

Brian Sholis, *Vitamin Ph, New perspectives in Photography*, Phaidon, London, 2006.

After receiving a fine art degree in 1987, Paris-based photographer Valérie Belin studied the philosophy of art - with a focus on Minimalism - at the Sorbonne, and her education has left its mark on the black-and-white photographs she has produced during the past twenty years. These pictures, printed in medium to large formats, are marked by formal restraint, overabundant detail, amplified contrast between black and white, and a cool, keen intelligence. Much like the photographs themselves, in which it is easy to lose sight of the whole image when one is peering closely at details, it can be difficult to grasp Belin's project as a whole, especially considering that in recent years she has photographed crisp packets, bodybuilders, brides wearing traditional Moroccan wedding dress, robots, transsexuals, crashed cars, lace, hunks of meat, mannequins and ornate mirrors. Although Belin works in series, her individual photographs are not conceptually subservient to those in which they are grouped. With their plethora of finely described detail and their serial presentation, they hover somewhere between "specific objects", to use Donald Judd's term for minimalist sculptures, and illustration of a type. Their location in this luminal space between individuation and exemplification is perhaps the strongest thread connecting these disparate but similarly made photographs. One commentator, extrapolating from one of Belin's series, characterized this ambiguous zone as akin to an *entre deux*, a French term for a thin strip of lace inserted between two larger pieces of fabric.

Within this overarching framework, it is tempting to draw connecting lines linking several of Belin's photographic series: one can consider the instability of identity when looking at her portraits of mannequins, models, Michael Jackson impersonators and transsexuals; reflect upon the ways we alter or disguise our body when looking at her photographs of bodybuilders and brides in Moroccan wedding gowns; and ponder the nature of seeing and photographic mediation when looking at her early images of ornately framed mirrors or recent pictures of crisp packets and discarded computer equipments. Belin has refrained from commenting on these connections, ascribing neither iconographic nor thematic until to her subject matter.

Each picture stands on its own, and, in its austerity, frontality and particularity, is a forceful presence, a revelatory description of the surface of an object via the light reflected off it or passing through it. Of course, no matter how "realist" her pictures are, they are never solely documentary or archival, a fact emphasized by the confusion, at close range, between the surface texture of what she is photographing and the grain of the print itself. Belin's photographs are perhaps better considered as re-embodiments rather than reproductions of her subjects. Their austerity belies their immense complexity.