window dummies that seem paradoxically more emotionally alive than real beings. And yet these photographs scrupulously avoid the spectacular; on the contrary, they exude a feeling of abstraction that stands in singular contrast with the subject. If identity is the theme here, then it is identity in its most elusive form.

Belin's photography of the mid-2000s is notable for the mixture of the spectacular and austere in its treatment of its subjects, excluding any element of narrative or documentary. By now, her corpus was substantial, going from twenty-five to thirty photographic series, all based on a subtle play of repetitions and variations relating to a form of abstraction in photography. The absolute frontality of the viewpoint, radical two-dimensionality, the absence of context and the monumentality of the formats bestowed iconic status on the various subjects, chosen for their power as expressions of the uncertainties and paradoxes of life.

The year 2006 saw growing interest in Belin's work from specialist photographic institutions in Europe and beyond. Many American and French museums acquired her pieces, notably the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris, the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, and the Palais Galliera in Paris.

2006 was also marked by the appearance of colour in Belin's work, thereby introducing a new ambiguity regarding the real and the virtual. The photographic medium was enriched by new technologies, reshaping the presentation of being. The colour portraits of 2006 are marked by the almost technological dimension of their beauty, evoking the aesthetic of the avatar.

In 2007 a retrospective of Belin's work was coproduced by three major museums specialising in photography: the Huis Marseille foundation in Amsterdam, the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris and the Musée de l'Élysée in Lausanne. The German publisher Steidl produced a second monograph on the artist.

In the works that followed, Belin moved away from an "indexical" conception of photography and towards a more "magical" form of realism. She positioned her objects in relation to the evolutions of the day. Her new works showed a hybrid nature, placing the subject between the organic and the sublime. The gigantic photographs of baskets of fruits in electric colours, exhibited at the Musée d'Orsay in 2008, and an ensemble of works in black and white, shown for the first time at Galerie Jérôme de Noirmont that same year, are indicative of this stylistic evolution. The *Ballroom Dancers*

series, made in 2008, reflects Belin's interest in the simulacrum and in simulation, and in the mimesis at work in any representation. In this case the intention is active from the outset, through the poses required of the dancer, who thus becomes a photograph even before being photographed.

In 2008 Belin exhibited at the Norton Museum of Art in Palm Beach, Florida, alongside Bill Viola and Hiroshi Sugimoto. In 2009 the Peabody Essex Museum organised what was her first solo show in an American museum. In July 2009 she was made a *chevalier* in France's Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

The end of the 2000s saw her pursue new directions. Made in 2008, the *Vintage Cars* series can be said to constitute a "counterpoint" to the series of damaged cars made ten years earlier. Where the older series offered an imagined "realism," here the artist proceeded to make her subject unreal or virtual, using all the resources afforded by the photographic medium, in order to attain a certain paroxysm of representation.

Belin's work has evolved constantly, always in phase with the evolutions of the photographic medium itself. Where before this was essentially analogue, it is now much more a matter of calculation, intention, manipulation, information and imprinting. In the great Baroque tradition, and often with great felicitousness, jubilation and imagination, Valérie Belin tests all the artifices available to her, in terms of the processing of sounds and colours, solarisation, superimposition, saturation and accumulation. The mixing of genres and subjects is also part of the process: urban setting, theatre sets, bucolic scenes, sex shops and fast food outlets, queens, misses and newlyweds, burlesque dancers and cheap glitz. The mixing of these images and of genres creates a visual and semantic shock that is resolved in the fusion of forms and metamorphosis. This process has produced the series *Crowned Heads* (2009), *Black Eyed Susan* (2010-2013), *Stage Sets* (2011), *Bob* (2012), *Still life* (2014), *Super Models* (2015) and *All Star* (2016).

In addition to photography, Belin has also worked with video and live performance. In 2011 she presented a video work as part of an installation in Rio de Janeiro, in which she reprised each of the photographs in her *Black Eyed Susan* series as a "fixed image," over which she superimposed a moving video image, accompanying these with repetitive electronic music. These disruptive motifs, forming a kind of "electronic background noise," are added over the original motif, as if to further blur our interpretation, rather like an advertising message. In 2013 she conceived a live performance for the Centre Pompidou, revisiting one of her earlier photographic series (*Michael Jackson*, 2003),

“resuscitating” it on stage as so many equivalent tableaux vivants, as if one could move constantly from life to waxwork, and from waxwork to life.

In 2010 one of her works (*Black Eyed Susan*) was acquired by the Kunsthhaus Zürich. In 2013, she showed at the Edwynn Houk gallery in New York and the Multimedia Art Museum in Moscow mounted a retrospective. In 2014 she exhibited her latest works (*Still Life*) at Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Brussels and an ensemble of her recent series at the Fondation DHC ART in Montreal.

In 2015, Belin was honoured with a solo exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, “The Unquiet Images,” which covered several periods of her production. Also in 2015, she was awarded the prestigious Prix Pictet (sixth edition), following which her work was shown at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and in other European museums such as the MAXXI in Rome.

In 2016, Nathalia Obadia exhibited her latest series, *All Star*, in her Parisian gallery. Belin’s earlier works also featured in a number of group shows at institutions such as the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

The year 2017 has seen the publication of a second monograph with Damiani, while Belin’s work has been included in major exhibitions at the Fondation Cartier, the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire du Judaïsme, the Musée de Design et d’Arts Appliqués Contemporains in Lausanne, and the Fondation Fernet Branca in Saint-Louis, among others. A third one-person shown in New York was held at Edwynn Houk Gallery, and a touring exhibition was co-produced by the Three Shadows Photography Art Center in Beijing, the SCôP in Shanghai and the Chengdu Museum. Finally, the Institut Culturel Bernard Magrez in Bordeaux also hosted a monographic exhibition.