

Valérie Blass

PARISIAN LAUNDRY

The sculptural *modus operandi* of Valérie Blass is hardly an unfamiliar one these days: She makes assemblages out of a wide repertoire of everyday objects and materials; the play of the Montreal-based artist's

perception and invention reveals itself more through the gaps and disjunctions in the construction or, rather, the arrangement of the various parts brought together through some seemingly imponderable conjunction of chance, intuition, and will than through any immediately perceptible formal resolution. However, unlike many other sculptor-*bricoleurs*, Blass distinguishes herself through her predilection for using the human figure as a base reference in her work. "Every sculpture is a body and has an attitude," she once said. "I play with the capacity we have to see a face (or a body) in an abstraction"—but also, it should be added, to see abstraction in a given face or body. In this she might be close to Matthew Monahan or Huma Bhabha, but, comparatively, they almost seem more like closet traditionalists—their figures like cobbled-together Frankenstein monsters trying to morph into integral humans seeking an empathetic gaze. Blass's forms, on the contrary, conjure once-whole beings whose human character has slipped away and become lodged in the alien world of inanimate objects. Or, to put it another way, Monahan and Bhabha's work moves from irony to pathos, whereas Blass's flows in the opposite direction, from pathos to irony.

In the dozen sculptures and five collages on view in "*Petit losange laqué veiné*" (Little Glossed Veined Lozenge), that irony was often directed at gender roles. In the tradition, perhaps, of Louise Bourgeois's *Femme Maison*—a motif Bourgeois first addressed in the 1940s and returned to periodically thereafter—Blass presented a *Femme panier* (Basket Woman) and a *Femme planche* (Board Woman), both 2010. The first is a headless figure whose torso is—you guessed it—made of wicker basketry; but the "*femme's*" posture is twisted, too, as if to be woven into the pattern of someone's expectations. At once ingratiating and aggressive, she seems to be stepping forward like a dancer executing an oddly unstable



Valérie Blass, *Femme panier* (Basket Woman), 2010, stockings, found shirt, hand tool, basket, paint, mannequin, 52 x 59 x 32".

bow, with one ceramic hand wielding a sharp gardening tool while the other hand shows off its skeleton-motif ornamentation. Nearby, the *Femme planche*, a stylized figure in Styrofoam rather convincingly masquerading as wood, seemed to be at once bowing in obeisance and executing everyone's favorite yoga position, the downward-facing dog; a long shovel rests on her behind, its shaft parallel to her legs and its blade pointing upward. Oddly, it's as if her body were being pulled up by the shovel rather than the shovel being held up by the body. In any case, the piece conveys a sort of slapstick indignity in a strikingly deadpan way.

Not all the sculptures were as glaringly figurative. *Une somme rondelette* (Round Sum), 2011, is a wooden construction resembling a crane but painted with a dainty pattern of brickwork—a material that could never actually be used to build a crane. But it, too, has a posture, an attitude—as though it were a person disguised as a crane pretending to be made of bricks. The sculptures were placed on pedestals or low platforms of various heights, shapes, sizes, and colors. And yet, in the rather grand space at Parisian Laundry, the installation strategy conferred a unity on the entire show by emphasizing the isolation of each sculpture from the others—as if each one, with its real or implied figures, represented a self-enclosed predicament, isolated by the tragicomic irrationality it embodies.

—Barry Schwabsky