

Anachronic Contemporary

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A huge black monolith looms large over Valérie Blass's studio, dominating dozens of finished or half-finished works and a vast assortment of raw materials, bought and found objects of all types, fragments of earlier works, accidents, experiments, traces of failures and sculptures in a state of becoming. The artist's studio provides a glimpse of works in progress but also reveals her artistic process, the things she is looking at and thinking about, what inspires her. Though the studio exposes something essential about artists, it often remains absent from critical discussions of their work. In Valérie Blass's case it is central, as it clearly identifies her as a sculptor. It bespeaks an artist who actually makes her works rather than conceiving them on paper or computer and sending the designs out to be fabricated by skilled technicians. In an era when the romantic image of the studio as the privileged locus of individual creative genius has unravelled, largely supplanted by the factory, the office, the workshop, the design studio, the collaborative atelier, the link in a global network, it is a significant thing when an artist maintains a studio, goes to it every day, and produces work there that is intended for exhibition elsewhere. Coming after the phenomena of the factory, the post-studio and the post-post

studio,¹ current reinvestment in the studio coincides with the reaffirmation of the handmade, the revival of craft and the reskilling that are all so prevalent in twenty-first-century artistic practices.²

Blass tends to work on up to ten sculptures at a time, and she may have between thirty and forty research projects on the go simultaneously. The studio is for her a place of exploration, where new materials are tried out, where objects of all description may lie around for years before finding their place in a sculpture. There is a density in her work that reflects a desire to render visible, to materialize the multiplicity of images, ideas and atmospheres making up her mental space. Her work is grounded in finding material solutions to formal problems, and emerges out of experimentation, determination, trial and error, play and sheer effort. Her challenge is to continually surprise herself, and she adheres to a self-imposed rule of embracing the accidents and chance occurrences that arise during the creation of a work, of transforming and integrating, rather than abandoning, "mistakes."

Since discourses relating to contemporary sculpture generally speak of the contingent, the un-monumental, the *informe* and the immersive, Valérie Blass has staked out a terrain quite distinct from



Midnight Viper, 2009
Ceramic objects, glue
38 × 33 × 28 cm

the majority of her fellow sculptors. For the most part, she makes free-standing, vertical, figurative, handmade, human-scale, autonomous sculptures. The character of her studio points to an aspect of her practice that is often overlooked and that reflects her grounding in two distinct sculptural traditions. On the one hand, the diversity of her materials and the plethora of mass-produced, bought and found objects indicate an engagement with the traditions of assemblage and bricolage. The antique shop, the flea market, the hardware store and the street are her suppliers, and decorative arts museums are important sources of inspiration. On the other hand, the statue, the monument, the bust and the pedestal are the foundations of her formal vocabulary, which locates her work squarely within the classical tradition of figurative sculpture. The impact of Blass's work resides precisely in the anachronistic way she navigates between these two distinct sculptural traditions. Through the processes of assemblage and bricolage, Blass expresses an enthusiastic engagement with the material culture of the twenty-first century, while the classical influence is felt in her use of such techniques as carving, modelling, casting and moulding.

Objects Objectified

Assemblage and bricolage have their roots in the surrealist practice of juxtaposing incongruous objects and images in order to trigger unconscious associations, but also in Marcel Duchamp's notion of the ready-made, which radicalized the very concept of the art object. Employed by artists in the 1950s and 1960s to infuse their works with evidence of the real world, assemblage is, in Blass's hands, a tool for amalgamating recognizable mass-produced objects into communicative wholes that both retain the cultural and material associations of their components and provoke new and indeterminate meanings. She employs the approach as a way of drawing out the instant of perception and engaging the viewer in a complex process of decoding. The visual intricacy of *Midnight Viper* (p. 138-139), for instance, resides in the dual function of each of its elements. Reminiscent of Giuseppe Arcimboldo's portraits of the seasons, which depict faces made of fruit, vegetables and flowers, Blass's sculptural bust is composed of (among other knick-knacks) a teapot, ceramic cats and kittens, vases and animal-shaped milk jugs and gravy boats. Each

object is identifiable as what it is and thereby retains its functional or purely decorative past, but it also becomes an ear, a mouth or a grotesque protuberance. The elephant-man-like monster that emerges from this bricolage is both whimsical and disturbing: our feelings waver between fascination, disgust and delight as we recognize the familiar and progressively decode the multiple layers of meaning and references at play. The glazed monochrome black finish serves to formally unify the diverse objects, but it also endows the sculpture with a patina that would justify its inclusion in any decorative arts display. By contrast, the surface of *S'il te plaît* (p. 142-143) is covered in black flocking, which produces a skin-like effect that makes the piece more anthropomorphic than decorative. However, the ceramic fragments used to form this gnome-like creature are just as distinguishable as those of *Midnight Viper*. We can discern the entreating hand reflected in the title, but also a cow-shaped milk jug—used to form the pink orifice-mouth and snub nose—a swan, a duck and other animals. *Comme dans l'an quarante* (p. 102-103), one of Blass's most complex assemblages to date, is likewise composed of a wide array of ceramic objects, including an Egyptian



Déjà donné, 2011
Styrofoam, epoxy finish,
fibreglass, Hydrocal FGR
gypsum cement, pigments
153 × 140 × 140 cm

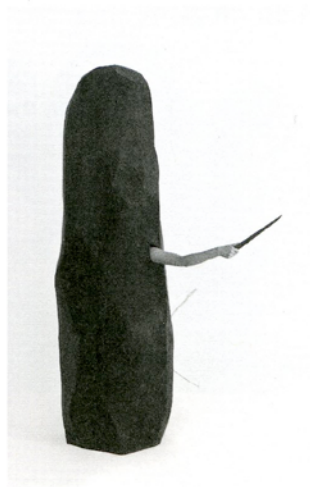
bust with a swan protruding from its mouth, a poodle, a boot, a hand, the legs of a feline and a figurine of a reclining female nude. The “original” assemblage was three-dimensionally scanned and then mechanically carved in Styrofoam at a scale three times the original size, thus producing a second work, entitled *Déjà donné* (p. 144-147). This process of enlargement gives the work an undeniably sculptural quality, with the fragments of recognizable objects becoming at once more grotesque and (strangely) more elegant. The larger scale and very different surface treatment tip the work away from the decorative effect of the smaller piece and explicitly declare its status as a sculpture.

The interest in contemporary material culture reflected in Blass’s assemblage works aligns her with a trend mapped out by Johanna Drucker in *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity*.³ Drucker eloquently describes what she calls the “affirmative gesture” of a wide range of artists who acknowledge that the art object is obliged to compete with a host of “things” but who—in their effort to differentiate fine art from the so-called culture industry—refuse to adopt an aesthetics of negativity (characterized by formally esoteric and notoriously difficult work) and

declare themselves active participants in the consumer-driven commodity culture. The author traces a variety of strategies that have emerged since the early 1990s and that distinguish these artists from their predecessors, including eclectic materialism, ludic formalism, narrative figuration, realism and a revival of studio techniques. Keenly aware of the historical legacy of the twentieth-century avant-garde, these artists nonetheless push aside the shadow of negation that has hung over contemporary art and its critical reception by reviving what was repressed in earlier discourses. Drucker calls for an examination of *facture* rather than *form*, explaining that the properties of its making reveal how a work is embodied in a network of conditions and circumstances of production and perception: how a work is made and what it is made of are important inroads to understanding its significance. *Facture*, she states is “the indexical link by which the materials and forms of aesthetic artifacts can be read in historical, cultural, economic, political terms.”⁴ These artworks are emphatically to be read as things of, rather than apart from, the world of contemporary material culture, and they gain their identity by engaging in that dialogue rather than by refusing or repressing it.

Johanne Sloan has recently adopted notions developed by scholars in the field of material culture studies to analyze what she identifies as a “material turn” in contemporary art. These theoreticians have developed a language based in Marxist economic theory to “study commodities, objects, things and various permutations of materiality” that exceed “the semantically fixed object.”⁵ Like Drucker’s, this approach provides a means of demonstrating that artists are exploring the quotidian in order to reflect on how objects and materials permeate a network of social relations and how the artwork itself functions in contemporary society.

Paying attention to the *facture* of Blass’s works, then—to how they are made and what they are made of—is paramount to grasping their significance.⁶ It is through making that the artist participates in current discussions about the status of the object and the “difference” between a work of art and a mass-produced object. Ultimately, her work is a form of “aesthetic research, a way of interrogating the material circumstances of everyday life.”⁷ Blass selects her objects carefully. As we have seen, she is drawn to ceramic animal and human figures, vaguely anthropomorphic vases and containers,



Ce nonobstant, 2011
Styrofoam, Foam Coat,
Magic Sculp putty,
plaster, stick, oil paint
270 × 164 × 86 cm

anything with a reference to the history of art, popular culture or the body. Things may be chosen for their form, their colour, their texture or their patina, but they always retain their quotidian referentiality. She is evidently engaged both aesthetically and affectively with her materials, and her works aim to provoke the same kind of engagement on the part of the viewer. This “affective gesture” is described by Drucker as a way of putting

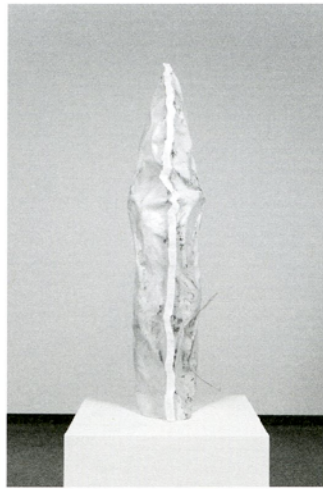
material objects ... into an organized construction. The affective gesture brings the inert to life, it rehumanizes material, not in the romantic sense but in a production sense. Affectivity gives material a sense of intention and form, of sentience and action, it shifts it out of the mere material while engaging with it, tweaking the stuff, making it active. Affectivity takes what looked like matter already formed and uses it as simple matter to give rise to another level of organization and structure.... The associations invoked by the functional identity of these objects-as-material are also part of the final communicative whole of the piece.⁸

Blass takes everyday consumer objects out of circulation and, through a variety of material strategies, creates a new *thing*

that acknowledges the mass-produced, pop-cultural origins of its fragments yet also declares its identity as an artwork. Each individual object brings with it a range of associations and meanings, as well as a materiality that participates in the communicative resonance of the final work. The cow-shaped milk jug is perceptible and evocative as such, but it also forms the mouth and snout of an uncanny creature whose realization provokes a multiplicity of sexual, philosophical and sociological musings that enrich its meaning. Blass has what she describes as an obsessive interest in the *infigurable* (a term that translates unsatisfactorily as “unrepresentable”) aspect of the aesthetic object.⁹ She navigates the terrain between figuration and abstraction, the recognizable and the indeterminate, the declared and the evoked, in order to create a duality that is charged with potential. She generates confusion between the found and the made, the de-skilled, the mass-produced and the reskilled, jarring familiar perceptions and cognitive channels long enough to produce a moment of dissonance and insight. By locating her works between the reassuring and the strange, the familiar and the uncanny, Blass draws out the moment of recognition, forcing the viewer to decipher the mass of meaning.¹⁰

Tradition Radicalized

Within the unbridled materiality of the artist’s studio, where nothing is either sacred or without interest, *Ce nonobstant* (p. 66-67)—the monolith alluded to earlier—distinguishes itself not only by its scale (it is almost three metres high), but also by the simplicity of its form and facture. The radicality of this work points, paradoxically, to Valérie Blass’s affiliation with the classical traditions of figurative sculpture, thereby testifying to the anachronistic nature of her practice. Unprecedentedly monumental, it is perplexing when one recalls that the aim of classical monumental sculpture was to fix a single significant moment; this seems quite at odds with Blass’s quest for the *infigurable*. The mat black form suggests a megalithic menhir—there is something almost primeval about it that evokes Stonehenge or the monuments of Easter Island. The surface looks as though it could be graphite, but (as so often) it is impossible to identify the materials definitively. A grey arm emerges out of the “back” of the monolith, pointing a wooden stick at some unknown assailant. As the viewer circles the work, what appeared from afar to be an abstract form is transformed into a shell enclosing



For rêveur, 2008
Hydrocal FGR gypsum cement
122 × 30.5 × 20.5 cm
ALDO Group Collection

an entrapped human figure. Since even the most abstract of Blass's sculptures may be read as bodies, this comes as no surprise. Imprisoned in the stele, the figure seems to be lashing out at its tormentor, attempting, despite physical constraint, to assert its life force. The delicacy of the curved arm, the vigour with which it proffers its weapon and the deathly pallor of its pigmentation complicate the reading. How did the figure find itself in this position? Did Blass perhaps decide to stop in the midst of casting a new work? If so, can the piece be related to the enigmatic *For rêveur*, which looks like a shroud and conjures a madonna but is in fact the exterior shell of the cast of another sculpture?¹¹ The fact that one of the hypotheses concerning the function of menhirs is that they were used by Druids for human sacrifice is compelling. Rodin's extraordinary personification of Honoré Balzac also comes to mind, for the gesture of the arm bursting violently out of its material casing echoes Balzac's huge head emerging forcefully from beneath his cape. Or perhaps we are closer to Samuel Beckett's character of Winnie, from *Happy Days*, who though embedded up to her "big bosom" in a mound of earth, wilfully declares her urge to forge ahead and begin each morning anew.

In keeping with the traditions of

classical sculpture, each of Blass's figures embodies a human characteristic or emotion: pathos, defiance, aggressivity, unbridled confidence, unfettered sexuality. Her standing figures are not formal exercises but explorations into the human condition, attempts to express the essence of what it means to be alive—what a body is and how it occupies space. *L'Homme paille* (p. 62-63) exudes pathos, for he sits slouched over, looking (despite his massive, yeti-like body) quite downtrodden. Made with the camouflage burlap used by the military or hunters to dissimulate men and equipment, he has a materiality that epitomizes masculinity. But this *Thinker*, seated on a somewhat too-large minimalist plinth, one foot perched on a bust of King Tut, is slightly comical in his distress. He has clearly had a hard day and seems to be begging for sympathy. By contrast, *Touche du bois* (p. 98-99) manages to cut a pretty macho figure despite the frailty of his phallic body, which consists of three wooden beams clothed in a pair of sexy stretch jeans. *L'Homme souci* (p. 58-59), for his part, radiates confidence. Armless, headless, but nonetheless very present, his tight muscular body, formed out of flowing strands of artificial black hair, stands squarely on Miu Miu stiletto heels. There is nothing pathetic about this body builder's

cross-dressing. The character central to *Mon bâton préféré tenu par l'homme ciment* (p. 81), whose Wookiee-head tops a Greek warrior's torso, is also clearly in control of the situation. Sentinel-like on his pedestal, he is obviously standing guard—but over whom or what? The satyr-like figure of *Étant donné, le Loris perché sur son socle néo-classique* (p. 78-79) expresses a mind-twisting multiplicity of visual and textual references. With their myriad conjurings—Marcel Duchamp's homonymous installation, the lion from *The Wizard of Oz*, the extravagant wigs of Louis XIV, figures from Greek mythology—it is impossible to fix the meaning of these two hybrid beings, attached to one another physically but so separate in pose and facture.

Femme panier (p. 60-61), one of the few fully assumed female figures Blass has made,¹² is an aggressive little thing, but not without vulnerability. Headless, arms flung wide, dressed in a kitschy patterned shirt, one hand, white, brandishing a green pickle-like tool, the other black and Halloween-horrific, she is, in her stance, clearly defiant. Don't come any closer, she declares. But she also has her feminine side. The child-sized mannequin legs are fitted with just slightly too-small fishnet stockings that droop at the crotch. In the way she is presented—the precision of her pose, the importance of



Femme planche, 2010
Styrofoam, paint, ceramic,
shovel
89 × 170 × 41 cm

clothing in defining her identity—she has something of Degas's little ballet dancer. But she hides her sensitivity (conveyed by the fragility of the woven basket that forms the torso) behind the belligerence of her pose and gesture. Why, one wonders, after a long series of animal-man hybrids, did Blass decide to make such a strong female figure? When asked about the gender of her works, the artist admits that her apparently masculine titles—*Homme souci*, *Homme paille*, *Homme ciment*—refer in fact to mankind. These figures are to be read as hybrid beings. There is, however, no ambiguity about the gender or sexuality of *Femme panier*. The piece actually embodies an aspect of Blass's practice so far unmentioned: that her works are those of a female sculptor, and that despite the patriarchal domination of the sculptural tradition, she is a genuine descendant of such women as Meret Oppenheim, Louise Bourgeois, Betty Goodwin and Kiki Smith. *Femme panier* directs attention to the encounters that are the foundation of her practice—between her own body and those she creates, between one sculpture and another, between the physicality of her viewers and that of the works in an exhibition space.

Clearly, the anachronism underlying Blass's practice, her anchoring in two

chronologically distinct sculptural traditions, is not as straightforward as I may have intimated. The facture of her free-standing figurative sculptures is no less evocative than the assemblage works, and they are encoded with the same complexity. The flowing locks of *L'Homme souci* are purchased wig extensions, but they are also the base material for an artistically formed muscular body, its clothing and its texture. The basket, shirt, stockings and mannequin used to create *Femme panier*, all recognizable for what they are, assume many new associations within the context of the sculpture. Likewise, even the most abstract of the assemblages can be read, if only through evocation or suggestion, as bodies or figures. Orifices, hands, feet, bulbous heads and expressive gestures abound in the ceramic works. The minimal addition of a horizontal extension on the bottom of *Comment se tenir debout* (p. 88-89) transforms a tiled column into a footed figure, while it is the title of *Cette jeune femme ne sait pas s'habiller* (p. 80) that gives humanity to its tricoloured drapery. In an odd way, *Cargo culte* (p. 64-65) calls to mind statues of multi-armed Indian gods and goddesses, whose hands each signify a particular power—yet the symbolic thrust of its hands could hardly be more contemporary.

Blass is a master of *trompe l'œil* and the *faux-fini* (even her raw materials are multivalent), and we are often tricked into seeing things that are not what they seem. *Femme planche*, *Étant donné*, *Déjà donné* and a new series of "cubist" works are, for instance, carved out of Styrofoam masquerading as wood, ancient pottery, bronze, plaster or marble. Objects and materials are both what they are and more than they appear to be. Her titles, which on first reading seem descriptive or nominative, also serve to complexify the associations, opening up indeterminate avenues of meaning and intention, provoking reflection and deepening the viewer's engagement. They seem to express the affective relationship Blass has developed in the process of making the work but at the same time suggest routes via which viewers can establish their own rapport to the piece. They represent, in fact, along with the facture and the form, yet another level that must be decoded if the mechanisms at work in these complex sculptures are to be fully grasped. It is their double, triple, even quadruple encoding, enhanced by the way Blass manipulates the conventions and techniques of the sculptural tradition, that gives her works such resonance. We are indeed within the realm of the *infigurable*.

1 It is arguably Andy Warhol's factory that paved the way to the undoing of the romantic notion of the studio as the privileged place of creation. In his seminal 1971 essay entitled "The Function of the Studio," Daniel Buren described the studio as a place where the work originates, a private place—perhaps an ivory tower—and a stationary place where portable objects are produced, while simultaneously declaring his rejection of the studio and his commitment to working *in situ*. Joe Scanlan's idea of the post-post studio rejuvenates the studio as a site of production by enlisting the help of collaborators and outsourcing the labour of making art. See Mary Jane Jacob and Michelle Grabner, eds., *The Studio Reader: On the Space of Artists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press and The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2010) for a selection of texts by artists, art historians and art critics on the subject of the studio.

2 Canadians Liz Magor, Shary Boyle, Brendan Tang, Stephen Schofield, David Altmejd, Luanne Martineau, Jake Moore and Fabienne Lasserre are just a few of the artists working in the terrain of the reskilled.

3 Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). See also her text, "Affectivity and Entropy: Production Aesthetics in Contemporary Sculpture," in Glenn Adamson, ed., *The Craft Reader* (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2010), p. 588-595.

4 Drucker, *Sweet Dreams*, p. 36.

5 Johanne Sloan, "Everyday Objects, Enigmatic Materials," in *La Triennale québécoise 2011 : Le travail qui nous attend* (Montréal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2011), p. 374. Sloan cites the writings of Arjun Appadurai, Bruno Latour, Bill Brown and Jane Bennett, in particular.

6 Aside from the plethora of bought and found objects that Blass's works incorporate, the diversity of her materials is impressive. A merely cursory list includes Styrofoam, cement, metal, wood, paper, paint, plaster, expandable polyurethane, silicone, straw, FGR gypsum, burlap, rubber, ceramics, polystyrene, shrinkable tubing, linoleum tiling, glue, concrete adhesive, artificial hair and fabric.

7 Sloan, "Everyday Objects," p. 374.

8 Drucker, *Sweet Dreams*, p. 173.

9 From a text by Valérie Blass deposited at the time of her Master's thesis exhibition at the Université du Québec à Montréal, held in 2005 (made available to me by the artist).

10 Earlier in her practice, Blass employed a strategy of doubling—producing two almost identical objects, different only in scale, texture, colour or materiality—as a means of representing the *infigurable* and suspending or drawing out the "moment of recognition." See Jean-Ernest Joos, "Le Poids de l'infigurable. À propos du travail de Valérie Blass," *Esse arts + opinions: Dérives II* 55 (Fall 2005), p. 54-55.

11 See Jake Moore's text on this work: "Look at What I Am Thinking. See What I Am Feeling," in Valérie Blass, exhib. cat. (Montréal: Parisian Laundry, 2011, p. 52-56).

12 Other explicitly female works include *Une fois de trop*, 2008, *She Was a Big Success*, 2009, and *Femme planche*, 2010; there are also pieces whose feminine gender is alluded to only in the title, such as *Cette jeune femme ne sait pas s'habiller*, 2008, and *Ta sœur*, 2009.