

Valérie Blass: Figurative fragments of a double-life world



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Valérie Blass, *The Mime, the Model and the Dupe*, Installation view. Photograph: Louis Haugh

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★★★★

Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin Until Septembers 7th
douglashydegallery.com

One work above all put Canadian artist Valerie Blass on the map – her 2009 sculpture *She Was a Big Success*. Made of wood and expanded polystyrene, it is a fragmentary rendering of a crouching, mannequin-like figure in high heels, largely enveloped by the folds of a voluminous, massive wig. It has the concision of a cartoon, which seems to have contributed greatly to its popularity, but it is ambiguous. The title suggests a satirical, mocking slant, but it's not clear who the target of the mockery might be. The treatment is very stylised and anonymously bland, as most mannequins are. The pose is similarly stylised and non-naturalistic, anatomically unreal.

Fast-forward to Blass's first solo show in Ireland, an iteration of one previously on view in Canada. In the cavernous Douglas Hyde, it comes across as guarded and tentative, mostly keeping to the edges and corners. That's

partly because it is physically quite sparse, especially following the relatively crowded space immediately inside the entrance, a kind of anteroom to the show. But it also has to do with the nature of the work. The introductory note says that Blass's sculptures "operate in the realm of the double", which is strictly true given her penchant for mirrors and composites, but might suggest an expansive physical presence, a doubling.



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In fact, her doubles are diminishing, fragmentary glimpses of an original that is itself a glimpse or, as it happens, an absence. Absence is a consistent motif, specifically the absence of the physical person. She goes to great pains to create an intimation of physical bodies or fragments thereof. The mime of the title could refer to the way the bodies adapt distinctive poses, insistently acting out presence. Then she recurrently dispenses with the bodies and leaves us with, say, items of clothing they occupied, still shaped and bulging. Or, a folded amalgam of photographic glimpses might indicate an absent body. These interlocking shards of one-time presence, curiously located between the real and the immaterial, are intriguing and promising, though not quite satisfying – perhaps they are not supposed to be.

A line of anthropomorphic vessels offers another oblique approach to the body, picking up on a venerable tradition, one as old as ceramics. In everything Blass does, there is a sense of an artist trying to figure out how to address embodiment in a telling way while eschewing the formulaic. Her often playful use of a number of visual tactics, especially forms of metonymy and synecdoche, don't take from the serious commitment involved.