

Down and dirty with Valérie Blass

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A pompadour made from black hair extensions balances on top of a slightly larger-than-lifesized mannequin: lower torso, legs and arms; a string-covered yeti or primordial sea creature slouches on a plinth, head on hand, foot resting on a bust of King Tut. Another bust, this one reminiscent of Leonardo's *David*, sprouts black ceramic vases, cats and candle holders, becomes Darth Vader-esque, post-human. Valérie Blass's work evokes a fancy dress or fetish party, with the attendant exaggerations and inversions: symbols of male and female, animal and vegetable, organic and manufactured, high and low, appear to reverse, change places and merge.

Performing from plinths and pedestals, Blass's figures gesture and emote. "Look at me, I'm a sculpture!", they seem to say, as if surprised to find themselves in the halls of high art. *Femme Panier*, 2010, with her gaudy shirt yanked over a wicker basket torso (and, perhaps, a basket case herself), and her fishnet stockings that sag at the crotch, gesticulates in both directions. Her right hand bears a bright green garden tool (Is it a missile? A weapon?); the other sports white-on-black skull and crossbones insignia, like a teenager's homemade tattoo. Often close to human scale, Blass's sculptures foster curiosity. Their visual and tactile surprises draw us close so that we can investigate the hidden possibilities of the works' crevices and folds.

Performance brings performance anxiety. Of *L'homme paille* Blass says, “the figure’s pose is so dejected, but it makes you laugh. I think the figurative always bears some relationship to pathos.”[1] Deflation meets insouciance as solid substances like iron and ceramics meet floppy materials like rubber and felt. Perhaps, these works suggest, accepting failure can be liberating. We encounter mannequins and straw men, scarecrow and puppet forms — surrogates or decoys that evoke the human but fall short. Many of these forms are faceless, if not entirely headless. Heads are covered, cloaked, masked, subsumed or nonexistent. “In every sculpture,” Blass says, “I think about a surface that hides and reveals at the same time.”[2]

Immersed in the body’s pleasures as well as its failings, Blass’s recent work gets unashamedly down and dirty. Where earlier pieces from her 2008 solo *Le plus pure apparence*, veered towards the pleasingly ornamental, her new sculpture is raucous and bawdy. *Touche de bois*, 2009, a pair of jeans hoisted over a wooden post, has a Sarah Lucas-esque vulgarity – a delight in degradation, a salty, Rabelian appreciation for absurdity and the upside-down world of the carnival. Animals figure centrally and cross-fertilize with human forms. The faux wood *Femme planche*, 2010, waits doggy-style, a trowel that mirrors the shape of her legs resting on her butt. Blass revels in the uninhibited, unsocialized animal kingdom and its intimacy with the haptic realms of smell, taste and touch.

Placed, welded, glued or cobbled together, these works are more assemblages than traditional sculptures. Rarely does Blass use conventional sculptural media and, when she does, she turns it to parodic, sometimes antagonistic, effect. Porcelain plates are broken, ruined vessels

refashioned. In *Tentation médiévale*, 2010, a knife plunges into a stone-like block in a gesture reminiscent of Louise Bourgeois. This wealth of ideas and associations does not, however, make Blass's art conceptual. Rather than departing from pre-conceived schemes, Blass works *through* materials and processes. Her improvised approach shares much with the art in the New Museum's 2007 exhibition 'Unmonumental.'^[3] Of the era of sampling that nurtured the artists' DIY approach, co-curator Laura Hoptman highlighted tendencies that resonate with Blass' bricoleur approach: "Think of the do-it-yourselfer in a basement with a glue gun. Think of a DJ. Think of a search engine."^[4]

"No respect" could be a complaint levelled at Blass, for she scavenges and samples where she chooses. Often incorporating primitive, non-Western or ancient-looking vessels and busts, she has no truck with authenticity, mysticism or tradition.

I'm not so much interested in Chinese art; I'm more interested in chinoiserie. You know? An interpretation of an interpretation of an interpretation. When I travel to other countries, I go to traditional art museums, but I also like to go to museums of decorative arts. The things there may not be good art—but they are good objects. ^[5]

That last phrase says it all. Straddling boundaries of good taste and vulgarity, Blass eschews stylistic, artistic and cultural hierarchies. Styrofoam and rubber tubing are as good as marble and porcelain. We are in the realm of Bataille: sumptuary excess mingling with the riches of the junk store and the rubbish dump. Says Blass: "I find materials on the street, sometimes at the Salvation Army or Dollarama, sometimes a special industrial shop, and I'm at the hardware store up to several times a

day. I am constantly testing materials and might have 30 to 40 research projects going on at once.” [6] The results are unlikely combinations of objects and materials – real hair with plastic limbs, string with farming tools, wicker with fishnet stockings. Improvising and rehabilitating discarded objects rather than recycling them, Blass confronts environmental degradation with eyes open and humour intact.

A recent proposal by Blass for a public artwork captures her irreverence. Combining three abstract shapes that suggest furniture covered with dustsheets, the proposed work evokes inert matter on the verge of collapse.

Alluding to the traditional, it is presented on a pedestal in the middle of the site, and yet nothing about it is traditional [...] [it] represents nothing in its hybrid form. It is only a presence, it is a version of time and memory. It makes us feel the pull of terrestrial gravity. [7]

This punkish insouciance infused Blass’s three works in the recent sculpture show ‘Nothing to Declare’ at the Power Plant.[8] *L’Homme Souci*, 2009, a headless/armless mannequin enveloped in voluptuous black hair extensions, stole the show. Like a circus ringmaster or a dom, *L’Homme Souci* stood centre stage in patent Miu Miu stilettos. On seeing the work, a friend of Blass’s remarked that its compact energy resembled that of its maker: a self-portrait, perhaps?[9] Across from it a newer, more modest black ceramic sculpture rested on a shelf. Incorporating the shapes of a light bulb, a stiletto heel, and a human figure that nestled a duck-cum-penis, it also featured a wooden hand pointing sharply upwards: cheekily, but without much ado, Blass was giving us the finger.

- [1] Leah Sandals, "Valerie Blass: Particle Collider," *Canadian Art* 26.3 (2009): 112-115. Web. 1 December 2010.
- [2] Blass in Sandals, 2010, Ibid.
- [3] "Unmonumental," The New Museum, New York, 1 December, 2007 – 9 April, 2008
- [4] Laura Hoptman, "The Unmonumental: Going to Pieces in the 21st Century," *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century*, ed. Laura Hoptman, Richard Flood, Massimilana Gioni and Trevor Smith (London: Phaidon Press, 2007): 128.
- [5] Sandals, 2010, ibid
- [6] Sandals, 2010, ibid
- [7] Blass unrealized Public Art Proposal, October 2010
- [8] "Nothing to Declare: Current Sculpture from Canada," The Power Plant, Toronto, 11 December, 2009 – 7 March, 2010.
- [9] A photograph of Blass standing next to *L'Homme Souci*, published alongside Sandal's article, showed the sculpture mirroring the artist's posture, height and attitude.