

OAKVILLE, ONTARIO

## Valérie Blass

OAKVILLE GALLERIES

Valérie Blass is perhaps best known for assemblage sculptures that reflect her long-standing interests in theater, dance, and fashion. This ten-year-survey show—elegantly curated by Matthew Hyland—focused on her uses of the figural form. To compose her bodies, Blass disjunctively draws together representational imagery with abstract forms and textures—such as a pair of shorts with a bar of polished metal—that resist cohesion, encouraging viewers to project, and to consider the contexts of the erotic, ritual, and commercial, in which we are all, in some way, participants.

Often, Blass alters found everyday items, but only rarely does she dissolve or mask them completely. *Je suis une image* (I Am an Image), 2014, featured a leg, an arm, and a hand, each delicately cast in gypsum, with fine contours and curving lines in the palm and wrist. All

elements had been fastened to a wall-mounted metal structure with several appendages that extended into space, almost like a store sign; she/he/they were on public view, an image for all to see. With great care, Blass had caught these bits of body midway through an awkward act of undress: A single finger fumbled with a pair of pink panties, jiggling in response to air currents in the gallery. Acting as a kind of veil for the figure, bleached-blond hair extensions gently fluttered from a horizontal bar attached toward the top of the mounted structure. Referencing retail mannequins, the work also exudes notions of the shameful and the fragmentary; it may serve as an aide-mémoire, distilling details of an erotic encounter with which some other pseudo character was straining to contend.

This predicament was again evoked in *L'homme réparé* (Repaired Man), 2019, which consisted of a stainless-steel handrail—perhaps a former guide rail or crowd-control device, shaped like the letter *n* and assertively inserted into the concrete gallery floor—that supports a pair of weathered denim shorts, painted with acrylic and frozen in place with resin to suggest that some invisible body might be leaning against the cold, hard rail. The work may serve as an anti-monument to another tryst: The cotton cutoffs have been unzipped and unbuttoned to open and empty the form.

*Dire à jamais qu'une seule chose à jamais la même chose* (To Only Ever Say One Thing Forever the Same Thing), 2015, featured a more caricatured coupling, fitted into the handle design of a black sword made of Magic-Sculpt: One figure straddles another with a sparkly complexion (made possible with a scattering of sand) and eyes that shine with fool's gold. Wearing disquietingly blank, blasted expressions (of agony? of ecstasy?), these basic putty people are violently joined by the prominent "metal" member of the

sword's shaft, which runs vertically through their groins into the minimal Plexiglas plinth supporting them—as if to pay tribute to their moment of union, a comically permanent state of arousal.

With intriguing variations of materials and methods, Blass enacted such meldings of bodies and genders throughout the exhibition, with varying degrees of salaciousness. Consisting of two black-and-white photomontages made into ink-jet prints, *One couple, a single one*, 2015, splices together images of two people (one clothed, one naked) doing downward dog. With butts high in the air and contours contorted to form an isosceles triangle, the prone and geometrized bodies become sites of formal experimentation, distant relatives of myriad modernist exercises in avant-garde mastery. While Blass is certainly in dialogue with phallogentric, avant-garde histories of female nude paintings, her project is also a progressive (and provocative) picture of gender fluidity. Perhaps due to this interest in our conceptions of bodies and their outward presentations, her works always dwell in the realm of sculptural experience, even when they are predominantly pictorial or two-dimensional.

While Blass contorts her objects into human roles, the anthropomorphization is always inadequate; the minimal forms can be addressed from a strictly formal perspective or seen through a figurative lens. Her sculptures delight in hovering between these poles, perpetually playing with the viewer's expectations.

—Dan Adler



Valérie Blass, *L'homme réparé* (Repaired Man), 2019, stainless steel, denim shorts, epoxy resin, acrylic paint, 41 × 89 × 12". Photo: Laura Findlay.