

VANCOUVER

Valérie Blass

Catriona Jeffries

One of the rewards of looking at contemporary art, and at sculpture in particular, is the opportunity to track, for want of a better description, the genealogy of the field and its many innovations. More than any other art form, sculpture deserves the historical distinction of being the most adaptive and experimental of artistic disciplines—if today's sculpture seems set on redefining itself, it is in keeping with a longstanding tradition. Of late, it appears that artists are being mindful of the key formal and stylistic tropes of Modernism.

Valérie Blass's recent exhibition, "To Only Ever Say One Thing Forever the Same Thing," presented an intriguing intersection of sculpture and performance art photography. The choreography of her actors' activities was limited to static and slightly absurdist poses that, once transcribed photographically, become instrumental to the orientation of various sculptural assemblages, tableaux, and objects.

The failure of it all is a vaguely Cubo-Futurist/Machine Age piece (think early Léger) constructed of gypsum cement, epoxy dough, and acrylic paint. Conically formed and mold-cast, this two-part, stacked hollow object with photographically transferred abstract brushmark motifs articulating multiple surfaces can only be fully appreciated in the round. Its overall artistry in fabrication also includes a surface treatment that masquerades as sculptural modeling. Blass has carefully applied sculpting dough to the interior surfaces to give the impression of a hand-formed object. Yet the mold seams reveal that the objects were cast, making this clever surface treatment an indexical simulation of the historic connection between malleable materials and sculptural process.

Dire à jamais qu'une seule chose à jamais la même chose is also fashioned in part from sculpting dough,

this time rolled into ropes and then shaped into humanoid forms. The three caricatured figures are connected by a vertical rod or column that at a certain angle resembles a sword; it pierces each figure, stretching above, through, and into the clear Plexiglas plinth that supports the ensemble. Interacting in a narrative of sorts, a lower-body-only subject pins a *Scream*-like figure (replete with gaping mouth and sparkling fool's-gold eyes) to the plinth, while the third figure, perched on top of the rod, covers "his" eyes and ears. It is a dramatic tableau vivant, but not a traumatic one, in spite of the symbolic above-and-below architectural narrative of the plinth. The stylistic treatment of the figures ranges across mid-century organic figurative abstraction, early Greek classicism, and Pop cartoon.

The transparency of the *Dire à jamais* plinth might easily serve as a metaphor representing Blass's delightfully accessible and sophisticated talent for double entendre, with the accretion of meanings only limited by a viewer's investment of time and imagination. Blass appears to revel in the interplay of multiple iterations of a subject, often fragmented in representation—for instance, the three-dimensional objects, photographic transfers, large-format photography, line drawing, and flat planar surfaces in particularly ambitious pieces like *To Reside Elsewhere* and *High-Up, dignitary, panjandrum, high muckamuck* (both 2015). This Cubist-style stacking of planes of representation and meanings provides an open structure for analysis and also promotes a localized version of the *dérive*, whereby viewers might chart their own direction in tracking various planes of reference amid the unfolding of the imagination.

—Gary Pearson

Right: Valérie Blass,

Dire à jamais qu'une seule chose à jamais la même chose, 2015. Sculpting epoxy dough, sand, fool's gold, Plexiglas, and metal, 51.25 x 9.5 x 9.5 in.

