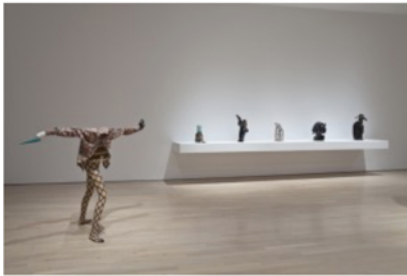


Valerie Blass, Musée d'art contemporain

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Valerie Blass, "Femme panier," 2010. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay. Courtesy: Musée d'art contemporain.

Valerie Blass assembles and refashions kitsch objects and common materials into strange hybrids that look unmistakably like *objets d'art* [February 2 – April 22, 2012]. One cannot help but think “Brancusi” when looking at the stacked and shrink-wrapped columns of trinkets (*Distortion et alignement animalier*, 2007), or “Joel Shapiro” when looking at wooden beams wearing skin tight jeans (*Touche du bois*, 2009). Blass’s spindly, ceramic, and life-size hairy sculptures also bring to mind Giacometti, Jeff Koons and Nick Cave, and a pair of fishnet stockings stretched over a thin wooden framework (*Pont à poutre en porte-à-faux*, 2009) is oddly reminiscent of Moholy-Nagy.

In the exhibition catalogue Blass states, “I want to upset our ability to identify, or rather I want the tendency to automatically link a work to a set of pre-established references to be submerged by a simultaneous loss and surplus of meaning.” Certainly she succeeds: viewing her work is like scanning an index; the various pop and art historical references instantly conjure up images but they do not, by co-presence alone, coalesce into a meaningful whole. Their sense is lost, or at least their sense of purpose. The question poses itself: do Blass’s sculptures use *de rigueur* irony to demonstrate a superior knowingness?

The “I get it” effect of the various allusions has the unfortunate effect of cutting down the work’s duration and reducing its materiality to a language of signs. It is as if the sculptures dematerialize in the process of gaining significance, for the leap from signifier to referent can only be taken by denying the facticity of the artifacts themselves: cast hands and little glass booties; combs, knives and shovels; teapots, light bulbs and baskets; shirts and shoes; string and hair, to name a few. These objects and materials have a direct relationship with our bodies and, thus, keep us embodied in the here and now. In this way Blass builds duration into the viewing experience, which is at odds with the initial “a ha,” and which opens a space for the viewer’s subjectivity to play with the work.

Furthermore, the material juxtapositions of Blass’s work set in motion a process of synesthetic exploration. Like the lingering taste left in your mouth by the thought of Meret Oppenheim’s infamous fur-covered cup, the flock-covered assemblage *S’il te plait* (2009) invites caresses; the wooden torso of *Femme planche* (2010) leaves a splinter as we imagine our hands running down her back; and the monumental *Étant donné, le Loris perché sur son socle néo-classique* (2008) is unbearably heavy, teetering precariously on its disproportionate high-heeled feet. These sense-to-sense translations, along with the sculptures’ duration, keep fixed interpretations at bay. The resulting “loss” of significance harbours much more potential than the referential “surplus” as it makes the sculptures what Jeanne Randolph calls “amenable.” That is, due to the ambiguous elements of Blass’s work, there is no definitive line between its significance and the viewer’s own subjective notions: the sculptures can absorb many stories.

However, as Amelia Jones writes in the catalogue, “we find ourselves...suspended between a belief in appearance and a suspicion that something else is going on.” On close inspection our expectations meet with deception: some solids are hollows, some wood is Styrofoam, and bronze and rock could both be plaster. “Truth” to materials is not even an issue for Blass (who worked as a stage set designer), and what looks like an odd material juxtaposition could be all of the same matter. But what then of embodiment and sensual empathy? No materials are free of ideological inscription but they can (and do) resist it; this is the special power of sculpture. But how does faux-finishing figure in this debate? What would we talk about, the “raw” material or its mimic? To cite Jones again, “the joke, uneasy as [these] innocuous object[s] [have] made us feel, is on us.”