

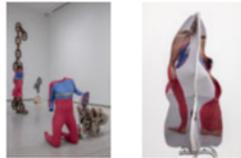
Art in America

REVIEWS Oct 29, 2019

Valérie Blass Makes Figurative Sculptures without the Figure

by Sky Goodden

Valérie Blass: *Ceux qui ne demandent rien*, 2019, stool, acrylic gesso, paint, fiberglass, and brick, 44 by 60 by 32 inches; at Art Gallery of Ontario.



Valérie Blass creates assemblages and sculptural tableaux that portray the human form using a kind of shorthand, alluding to the body through objects rather than depicting it outright. Often, her works feature pieces of clothing molded to look as though invisible people are wearing them. Take *Ceux qui ne demandent rien* (Those Who Ask for Nothing), one of the ten works (all 2019) on view in the Montreal-based artist's exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Here, a pair of denim shorts and two pink boots hardened with resin and placed about a metal stepladder suggest the form of a person sitting with legs splayed. For such pieces, Blass molds the clothing on plaster casts she makes of live models. Thus, in the final works, the human silhouettes feel uncannily real, even though the clothing is empty.

Blass's partial figures often seem caught mid-action. In *Le Mime, le modèle, et le dupe* (The Mime, the Model, and the Dupe), for instance, a kneeling pink-and-purple unitard with two nipple protrusions on its front extends an open bag of Doritos to a pair of wide-legged trousers whose bent legs, pointed upright, suggest a figure crab walking. As you move through the galleries, you can easily imagine such tableaux whirring into motion.

Several works make winking reference to the canon of modernist sculpture. *Le diable est dans les détails* (The Devil Is in the Details) is a stack of Ikea watering cans enclosed in heat-shrink tubing to produce a form that recalls Brancusi's rhythmic columns. While the show mixes the contemporary and the modernist, consumer culture and art history, recurring motifs and gestures help link the diverse styles and references. One of the artist's trademark motifs—found both here and in her prior work—is that of the hand. *Ma fille coupée en deux* (My Daughter Cut in Two) is a large ceramic vessel whose body is punctuated with tubular spouts that evoke bent fingers. In a piece exhibited nearby, *Pourquoi appelle-t-on un trou noir, un "trou noir"?* (Why Do We Call a Black Hole a "Black Hole"?), a latex-gloved hand perched atop a metal armature grasps a small ceramic sculpture.

The hand motif, of course, points back to the show's major unifying thread: Blass's focus on the human form. Even pieces that might at first seem distinctly inhuman ultimately evoke the body. *Take all the time you need* is a large chain rendered in resin and suspended vertically at the center of a room, appearing self-possessed. One segment is sheathed in heat-shrink tubing printed with the color blocking found on the aforementioned kneeling unitard, the shared pattern serving to emphasize the feminine curvature of the wrapped chain. The unitard reappears in *Échapper à la psychologie* (Escaping Psychology), an assemblage whose top half is wrapped in polyester printed with a photograph of a blonde woman in Blass's studio wearing the garment, presumably during the session where the cast was made for its use in *Le Mime, le modèle, et le dupe*. With all the self-references and portrayals of bodies gone missing, the show produces a strange temporality: Blass disrupts chronology so that past and present appear to coexist.

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