

Valérie Blass, *La poudre aux yeux: Of Smoke in Mirrors*, Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver

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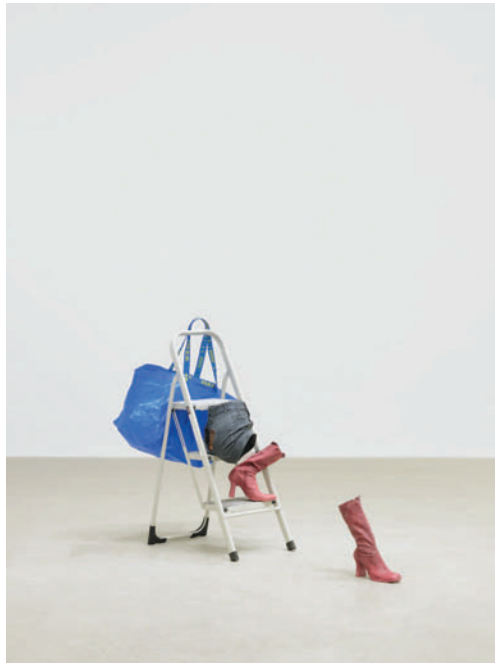
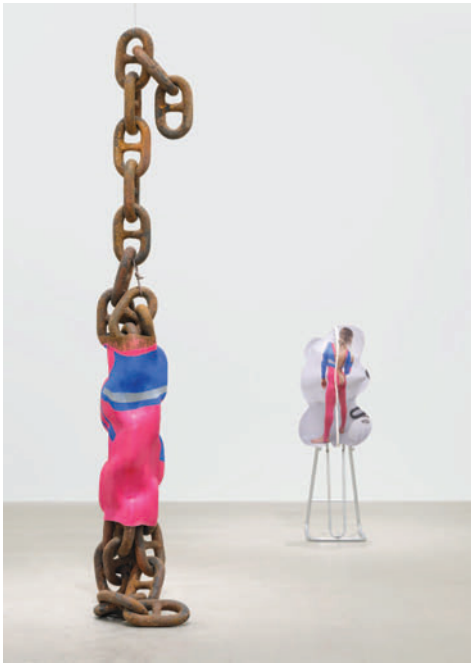
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Valérie Blass

← *Take all the time you need*, 2019, installation view, Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver, 2020.

Photo : Rachel Topham Photography, courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver

← *Ceux qui ne demandent rien*, 2019, installation view, Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver, 2020.

Photo : Rachel Topham Photography, courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver

Valérie Blass

La poudre aux yeux: Of Smoke in Mirrors

Amidst the global pandemic, most galleries have increased their online presence. Catriona Jeffries is no exception, as it offered guided virtual tours of Valérie Blass's most recent project: *La poudre aux yeux: Of Smoke in Mirrors*. For the occasion, the Sobey Prize winner grouped ten works produced over the past two years for shows at the AGO, the Oakvilles Galleries, and the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin.

The pieces in this exhibition appear to be suspended in a moment of transformation, making them unquestionably performative, while also referring to the photographic realm. In fact, both disciplines play a central role within the practice of the artist. At the onset of the project, performers were invited into the artist's studio where they dressed up and performed for Blass's camera. This preparatory studio session seems to have informed the entire production.

L'homme réparé is the first work one encounters. It consists of a pair of denim shorts sitting atop a barricade pole. This piece, along with two others nearby—*L'homme augmenté* and *L'homme préservé*—form a trilogy that provides a synopsis of the three main avenues of research that have defined Blass's practice over the past few years: the suggestion of a bodily presence, the deceiving potential of transformed materials, and the clever weaving of photography, performance, and painting into complex sculptural forms.

This exhibition is a further testament to Blass's interest in games of perception, *trompe l'oeil* specifically. In the second room of the gallery, a column of rusty chain links towers above the visitor's head. In reality this piece, titled *Take all of the time you need*, is made of resin and fibreglass. The illusion is flawless. Blass is a master at juxtaposing materials, from readymades to more traditional media such as plaster and epoxy and changing them into what they certainly are not. In *L'homme augmenté*, industrially made PVC pipes are made to look like organic branches of bamboo. Through this agile

game of camouflage, Blass prompts the viewer to pay close attention to details, which are usually bountiful. Observant viewers will notice subtle repetitive elements that unite the works into a coherent affair. Colours, patterns, shapes, and props are peppered throughout the exhibition. This testifies to a certain systematic methodology within the artist's playful production plan.

In one of the stronger pieces of the exhibition, *Ceux qui ne demandent rien*, a pair of denim shorts and red pleather boots suggest a brazen invisible figure slouched on a stepladder, with an IKEA duffel bag on their shoulder. Herein lies the magic of Valérie Blass, which is to suggest the unseen with uncanny precision. The Montréal-based artist understands how to playfully manipulate notions of presence and absence, of surface and substance, of inside versus outside in order to construct remarkably alluring sculptures. These dualities not only coexist simultaneously in her work, they intersect and reinforce one another. Often, such artistic strategies generate a sort of sensational impact that risks coming off as gimmicky. However, Blass's subtle sophistication dodges this trap to offer instead an exalted experience—one that retains potency even if experienced virtually.

Anaïs Castro

Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver,
May 23–June 27, 2020