

Valérie Blass's sexy beasts

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The sculptures of Montreal's Valérie Blass defy easy categorization. For that matter, they defy easy assimilation. To confront a Blass sculpture is, at least partially, also to confront one's ideas about the function of sculpture, not to mention the more important function(s) of transgression in art.

Blass does not create lovely three-dimensional objects to behold. Rather, her work replicates a kind of obsessive-compulsive, relentlessly compiling mindset – an interiority driven by dissociative (at first sight) associations, dots connected that do not make (at first) cognitive sense, don't connect – and thus, the works are more frightening than seductive.

Unless you're a total pervert (in the happy way).

I brought two friends who are both veteran theatre artists. The first thing these dear hams said was, "Sexy!", and the show was all uphill from there.

Blass's work, however weird it gets, is more erotically charged than most burlesque acts – because, unlike things traditionally considered erotic, Blass's work is dangerous and indeterminate and does not give it all away at once. Nothing is obvious, but all is available.

Three sculptures in particular trigger this turned-on-while-confused sensation, and all of them are made from the most unlikely materials.

Femme Planche is a near body-sized sculpture of a crouching female figure. The figure's forearms and hands rest on the floor, while its legs remain locked upright, thrusting the backside into the viewer's face. Resting cozily between the cheeks of the buttocks is the spade of a shovel, with its long handle following all the way to the floor.

The prone, sexualized position of the figure is indeed blunt, but the materials Blass uses to craft this situation are hardly the stuff of mommy porn: Styrofoam and paint, plus a rusted and mangy looking old shovel. The figure's lurid pose and the barn door materials (furthermore, the figure is coloured a dung brown) do not appear to work together toward a shared erotic goal, yet the sculpture triggers an unavoidable erotic response. The vulnerability of the pose plus the investment, via the indelicate placement, of the common shovel with phallic power (or menace) cause the viewer to see the sculpture as both sexually inviting and utterly abject, far from sexual.

Similarly, the large work entitled *Ce Nonobstant*, both invites and repels. About seven feet tall and basalt black, the painted Styrofoam sculpture resembles a stalagmite, a cool and patient rock sentinel. And then you turn and see that from one side of the rock a slender arm, a slender creamy blue arm, is extending, holding a deadly sharp pointed stick. Again, Blass is playing hard to get. The rock tower, a

refugee perhaps from Stonehenge, is a welcoming, mystical presence. The armed arm practically yells Back Off.

My favourite work, however, is the post-human figure made of mounds of synthetic wig hair, plus a pair of Miu Miu high heels. Entitled *L'Homme souci* (*The worried man*) the sculpture is both voluptuous (the wigs form bulbous, curvy muscles, fibrous loins) and, well, disgusting (the wigs are of the cheap sort, more woolly itchy than silky). The abundant evidence of artifice, as conveyed by the wigs, conflated against the silhouette the sculpture casts – that of a curvy, fleshy creature, a Rabelaisian sexpot – both disrupts and re-aligns the inherent sexual expectations; expectations naturally attached to what is essentially still a nude figure in high heels.

Alongside all these Cronenbergian flesh/not flesh, desire/revulsion dynamics, Blass's many tower-like assemblages seem rather conventional. But there are subtexts a-plenty in these works as well.

Blass employs everything from pipes to animal-shaped planters to onion soup bowls for her tall, misshapen totems, which are made from found and/or rebuilt objects: But underneath the seeming randomness of her collection of objects, an instinctual logic waits - an atavistic like-to-like, sympathetic magic.

Her smaller works, in particular a cheap ceramic David to which cat-shaped milk jugs and ashtrays have been attached, compress this pile-on sensibility, creating a density of visual cues, noise and bluster, whereas her taller works create meditative, and, yes, silly too, chains of meaning.

When viewed with the more overtly sexualized works, Blass's assemblages betray a parallel distrust of the exact, especially in any attempt to replicate the organic, the bodily, the human.

We are all masses of contradictions, mash-ups, breathing chunky scrapbooks, Blass's work informs us – and here are our synaptic flares, and burps, made concrete.