

MUSÉE MAGAZINE

VALÉRIE BELIN

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WEBZINE

Valérie Belin

1. *When did you first start taking pictures?*

I started taking pictures when I was a student in an art school in France, in the mid-80s. My first influences were the American Minimalists. My first photographs were photographs of light, mirrors and transparent objects.

2. *There are some intentionally revealing details left on your mannequins, for instance some of the joint lines are still visible on the mannequins arms. Why choose to leave those details in?*

I have always aimed to photograph things “as they are”—in the spirit, ultimately, of straight photography. The first photos of shop-window mannequins that I took in 2003 are realistic. You could even call them hyperrealist. At first you think they’re portraits of living models, then you realize that it’s an illusion, because of the telltale details of the textures and the imperfections. For the *Super Models* series, which I made in 2015, the mannequins are photographed naked: you can see the joints at the pelvis and on the legs. Mannequins are made to be dressed, so there’s something obscene about photographing them naked. These mannequins are in fact articulated puppets, and I show them as just that.

3. *When did you start shooting mannequins in lieu of real people and why?*

I began by photographing objects: smashed-up cars, carcasses of meat, etc. In 1999 I started making portraits of living models. These were highly stereotyped: bodybuilders, transsexuals, lookalikes, and girls from modeling agencies. I photographed these subjects as if they were inanimate objects, lifeless, because they themselves were reproductions of models. In 2003 I came

round to photographing those models themselves, as if they were living persons. What I wanted to do was photograph living persons and objects in the same way.

4. *How do you alter the mannequins to get exactly what you're looking for?*

I don't make any alterations when I take the pictures. The mannequins are photographed "as found." In the *Super Models* series the artifice is to superimpose a geometrical motif over the image. This motif creates a perturbation. My method is to assemble the "raw" materials, in a slightly brutalist way.

5. *You tend to explore the concepts of perfection and falseness. When did these themes begin to emerge in your work?*

I started thinking about these themes when, for example, I photographed lookalikes. The subject aims for perfection, but it's fake.

6. *What interests you about the idea of perfection as a construct?*

Any attempt to achieve perfection ends up with a grotesque representation. A lookalike is never perfect. It is "almost" perfect. It's the details that bring down the edifice of representation. Photography is an instrument of deconstruction, not to say *demolition*.

7. *Your series "Black Eyed Susan" features women that epitomize 1950s beauty. What interests you about beauty standards from this particular era?*

Without a doubt the fact that in those days the stereotype was a dominant model of representation. That was also the era of our parents and of the films of Alfred Hitchcock, which conveyed the image of a certain kind of cold, glacial beauty.

8. *Your fruit basket still lifes are rich and painterly. What inspired this style?*

Painting has always been a source of inspiration for me, and the still life is a major genre in painting and the visual arts. In this particular case I photographed real baskets of fruit, with genuine fruit, but the result looks very artificial. Yet I didn't use any particular artifice, except, perhaps, the color: the fruits were so perfect that they seemed artificial.

9. *How do you go about choosing the objects for your still lifes? To what extent is their arrangement planned and to what extent is it organic?*

I choose very banal objects, nothing “precious.” Like ordinary consumer objects, useless gadgets. I then try to construct a still life, “in the time-honored way,” or according to “tradition.” That does effectively result in organic compositions. When I photographed car engines in 2002, it was their organic appearance that interested me. I didn’t start trying to make my own compositions until later on.

10. *What do you want your audience to come away with when they look at your work?*

I’m not trying to cause particular sensations. However, I do think that my photographs must give an “uncanny” impression when one looks at them, to reference a very Freudian concept. This feeling of unease comes from the doubt you experience when, for example, you fail to recognize your own reflection in a window or a mirror.

11. *In the Crowned Heads series, your subjects’ faces are blurred. Why did you make this decision?*

I superimposed different “poses” for the same portrait. It’s a technique that has been used almost since the origins of photography. I used digital technology but you could get the same result by superimposing film. The specificities of the medium have always been very important in my work, and today the medium of photography is digital. It allows greater freedom as regards abstraction.

12. *Where did your series with the computers originate from?*

I started using digital technologies in 2006, with my second series of models. What I first liked about digital technologies was that you can control the image at the printing stage. Then digital processing naturally came more and more to the fore.

13. *When did you first make the decision to produce work in color? Why did that transition come about?*

It was precisely when I started using digital technologies that I began photographing “in color.” It was the “natural” choice to make, as it suited my subject and my project. I’m sure, too, that it was a kind of “challenge.”

14. *You deal with the subject of women often in your work. What are you trying to communicate about or with women?*

What interests me, more generally, is the representation of bodies and stereotypes. I have also photographed men (bodybuilders), men and women models—and transsexuals, whose gender is

more "indeterminate." But I think that the question of the model or stereotype concerns women more. I'm not trying to convey a particular message, more to provoke a feeling of unease.

15. *Could you tell me about some of your earlier series, like the one with the dresses in coffins, and how you look at them now, ten years later?*

I see them as things that I have done and that, in a way, no longer belong to me. Let's say they simply bring back memories, but the only thing that interests me is the work that I will be doing tomorrow.

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