

GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA

BRUSSELS

VALÉRIE BELIN

China Girls

Thursday 15 November - Saturday 22 December



Valérie Belin, *Opaline Crystal Flask (China Girls)*, 2018.

Pigment print back-mounted on Dibond, 177 × 134 × 5 cm (69 11/16 × 52 3/4 × 1 31/32 in.) framed.

Galerie Nathalie Obadia is very pleased to present *China Girls*, French artist Valérie Belin's third solo exhibition. In the line of *Super Models* (2015), *All Star* (2016), and *Painted Ladies* (2017), this new series of photographs, realized in 2018, depicts young women posing "like actresses incarnating imaginary characters." The title is directly borrowed from the vocabulary of the motion picture industry from the 1950s. Originally, a "China Girl" designated an anonymous actress who held the cameraman's grayscale, used to calibrate the opening image in the reel leader, when processing the film. By extension, "China Girl" became the generic term to identify this first image.

This secondary role assigned to actresses gave rise to the stereotypical pose that Valérie Belin subtly reinterprets in her portraits, which depict three young women who are all strangely similar, aesthetically speaking, to the point that it is hard to tell them apart in the photographs that make up the series. Like contemporary geishas, they embody, according to the artist, "the role of a beautiful captive, inhabiting a wonderful environment." Elegantly dressed, they kneel in the middle of a décor that is dense with motifs and knickknacks (oddities, fake antiquities, vases and bowls filled with flowers and fruit, etc.). The types of porcelain she uses (otherwise known as china) were the inspiration for each of the titles: *Bohemian Glass Cup*, *Opaline Crystal Flask*, or even *Swan Neck Vase*.

The phantasmagorical atmosphere that Valérie Belin's works exude fits in with the exuberance of their setting, saturated with details, similarly to baroque still lifes. The comparison was already true for her series *Still Life* (2014), which, in its own way, evoked Dutch Golden Age painting in terms of the extreme density of images. It reaches its climax here, in the complex backdrops made up of excerpts of American comic strips and other elements, floral for example.

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The pictorially refined superimpositions of motifs compose lush landscapes that play an analogous role to that of the imaginary landscapes that make up the backgrounds of important portraits in the history of old master painting, from Leonardo da Vinci to Joshua Reynolds. While these landscaped backgrounds were primarily decorative, from the 18th century on, they also began to serve the function of reflecting the model's psychology, exactly the same way that Valérie Belin does it with her *China Girls*. Thanks to the techniques of *matte painting*¹ and overprint, the artist manages to blur the different planes and to create the illusion of scenery that is at once material and sensory, in which each element contributes to the psychological tension of the entire photographic series, which is in itself conceived as a “mental landscape” where *China Girls* are prisoners. These strange geishas, “delicate as flowers and strong and supple as willows” (according to the Japanese definition), are somehow transposed from a dream into an allegorical décor imagined by the artist.

By confronting backgrounds and abundant details in her compositions, Valérie Belin accentuates the general dramaturgy of the series, and progressively leads the spectator toward an unfamiliar sense of unease. The mysterious—unreal even—climate that emanates from each image is reminiscent of *Blow-Up* [Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960], and in particular of that key sequence in the movie where blowing up a photograph reveals, in the background, the traces of a murder, leaving us to wonder if it did actually occur. In the game of cinematographic references, Valérie Belin also summons up that famous scene in the movie *Vertigo* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1958], when the destiny of the protagonist merges with that of her ancestor “through a painting”—and more precisely, “through the attention given to the details in this painting” (the wavy hairdo, the patterns on the dress, the jewel on her chest, the bouquet of flowers laying on the bench...). In *China Girls*, we find the same deep preoccupation with detail and the same evocative power of images. The objects are imbued with a destabilizing fetishistic dimension. In 2003, Valérie Belin already interrogated the very role of the image with her series *Mannequins*. The same interrogations are also present in the series *China Girls*, where the models, though alive, seem frozen “like porcelain dolls.” The light contributes to this trickery, by casting shadows on the bodies and especially on the faces, which are inhabited by an impenetrable look that seems, according to the artist, to be “absorbed by a sort of interior and exterior off-camera.”

In short, there are no stars in the eyes of Valérie Belin's *China Girls*. Instead, there is a glimmer of eternity, reflecting their condition as “beautiful captives.” Their suspended, willingly melancholy gazes exacerbate, along with elements of the scenery, the feeling of suspense, sublimated in every scene the artist imagines. Together, they paint a “mental landscape” heightened thanks to the refinement of the *mise en scène* and the dramatic use of chiaroscuro. This art of dissimulation and perversion is the distinctive brand of works by Valérie Belin, who, for the last twenty years, has continuously explored—between dream and truth, between fantasy and reality—the range of possible representation of animate and inanimate beings.



Valérie Belin, *Sans titre (Série Mannequins)*, 2003.
Gelatin silver print, 160 × 130 cm (62 × 51 1/8 in.) framed.

¹. Montage technique frequently used in fantasy and science fiction movies, as early as the 1930s. Matte painting consists in painting a trompe l'oeil décor on a flat surface, around an empty space which would frame the actors. It offered greater flexibility on movie sets by allowing cinematographers to unleash their imagination and their creativity.

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Born in 1964, in Boulogne-Billancourt, Valérie Belin lives and works in Paris.

Holding a diploma from the *École Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Bourges (France, 1983-1988)* and a diploma in advanced studies (DEA) in philosophy of art from *Université Panthéon-Sorbonne in Paris (France, 1989)*, Valérie Belin, who gained recognition from her emblematic series «Mannequins», in 2003, is considered to be one of the most important artists of her generation, both on the French and international artistic scenes.

She was in fact the subject of important monographic exhibitions, including, “Valérie Belin: Meta-Clichés” (traveling exhibition) at *Three Shadows Photography Art Center, Beijing* and at *SCôP (Shanghai Center of Photography) in Shanghai (China, 2017)*; “Valérie Belin” at the *Institut Culturel Bernard Magrez in Bordeaux (France, 2017)*; “Les Images intranquilles” at the *Centre Pompidou in Paris (France, 2015)*; “Surface Tension” at *DHC/ART in Montreal (Canada, 2014)*; “Illusions of Life” at *MultiMedia Art Museum in Moscow (Russia, 2014)*; “O ser e o aparecer” at the *Casa Franca-Brasil in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil, 2011)*; “Hungry Eyes” at *FotoMuseum in Antwerp (Belgium, 2011)*; “Valérie Belin: Made-up” at the *Peabody Essex Museum, Salem (USA, 2009)*; “Correspondance: Belin/Manet” at the *Musée d’Orsay in Paris (France, 2008)*; “Valérie Belin” at the *Musée de l’Élysée in Lausanne (Switzerland, 2008)* and at the *Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris (France, 2008)*.

In 2019, the *Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen (France)* will hold a solo exhibition of her work, and when the *Museum of Ixelles* will reopen, it will host the first retrospective of Valérie Belin in Belgium.

Valérie Belin won the *Prix Pictet*, in 2015, for her project, “Disorder.”

An eponymous exhibition followed and was presented, between 2015 and 2018, in France, at the *Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville in Paris* and at *Rencontres photographiques in Arles*; in the United Kingdom, at *Somerset House in London*; in Italy, at *MAXXI – Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo in Rome*; in Switzerland, at the *Musée international de la Croix-Rouge et du Croissant-Rouge in Geneva* and at the *Luma Westbau (Luma Foundation) in Zurich*; and in Belgium, at *CAB Art Center in Brussels*.

Valérie Belin also participated in numerous significant group exhibitions, including “Cent portraits – Collection Antoine de Galbert” at *Rencontres photographiques in Arles (France, 2018)*; “La photographie française existe... Je l’ai rencontrée” at the *Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris (France, 2018)*; “Barbie” at *Gwangmyeong, Seoul (South Korea, 2017)* and at the *Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris (France, 2016)*; “French Connections: Photography” at the *Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Florida (United States, 2017)*; “Golems. Avatars contemporains d’une figure d’argile” at the *Musée d’Art et d’Histoire du Judaïsme in Paris (France, 2017)*; “Autophoto” at the *Fondation Cartier pour l’Art Contemporain in Paris (France, 2017)*; “Performoeurs” at the *Fondation pour l’Art Contemporain Claudine et Jean-Marc Salomon in Annecy (France, 2016)*; “L’art et la machine” at the *Musée des Confluences in Lyon (France, 2016)*; “Dancing Light / Let it move you” at *Huis Marseille in Amsterdam (Netherlands, 2015)*; “A World of its Own : Photographic Practices in the Studio” at the *MoMA – Museum of Modern Art in New York (United States, 2014)*; “Parade” at the *Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris (France, 2014)*; “L’œil photographique, Œuvres majeures de la collection du Cnap – Centre national des arts plastique” at the *Fonds Régional d’Art Contemporain Auvergne in Clermont-Ferrand (France, 2014)*; “Falsefakes” at the *Centre de la Photographie in Geneva (Switzerland, 2013)*; “La photographie en France, 1950-2000” at the *Maison Européenne de la Photographie (France, 2013)*; “Women take over” at the *Seattle Art Museum (United States, 2012)*; “Pictures by Women: A History of Modern Photography” at the *MoMA – Museum of Modern Art in New York (United States, 2010)*.

In 2019, the *National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne (Australia)* will invite Valérie Belin to participate in an important touring exhibition, that will subsequently travel to the *Auckland Art Gallery (New Zealand, 2020)*; then to the *Musée des Civilisations de l’Europe et de la Méditerranée in Marseille (France, 2020)*.

Valérie Belin’s works are held by prestigious public and private collections, including, in the United States, in New York, at the *MoMA – Museum of Modern Art*, the *International Center for Photography*, the *JP Morgan Chase Art Program* and the *Neuberger Berman Inc. Collection*; in Los Angeles, at *LACMA – Los Angeles County Museum of Art* and the *Capital Group Companies Inc.*; in San Francisco, at the *San Francisco Museum of Modern Art* and the *Pilara Family Foundation*; in West Palm Beach, at the *Norton Museum of Art*; in Salem, at the *Peabody Essex Museum*; in France, in Paris, at the *Musée national d’Art moderne*, *Centre Georges-Pompidou*, the *Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris*, the *Maison Européenne de la Photographie*, the *Musée Galliera*, the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, the *Fondation Cartier pour l’Art Contemporain*, the *Fondation Antoine de Galbert*, the *Collection Société Générale d’art contemporain*, the *Fondation NSM Vie/ABN-AMRO*, the *Groupe Altadis*, the *MAC/VAL – Musée d’Art contemporain du Val-de-Marne in Vitry-sur-Seine*, the *FNAC – Fonds national d’art contemporain*, the *Fondation HSBC pour la photographie*; in Belgium, at the *Collection Lhoist in Limelette*; in Luxembourg, at the *MUDAM – Musée d’art moderne Grand-Duc Jean* and the *UBS Art Collection*; in the Netherlands, at the *Huis Marseille in Amsterdam*; in Switzerland, at the *Musée de l’Élysée in Lausanne*, the *Kunsthaus in Zurich*, and the *Collection Pictet in Geneva*; in Germany, at the *E.ON Art Collection in Essen*; in Austria, in the *Essl Collection in Vienna*; in Australia, at the *National Gallery of Australia*, *Parkes ACT in Canberra*; and in South Korea, at the *National Museum of Contemporary Art Korea in Seoul*.

Valérie Belin has been represented by *Galerie Nathalie Obadia Paris/Brussels* since 2013.

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Brussels

Valérie Belin

China Girls

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9 January - 16 February, 2019

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Nú Barreto

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8 November - 29 December, 2018

Carole Benzaken

12 January - 23 February, 2019

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Bourg-Tibourg

Wang Keping

Sculptures sculptées

9 November - 29 December, 2018

Carole Benzaken

12 January - 23 February, 2019