

Pierre Wat, *Memento Mori*.

In the occasion of *Valerie Bélin, photographies 1997-1998*, Centre d'art contemporain de Vassivière en Limousin, Beaumont-du-Lac; Galerie Xippas, Paris, 1999.

Memento Mori

“Recall the object that we have seen, my soul,
On that beautiful summer morning so sweet:
At the turn of a path, an infamous carrion
Upon a bed sawn with pebbles”

Charles Baudelaire

Valérie Belin photographs glasses, carafes, silver platters, mirrors, wedding dresses, paintings glimpsed in store windows, wrecked cars, meat markets, flowers... Each motif gives rise to a series, until its possibilities are exhausted. Belin advances by accumulation, from series to series.

Despite the variety, there is no incoherence, no desire to establish a cold and objective inventory of the real, to draw up an interminable list of the world's objects. The logic, the profound unity of this artist's work lies elsewhere: in her way of looking at the world.

Though removed, the photographer's gaze is not neutral. Far from submitting to the order of things, Valérie Belin gives the world back to us *according to* her vision. A vision which fragments, a vision which searches out the fragmentation at the heart of each thing. Like these photos of carafes, where the objects seem to be fractured, splintering into multiple facets that integrate into and saturate the image's field. Like these wrecked cars, like these pieces of meat – anatomical fragments.

Valérie Belin uses the means that photography – the pre-eminent realistic medium – offers her to shake up our usual perception of what we call reality. Each object is very closely framed, isolated, cut off from any context, deprived of those elements that would enable the viewer to transform the image into a story. Each photo is printed in a very large format in order to alter the scale and the nature of what was captured on film. And finally, each photo is in black and white: a way of fighting against the illusionism of the images. Also, a way of rendering more clearly, of emphatically exposing, certain details that the use of color would tend to obliterate.

All the tension of Valérie Belin's work resides in this double movement, in this balancing between two opposite poles: an abstract pole and a naturalistic pole. On one hand, Valérie Belin is seeking, in an almost obsessive way, to render what she has seen, and even, to be more exact, to render *more* than what she has seen. On the other hand, the treatment she inflicts on the world's objects makes them lose their usual appearance, in favor of highlighting the possibilities of the photographic medium.

Valérie Belin takes photographs as one would perform an autopsy. With a scalpel. From the outside towards the inside. First, by attacking the skin to better discover the secret that it only masks.

Through her examination, through her austerity, the artist's works bring us back to the essence of photography: black, white, light. Yet, there is no formalism, no temptation to make purely abstract photography, but rather a way of approaching things that can never be satisfied with surface appearances. Indeed, the photographer does not look at the world, she attacks it. Frontally, face to face. Taking photographs, here, does not distance things, it confronts them. If there is a unifying theme in this artist's work, it certainly lies there: in this violence which lurks at the heart of seemingly cold images. A violence, sometimes, of subject matter, such as when she works with car wrecks. However, it is above all, it is essentially, a violence of treatment, which makes these objects explode, fragment, break apart, collapse into ruin, even the objects the most devoid of tragic potential: flowers, a carafe. For Valérie Belin, each photo is a battle with the chosen motif. Taking pictures of flowers is to try to overcome the obstacle of the picturesque, taking pictures of glassware or Venetian mirrors is to confront the threat of Kitsch, of cuteness, of prettiness. Confronting, in other words meeting head-on, frontally, in order to overcome. Because that is really what it is about, here, using photography against the deceptive prettiness of the world. Taking photographs in order to denounce appearances, to reveal the chaos that teems under each thing. Far from indicating some sort of incoherence, the diversity of the chosen motifs takes on here all its meaning. Each series is the hidden face of another. The meat lies behind the flowers. *Memento mori*: remember that you will die, the Romans said. It calls to mind what Charles Baudelaire wrote about Eugène Delacroix' *Femmes d'Alger*: "his most charming and flowery painting. This little poem of an interior, full of calm and silence, cluttered with toiletry's rich materials and baubles, exhales an untold perfume of an ill-reputed place that leads us quickly towards the unsounded depths of sadness." The same inversion, the same reversibility of the picturesque into the tragic. The same use of the image as an anti-naturalistic weapon. Any object, subjected to the photographic gaze of Valérie Belin, succumbs to a loss of identity. In this way, the Venetian mirrors, so graphic, reduced to simple linear contours, can evoke Rayograms. As if the ghost of the object remained there, in place of the object itself. As if Valérie Belin's art raised the spirits of the dead.

Valérie Belin does not destroy for the simple pleasure of destroying. She is fighting against prettiness, she attacks another, higher, form of beauty. A tragic beauty, born of death's intrusion into the heart of the picturesque. If, here, man is never captured by the lens, if, in this world of glasses and mirrors, he doesn't even appear in a reflection, it is not, however, a question only of him. Of him or of his absence, of him or of absence, of the emptiness that hollows out his being from the inside, fragments it, until it reaches chaos. In fact, it is indeed man who occupied these dresses that are thread-bare from wear, it is he who drove these wrecked cars, it is to him that these cut flowers are addressed, arranged into bouquets. Under Valérie Belin's eye, each object becomes a shroud, a funeral sheet deserted by a body of which it retains only the imprint. Each object becomes – the metaphor is eminently photographic – the trace, in negative, of a presence.

To once again take up Baudelaire, Valérie Belin practices "supernaturalistic" photography. Photographs which attack the naturalistic fallacy, in order to remind us of our fragmentation, of our mortality. Being in front of a work by this artist is like being in front of a mirror that suddenly appears shattered. It is to find oneself scattered far away from where one was trying to belong. "We are all potentially chaotic beings," Friedrich Schlegel said. It is this potentiality, which Valérie

Belin's "vanités" reveal. "Vanités," or rather, traps, like the water in which Narcissus admires himself until he drowns.