

## Valérie Blass: Particle Collider

"Valérie Blass: Particle Collider" by Leah Sandals, Fall 2009, pp. 112-115 / photo Alex Meyboom

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Though its industrial past was downright gritty, Montreal's Darling Foundry is, today, a pretty tidy place. On the first floor, two large, pristine galleries host exhibitions. On the third floor, artists and curators lunch in a stylish open kitchen. Even on the second floor, where the artists' studios are located, the hallways are clean, with nary a blot of paint or a dot of clay in sight.

The facility's spotlessness makes entering Valérie Blass's studio all the more dramatic. On one side of her sizable room, shelves hold masses of motley materials: gold-coloured plastic trays, antique chairs, cans of spray paint and stacks of Styrofoam. On the other side of the room, Blass's works-in-progress bubble and ferment. One of them seems close to completion—a life-size figure woven out of jet-black hair, with muscled legs stuck firmly (and wittily) into gleaming high-heeled shoes. Another sculpture seems just in its infancy, with a Frankenstein head and a fashion-magazine page taped to a basic torso. In between the raw and the cooked, several tables support clay, metal and plastic structures, as well as magazines, mirrors and boxes of dusty dollar-store mugs.

A moment later, Blass herself—compact and energetic—is also in the space. Blass has generated one of the most diverse, intelligent and engaging bodies of sculpture to emerge from Canada in recent years. Here, in this studio, she made the triumphs of the past year happen—works that wowed at the Québec Triennial, impressed at Parisian Laundry and won raves during her Toronto debut. Now, gesticulating with her work-worn hands, Blass wanders her creative domain and answers questions about her inspirations, her limitations and the gentle humour that pervades them both.

**Leah Sandals: You produce work in many different styles, from minimal to representational. Why such a huge range?**

**Valérie Blass:** My work is not about the history of art, but about individual aesthetic objects. I like to compare things that are normally not compared. I create relationships, and this produces something strange, something between the figurative and the abstract.

For example, some might consider *Damien en gris et rose* a figurative work. But for me, it's about modelling the same picture twice, the experience of that. What's on the left is not important, what's on the right is not important—it's what's in-between.

I also like when my sculpture is hard to understand, when it's hard to conceptualize the form completely. You see this piece and that piece and you understand them separately, but the whole is difficult to get.

For example, with *Distortion et alignement animalier*, my interest is in how volume, material, texture and line play with form. When you look at an object, you want to find a reference point for stabilizing it, for recognizing it, very quickly. I like to stretch out that moment of trying to recognize. How might we see this object if we didn't have all these cultural references?

**You seem to sample many different cultural references—Egyptian heads in *L'homme paille*, Chinese figures in *Guerrier I*. Is it of interest to you what art forms exist in other cultures?**

Yeah! But only certain kinds of objects. So I'm not so much interested in Chinese art; I'm more interested in chinoiserie. You know? An interpretation of an interpretation of an interpretation. When I travel to other countries I go to traditional art museums, but I also like to go to museums of decorative arts. The things there may not be good art—but they are good objects. I see a lot of technical inventiveness in *l'art mineur*. I'll see something and think, "Oh, if I twist that this way, I'll get something else."

I bought this object [she holds up a small, cheap ceramic lion] for inspiration. I like how it's just been spray-painted somewhat randomly, with a couple of dots for eyes. The object is just a two-piece mould, so it's the painting that makes you see the animal. One of the sculptures I'm working on right now will use some of these colouring techniques, but applied to long, tall forms.

**You also use a wide range of materials, from mattress foam to plaster. What materials inspire you, and where do you find them?**

Often when people sculpt, the piece is resolved before they start. But when I make a sculpture, I can't draw it beforehand. The final form comes from material techniques.

Still, I do begin with certain ideas. I might know that a given work will contain little trinkets, I know there will be lines and I know it will involve distortion. Even if I don't know the final form, when I start I know the work has a good heart.

I find materials on the street, sometimes at the Salvation Army or Dollarama, sometimes a special industrial shop, and I'm at the hardware store up to several times a day. I am constantly testing materials and might have 30 to 40 research projects going on at once.

### **How did you become a sculptor, or an artist who works so much in sculpture?**

I was a painter when I began university, but when I cast my first object, I went, "Ahhhhhhh!" In sculpture you can produce forms that you can't necessarily visualize. Think about Marcel Duchamp's moulds of a vagina—you'd never think of the shape of that mould, but that object is still real. You can see reality very differently through moulds. If a woman pissed on the snow and you moulded the form the piss makes in the snow, you'd see such a fantastic object! It's a reality you can't usually see.

I liked painting, and I liked to mix colours and effects in images. But sculpture is different because the object, the reality, is actually there. It's funnier, it's more pleasurable and it's easier for me.

### **Speaking of the process being funny—some of your artworks come off as very humorous. Is that okay with you?**

Yeah—but hopefully not "laughing at" funny! More "laughing with." I don't like art that is too solemn or severe. I like something that is deep, but also allows you to laugh—when something is so intense it's funny. In *L'homme paille*, the figure's pose is so dejected, but it makes you laugh. I think the figurative always bears some relationship to pathos.

### **Your dealers at Parisian Laundry mentioned you'd been looking at images from fashion magazines lately. What's that about?**

I like to play with the idea of image in sculpture. For my last exhibition at Parisian Laundry, "La plus pure apparence," I wanted to work not around fashion, exactly, but around *les appareils*—the hair, the clothes, everything that changes or covers the body. My work with the body is also about posture and tactility. A figure that slouches feels so different from one that stands up straight, and clothes play a role too. In every sculpture I think about a surface that hides and reveals at the same time.

I'm interested in something that speaks about the body, even if it's not explicit. *Comment se tenir debout* is really minimalist-looking, but when I look at this work, I see a foot. The bending forms in *Élongation en forme d'éclair d'une tête de rousse* to me sometimes look like knees.

### **You obviously love and excel at sculpture. But what do you find hard about it?**

It's dirty! I'm always having to wash everything all the time [laughs]. I also have to gather a lot of things before I can get started. I sometimes think, "If I were painting, it would just be brushes, paints, a canvas." But I really enjoy sculpture. You just can't be scared to deal with that part of the process when the object is really, really ugly.