

Laugh at this Valérie Blass' sculpture in Toronto, sure, but take it seriously

By Chris Hampton Special to the Star
Fri., June 7, 2019



You can laugh at the sculpture. The artist told me it's OK.

Installed on the fourth floor of the Art Gallery of Ontario, it depicts the most prosaic scene: two friends share a bag of chips. Except all that's presented are a pair of pants, a jumpsuit, a carton of juice and the open bag of Bold BBQ Doritos. Somehow, the props arranged so realistically that the whole story comes to life, and the bodies, invisible to the eye, extend vividly in the mind: One kneels reaching into the bag, which the other, who's posed in a squat, holds from the bottom. (Is that the indentation of a hand I see?) It is the tableau of a thousand Instagram posts, as the unseen subjects undoubtedly mug for the camera, perhaps curbside at a corner store or with a beach in the background. It is so easy to imagine.

The sculpture, *Le mime, le modèle et le dupe*, arrives with an exhibition of new works by Montreal artist Valérie Blass, recipient of the 2017 Gershon Iskowitz Prize. The \$50,000 prize, awarded annually to an artist who has made an outstanding contribution to the visual arts in Canada, generally comes with an AGO solo show a year or two after, hence the reason *Le parlement des invisibles* is now in session.

Blass, 51, begins her work by photographing models, playing around with various props and costumes. When she has found the right pose, she makes a plaster mould from the model's body. The clothes are stretched over the plaster form and applied with resin. Once they've hardened, they're cut free from the plaster and painted to restore colours dulled by the process.

Blass says she tends to choose clothing that's bright, out-of-fashion and almost cartoonish. The garments must not only do the work of composing the invisible figure; she also wants them to become like characters themselves — the way “a penis can look like a nose,” she says.

Sometimes, her intention is that they appear more like things in their own right than living beings. In another room, a pair of basketball shorts are presented opposite a similarly shaped and rather modernist-looking ceramic vessel. The humour comes from the unexpected, as she turns bodies into inanimate objects and inanimate objects into bodies, and moreover, muddies Western Art's church-and-state distinction between figuration and abstraction.

She recognizes the work is funny. “Laughing at it is good,” she says. “But it's not a happy ha ha ha.” It's not a super light (she uses the French *léger*) type of funny, Blass says. You laugh because it works your intelligence. “It's a kind of funny, for sure.”

Valérie Blass' *Le parlement des invisibles* runs through Dec. 1 at the Art Gallery of Ontario.