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Montreal. January 13 – March 5, 2011

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THE DEBRIS OF THE AURA : VALÉRIE BLASS AT PARISIAN LAUNDRY

Valérie Blass, *Petit losange laqué veiné*,
Parisian Laundry, Montreal.
January 13 – March 5, 2011.

Startling in its bravado, the recent sculpture of Valérie Blass collides low kitsch artefacts and high art signifiers and unites them in the unlikeliest of formal wholes. The collision throws off myriad sparks of meaning in the processual alembic of making, and draws us in, voluptuous eyes and far from innocent bystanders. As we weaved our way through the object field at Parisian Laundry, our imaginations and corporeal selves picked up sundry seismic tremors. Indeed, meaning here unwound like a spool of thread in the seeing, even as the tectonic plates of certainty shifted underfoot.

Her sculptures implicate our embodiment. Indeed, they are truly corporeal metamorphs. They are pertinent to the condition of being here; of being, that is, in the body, and part of a very louche cosmos. As we wandered through the full array of her recent work, one had the sense that the debris of its 'aura'—the luminous radiation it shed—was scattered seed-like and unavoidably self-present all about. In the background, a residual energy—a sort of dark matter of the sculptural world—staked a claim upon us. It exuded the sense that while modernity's fabled holism is no longer possible, reactive fusion is the mainstay of Blass's own art.

This artist is all about transformation and the morphologies of objects and states of being in the body and beyond. Stasis is her sworn enemy, and the status quo her bête noire. Her objects hit us with emetic force. We are removed at warp speed to the time and space of a splintered auratic realm in which objects are almost abstracted memories of their original purpose, the discarded shells of what they once were. But then these 'discarded shells' take on a whole new meaning, and a wholly engrossing one.

Celeste Olalquiaga once argued that: "Mythical time remains in the infinite replicas of these objects, souvenirs, which sought to retain the enchanted halo by blast-freezing it until it shattered into a thousand fragments. Kitsch is these scattered fragments of the aura, traces of dream images turned loose from their matrix, multiplied by the incessant beat of industrialization, covering the emptiness left by both the aura's demise and modernity's failure to deliver its promise of a radiant future."¹

Blass turns her scavenged objects loose from their matrices in a whirlwind of relational

pirouettes. In the process, she unleashes weird emotional vibes, including what can only be called a signature erotic twist.

The sheer exuberance of this new sculpture is as notable as its author's hubris. Yes, hubris, and I mean that in a good way. Only someone very sure of her own footing in the object world could step on our toes so adroitly that the pain is an entirely welcome respite from the hegemony of this object world that presses in upon us from all sides. Her work is about oxygen, not asphyxiation. Her work throws our internal GPS out of kilter, shakes us out of any possible complacency. No cobwebs or old ways of thinking allowed in the assimilation of this work.

These intricately collaged assemblages of found objects and sundry mixed media creations possess unusual auratic potential through what can only be called ingenious couplings. One senses in the postural web of a sculpture our own emplacement there, our own willing complicity in the making of meaning. If her sculpture world is decidedly lowbrow in its use of kitsch, pun and even puerile juxtapositions, it is because she loves squalor and its humour, and the impertinence of things placed in unlikely proximity pleases her optic as readily and well as it does our own. It is not the aura but the debris of the aura—not only artefactual remnant but emotional release in its wake—that counts here. Blass is a genius of disguise, and yet her work is far from disingenuous, and never blasé.

Her ear is pressed close to the ground, to the street vibe, undermining utopian signifiers from below, rather than from above. Her work is irreverent, wry and resonant of a punk aesthetic. But it is also consummately well made. There is radiance in the facture. The hectic, hurtling, hurly-burly quality of her sculptures is beautifully calibrated somewhere between lowbrow inventory and upscale invention and to say so is only to capture a bare fragment of their loony tunes truth.

Blass would evidently adhere to the old Surrealist axiom (after Lautréamont) about the infinity of possible worlds generated by "the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella" And so she sashays with rare, enlivening panache through the midst of this surreal Mardi Gras of the imagination with emetic force, erotic flair and a funky energy very much her own. Her sculptures—or collages in 3-D—are disarming and alarming at one and the same time. It's one wild fandango, New Orleans style, with no missteps.

Consider the sculpture *La somme en rondelette*, at once crane and canular. The painted brickwork reads like an optic puzzle, snaring the eye in a sort of whirligig of deception. Or *Cargo culte*, an epiphany of discorporation that owes something to Dali, Giacometti, David Smith—and Frank Zappa. Rife with real and metaphorical clamps and vises, it suggests the optic is as hands-on as, well, the hands are. Now, a cargo cult is a religious practice common in pre-industrial tribal societies in the wake of a collision with cultures that are technologically superior. The cults seek to acquire the wealth of the advanced culture through magic rituals and practices. Is Blass suggesting that this is her own 'cargo cult', her own sympathetic magic, in the wake of a dismembered modernity, to redeem Art? Or is she slyly implying that this sculpture is an attempt to imitate canonical modernist sculpture without necessarily evincing any continuity with or sympathy for its underlying premises, tenets, even structure? Blass is always subversive, even at her most winsome, and always holds us effortlessly in the 'grip' of her imagination.

Blass uses Styrofoam as though it was another medium. She traps us in assumptions about materiality that are often false. In *Femme planche*, there is the suggestion of a woman bent from the waist, resting on her forearms, poised in ardour or ordeal. A shovel lies across her buttocks and rear. Here is the proverbial apotheosis of the Duchampian readymade, at once subtle, rude and brilliant in its mien.

Femme panier is the piece de resistance here. The sculpture is of a female figure constructed out of a found mannequin and a wicker basket laid out in loud clothing and fishnet stockings. What induces shivers here is the remarkably lifelike pose the figure assumes in space. The figure resembles one of the gang members in Michael Jackson's *Beat It* video, moving forward with shiv knife raised, looking for the perfect opening to eviscerate a rival. Rife with both menace and humour, this is a very potent sculpture that betrays, above all, Blass's own deep-seated belief that every sculpture is a body and has its own attitude. Even out of wholly abstract forms, she can conjure a face or a body. Postural model and body image are often key.

Seeing Blass at work in her studio is a revelation. She is incessantly knocking one object against another in frenzied pursuit of the proverbial "good fit"—her studio is jam packed with likely kitsch candidates for unlikely fusions, and her sketchbooks as well are full with





Valérie Blass, *Femme panier*, 2010. Stockings, found shirt, hand tool, basket, paint, mannequin. Coll. of Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.

the sparks and tension that enliven her art. A true scavenger of the street and flea market and life-world, she is most at home investing her figures with the name of action, with the semblance of life. Searching for delirious hybrids in the debris field, she is somehow able to invest her sculptures with a hauntingly allusive human presence—whether through an aggressive pose or an appendage gone wild. This is her gift, and it is a very special one. Retrofitting modernity with her louche signifiers and kitsch souvenirs, Blass has developed a sculptural idiom that is unmistakably her own, and it is one where Eros and corporeality have made glorious inroads.

Above all, Blass shows us the sheer potential that is left for kitsch in contemporary sculpture. As Olalquiaga said:

“Since the aura’s dilapidated state speaks so eloquently about modernity’s underlying contradictions, kitsch may rightly be considered as containing the tension proper to all dialectical images: kitsch is the leftover of modernity’s own dreams of transcendence, a remnant loaded simultaneously with hopes and the impossibility of their realization, a ruin.”²

Blass thrives on paradox and discovery. She is after the surprise and hectic squalor in the collision and sense transfer between impossible things. Her aerated lexicon has a weird plasticity. It is replete with body parts and corporeal remnants. It is tempting to call her art a body art. But she is also a latter-day Schwitters of the aura’s debris field, evacuating utopian signifiers and installing kitsch changelings in their place. She cares for the vernacular of objects that have lost their moorings in the quotidian and that have become potent integers of unlikely couplings, obscene juxtapositions, Eros-laden iconic assemblages en route to a debris-ridden Dadaesque Graceland not so far from home.

James D. Campbell

James D. Campbell is a writer and independent curator based in Montreal. He is the author of several books and catalogues on art and artists, and contributes regularly to art periodicals such as *ETC*, *Border Crossing* and *Canadian Art*.

Notes

¹ Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: On the Kitsch Experience* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 84.

² *Ibid.*