



Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh, 'Inspirational Embodiments: The Incomparable Sculpture of Valérie Blass', *Border Crossings*, Issue 148, 2018

Inspirational Embodiments

The Incomparable Sculpture of Valérie Blass

by Robert Enright and Meeka Walsh

In 2015 Valérie Blass made a sculpture called *La méprise* consisting of two porcelain objects in flocking, standing on a marble slab and facing a mirror. One of the objects is a black cat with its tail sticking straight up. Viewed from the side and in the mirror, the cat's tail looks like a man's protuberant nose, which, looked at again, comes to resemble a penis. This sequence of reading and rereading is a process experienced by everyone who encounters a Blass sculpture. Nothing is only what it seems on the surface.

For the Montreal artist, *méprise* is a voluntary misunderstanding. "It's not a question of people lying," she says, "but simply a situation where people don't understand the same thing." That sense of misunderstanding is one that she welcomes, because for every "missed" understanding there are a multiple number of understandings waiting to be found. It follows, then, that moving through Blass's sculptural world is to be engaged in a journey of layered discovery. That trip can be curious, as in *She was a big success*, 2009—the piece that single-handedly made Blass's reputation as one of Canada's most exciting artists—and curiously, as in *Déjà donné*, 2011, a freakish con-fabulation of an Egyptian bust, body parts, an animal head and rude orifices.

On occasion, it can also be menacing. From one side, *Flat man/j'en ai assez je dis oui*, 2015, is a compact, powerful, two-sided sculpture that looks like a close cousin to any number of early modernist free-standing sculptures—it's like a blackened version of Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* from 1913 without the flowing bellbottoms. From the other side, it's a pyramid of three male bodies that is simultaneously erotic and strange. But the male figures that make *Flat man* so seductive are redeployed in *I feel funny*, 2015, where a pair of photographically rendered men seems to be pinned and racked like insect specimens on the wall.

Valérie Blass, *To reside elsewhere*, 2015, inkjet print on aluminum, wood, steel, sculpting epoxy dough, sculpture, 38 x 19 x 24 inches. Installation view, "To only ever say one thing forever the same thing," 2015, Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. Photo: SITE Photography. All images courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries.



1

In talking about *I feel funny*, Blass refers to the humour she finds in the act of sculptural deconstruction (she says her purpose is to divert and distract your attention and that her work is about “the continuation of discontinuity”). But, for her, the result of that disassembly is an altogether inventive reconstruction of something we’ve never seen before. What is so fascinating about her work is that it allows us to see clearly what has been taken apart, but then in the reconfiguring, we see objects and relationships that are completely unexpected.

Blass has said that she is constantly involved in engineering doubleness. The formal register of that pursuit is discernible in her movement between abstraction and figuration; the aesthetic measure is evident in the inventive ways with which she folds photography into her sculptural production; the cultural dimensions are traceable in her toggling between the Internet and art history for the sources of her work. *Étant donné, le loris perché sur son socle néo-classique*, 2008, borrows Duchamp’s famous title to show us a loris, a bug-eyed poisonous marsupial, clinging to a hairy creature that is a cross between the sasquatch and a satyr; *Quel regret*, 2010, looks as if Giacometti’s 1932 *The Palace at 4 A.M.* has been reprised as a wooden folk art model; *Cargo Culte*, 2011, is a three-dimensional hybridization of hands-on surrealism, Calderesque balance and Mondrian geometry; and *Prête pour le pire*, 2013, suggests that a collection of steel branches has

assembled into the form of a praying mantis and is taking itself for a walk. All the objects and figures in her sculptures take positions or assume postures. In aesthetic terms, they give good pose.

Blass’s intention is always to make connections between things. As she says in the following interview, “All the time I’m trying to reveal two things at once, trying to tell two stories by merging them.” One of the reasons why she favours the mirror is that it is a device that doubles every perception; there is how something appears and then how it appears in the mirror through reflections and amplifications. The mirror adds to and changes the story. The story (closer still, the stories) being told through the sculpture of Valérie Blass is, are and will be incomparably seductive. In any serious art competition, she’s guaranteed to be named Miss Understanding.

The following interview is a collage taken from two conversations in the artist’s Montreal studio, the first on April 23, 2018, and the second on October 12, 2018.

BORDER CROSSINGS: I know very little about your background, so I’m interested to get a sense of how much art was a part of your growing up.

VALÉRIE BLASS: My mother was an art teacher and my father, Gaétan Beaudin, was a famous ceramist, but my parents were not married and didn’t live together, so I was mostly raised by my mother. My

1. *Terminons en beauté (cruche phallique), J’ai percé un trou (cruche standard), Précieuse ma précieuse (cruche bauhaus), Bruit encerclé (cruche nouvelle)*, 2016, 4 objects, steel rod, embroidery fabric, threaded construction, PVC on plinth, 64 x 108 x 35 inches. Installation view, “La Grand Balcon,” 2016, La Biennale de Montréal, Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.

2. *She was a big success*, 2009, expanded polystyrene, wood, artificial hair, pigments, 96 x 32 x 32 inches.

3. *Ne pas essayer à la maison*, 2013, artificial hair, steel, plastic, polystyrene, 60 x 13 x 12 inches.

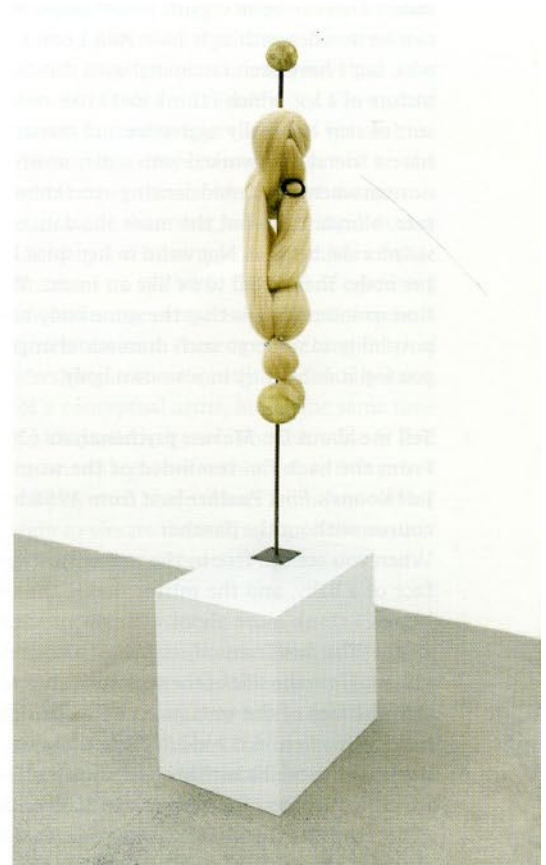
father didn't want the responsibility of raising a child. I met him for the first time when I was 12, and after that we were able to have a relationship, which turned out to be a really positive one. But he didn't teach me anything about art or ceramics. There have been times when I've been working with ceramics that I wish I had my father because he could explain things to me. He was a ceramist long before it was really cool; he had a school in the late '50s and early '60s. He went to Japan, not as a student but more as a master to meet other masters. He died in 2002 at the age of 78. He was always looking for ways to develop new techniques. He liked the process of using materials, and when he would find something new, he wouldn't stay with it. He kept changing all the time. I'm like that, too; I do so much research for each piece and when I finish, I think, "Now I know how I can do better." I respect artists who take a small, simple idea and push it to the maximum, but I don't see my art like that. Some people want to make objects that are super perfect, and my attitude is the opposite. I don't need to be perfect or have complete control of technique. It is more about the results that come out of some idea. Usually they come when I work in the studio. I think some material I'm working with has this quality and if I put it in another position, something else will happen. I usually don't know what that will be, but I do know that because of the torsion I set up, something weird will occur. I want what I do to be fresh. Sometimes I will do something and I think it is too small, but when I make it bigger I realize I can't really do it in the same way. But I'm not interested in making a perfect thing; I just do it super fast because I love the energy that comes out of spontaneity.

In earlier interviews you have talked about your attraction to modernist forms. What is it about them that you find so appealing?

First of all, I am fascinated by every movement of the avant-garde, including cubism and futurism. I was also attracted to an aspect of modernism that came out of primitivism and the way that Picasso was inspired by African art. I always like to mix my interest with other things because I like the contrast. I can draw inspiration from the sensibility of children's drawings—this is one of those clear and simple things that I talk about. But what is important is when you read a work of art, you have a hierarchy of reading; the eyes are more important than the nose or the hair. I work with the idea of how you read a shape, how you read an idea. My strategy is to divert your attention away from the usual thing and towards some other thing. How I do that, for example, is to make the same thing two times but with a distortion, or I put the same texture



2



3

on two pieces but one is figurative and the other one is abstract. The double turns up repeatedly in my work: the idea of two things with the same shape and the same motif and then a different shape with the same motif. My motivation in making a piece is about wanting to use material over which I don't have too much control, but material that will give me some object and some shape.

I want to talk about your studio practice and the making of a work. A sculpture like *She was a big success* (2009) is relatively simple in that it has only two components. I saw the source images, which make me think that you must have known what you were going to do with that piece in the studio. Yes. That sculpture is a collage, but not the kind of collage where you simply put two things together. I want to surprise myself with some shape that I can't imagine and that I can't figure out. When I find a strategy for making some object, it is usually not one that I have used before.

So the strategy of making comes out of your process in the studio. It is not predetermined?

No. It is more like what happens in *Ne pas essayer à la maison* (2013), where I stretched hair on a ball. What interests me is that the hair looks like a muscle. I don't control the shape of the things too much. They can be an organic potato shape, or they can be muscles with ugly hair. And I don't know why, but I have been fascinated with this fashion picture of a leg, which I think looks like an insect, sort of sexy but really aggressive and menacing. I have a friend who worked with a dancer who was normal when she started dancing—you know, cute face, blonde hair—but the more she danced, the weirder she became. Not weird in her spirit but in her body. She started to be like an insect. What I find so interesting is that the same body has the possibility to undergo such dramatic change that you feel it differently in your own body.

Tell me about *Dr. Mabuse psychanalyste* (2015). From the back I'm reminded of the woman in Jeff Koons's *Pink Panther* bust from 1988 but, of course, without the panther.

When you see the face in the mirror, you see the face of a baby, and the mirror makes the image bigger. I think more about a horror movie than Koons. The face is an object I constructed out of plaster. From the side of the sculpture, you can see that the face of the woman is cut and inside the head a small child is hidden. That sculpture was made for the exhibition "My Life" shown at Daniel Faria in Toronto and Artspeak in Vancouver in 2015. For that exhibition I was trying to make work that was more narrative and inspired by fiction.



What is it about the body that you find so fascinating? Even when you move towards abstraction, it still seems to be body-like. It's almost an obsession.

I'm surprised that you ask me this question because the body is everywhere. How can you not speak about it? I think the information in your body is really important. But I'm interested in a sense of eccentricity in the making of a body. When I start to make a sculpture, I don't want to make a character that is stupid, like a Bonhomme, the

1. *Flat man/j'en ai assez je dis oui*, 2015, wood, paint, photographic emulsion, 55 x 2 x 55 inches. Installation view, "To only ever say one thing forever the same thing," 2015. Photo: SITE Photography.

2. *Mieux vaut une vraie tristesse qu'une fausse joie*, 2016, fabric, polymer, forton, painting, 39 x 13 x 15 inches.



kind of figure that represents a naïve attitude about sculpture. I know that a body in sculpture can be horrible, but I know I'm really good at doing it well. There are many kinds of aesthetics in how you represent the body and there are many levels within abstraction. It was even evident when Betty Goodwin made work with pressed pieces of clothes. The reason I don't use a mannequin is because it is so different from a real body; it is not generic. For me, these kinds of detail are really important.

One of the things your work does is to walk a delicate line between the body as representation and the body as abstraction. You have pieces, like *To reside elsewhere* (2015), where lines will outline the form of the body. Do you have a particular interest in abstracting the body?

Well, your body and its genetic makeup don't change, but your spirit and what you think can change. I can make my body sit like this and then I can make my body sit like this, and both are very different. The positions the body takes are indications of how you feel. I am really interested in animals, too. If you are an eagle, you are in the present all the time, and I recognize that while being there can be super scary, it can also be really interesting. I think my work is about seeing something just in the present without any cultural baggage. I'm especially happy if people see many things in my work. An abstract sculpture can become anthropomorphic and a human figure can become geometrical. My goal is to sometimes give too much information and other times not enough, in order to confuse.

It's one thing to say it can be a bit scary, but another thing that comes out in your work is a genuine sense of delight and humour. Do you think your pieces are funny?

Yes. I like vulgarity. "Vulgar" is not a negative word for me. People think that whatever doesn't speak about death or religion or authority is vulgar. I am the opposite of this kind of authority. I'm against what makes authority in art and sets hierarchies, and I mean this everywhere and not just in the art world. I don't think a hierarchy that says this is a better value than that is interesting. I'm very influenced by a certain type of subculture image that circulates on the Web, the kind of confusing images with strange perspective, animals, or people in absurd situations. There is something magical and refreshing in these mostly accidental photos. I'm not a conceptual artist, but at the same time I play with stylistic issues. For me, style is just making one thing work with another thing. So I want to play with these things from pop culture and begin to elevate them. They can be funny but they can also be intelligent.

Do you care about beauty?

I don't really believe in beauty. For me, beauty is about specific references. When you first buy a Jaguar and a cheap car, they have a few things in common, but after 10 years the Jaguar will look a lot better. There are fewer of them and they will come to be more precious. Beauty is like that; it doesn't have an intrinsic value. Every colour is nice, but does it work best with another colour,



1

or with this subject or this finish? How does the gloss or matte fit with the object and the colour? These questions have a lot to do with the cultural references that we have.

If I think of a piece like *Déjà donné* (2011), for instance, you insert turquoise along with different tones of grey. What determines your palette choices?

I'm making a particular reference every time. I don't just choose a colour; it often takes me months and many tests before I choose. The sculpture *Déjà donné* is made of a finish, a motif and a colour that mimic ceramic. I wanted to isolate some sections with different colours and,

anthropomorphic—it could be a penis, a leg, a nose. In my work that happens all the time; you see one thing, but you're able to see two things at the same time. I want those ambiguities. To go back to your earlier question: this is something that I would call "beautiful." You are not fatigued by looking and you look a long time because the meaning can keep changing. It's like you get up one day and you see exactly the same thing, but you feel differently about it. I'm often inspired by images I find on the Internet about fashion and style and rappers. It can be interesting to work with expressive, very nice fashion. I like style, and I'll often take photographs of people in the street. I'll make tests in the studio and ask real models to come in and then I'll base the work on these photos. I will redo the same pose and I'll make those shapes and make connections between objects and people. All the time I'm trying to reveal two things at once, trying to tell two stories by merging them.

If seen from the front, *Je suis une image* (2014) gives the charge of seeing a woman undress, but if you go around to the side, you realize you're seeing only an arm, an elbow and a leg. The seduction is pushed out of the way by the humour.

Yes, with my work you ask: What is the reality, what's true, what is the *vérité*? Seduction is putting a sparkle on something as a way of distracting you from my real intention. But my intention is not to generate desire. I don't think about that when I work; I think more about abstract sculpture.

There are, though, different levels of seduction. Revealing a portion of an unclothed *derrière* is one kind, but there are more subtle ones as well. Is it the material that seduces the viewer, is it the form, is it some combination of the two?

Everything we're speaking about comes after because it develops in the work. I mould the body, I mould the inverse, I make a body, I put the clothes on it and, afterwards, I get the body out. It is the idea of the inverse. I have a concept when I start a piece and that concept is used as a restriction to guide my aesthetic decision. I usually start with a concept that creates formal obstacles, and step by step I try to solve them, which in the same process influences the aesthetic component of the work.

Why are you interested in just the remnant of the body?

I have made figurative sculpture, but when I work I like to cut the body. I don't know why. Maybe there is something in the deconstruction that appeals to me. I make a lot of photographs of the body that I then want to fit into a sculpture. So in *I feel funny* (2015), there are two guys but they



1. *Cargo Culte*, 2011, metal stand, wooden, rattan, plastic and ceramic objects, hydrocal fgr gypsum, cement, acrylic, enamel paint, 72 x 48 x 50 inches.

2. *Dans la position très singulière qui est la mienn*, 2012, plaster, mirror, pigment, wood, 66 x 63 x 61 inches.

through a glossy finish, to create some confusion, which forces the viewer to focus on the abstract sections of the sculpture and diverts his gaze from the figurative shapes.

Some of your most beautiful work are the pitchers, the *Terminons en beauté (cruche phallique)* (2016). Is the pitcher another form of body?

Sometimes my inspiration can be that simple. For me, when I look at a pitcher I see simultaneously three things: a container, which, for me has a feminine connotation; the beak that I see as a phallic form and at the same time the beak can be a nose; and the pitcher can look like a cartoonish face. For me, every time a thing with a nose turns up, I think of something sexual or

look like one guy. It's called *I feel funny* because I feel weird. In my work the fit of one thing can become the fit of another thing. For example, if I make your portrait in clay and I decide to remove a certain volume of clay from your nose, it will have a strong impact and disfigure you, but if I remove the same quantity of clay from your hair, nobody will see the difference and the impact will be less important. I like to pay attention to something that is more secondary so that people see two things at the same time. I play with that tension. I am really interested in old artifacts in the museum. When sculptures are broken, museums often put pieces of them in the space, like a Pietà where you have just the head with the hand. What happens is that your imagination wants to complete the composition, to fill in the missing parts.

Do you always see the body as presence and then something that can be taken away? You regard it as both presence and absence.

I want to have this opposition in the sculpture. For example, I like the coat when it's empty because you sense something that is not there. So if the sculpture of the woman where you see the

crack of her ass is sexy, it's not because of what is there, but because of what is only suggested. You can imagine more, you can feel the shape of the body, and you can feel the body inside there. It is really realistic. But this is connected to the question you asked about my intention in making a sexy sculpture. My show at Daniel Faria in 2015 was about seduction. I was saying that we want things that are not good for us, but I wanted to make fun of that, too. When I speak about emptiness, it's not symbolic for me; it doesn't have a message.

How do you know how little you can give before the viewer won't make that connection?

That's what I'm playing with. Seeing how little I can give is what the tension in the work is all about. I want to make a piece with less, where you don't understand which body part belongs to which body.

Your work operates on an edge between the put-together and the fallen apart. It is somewhere in that space between. Is that a comfortable space for your work to be in?

Yes, the in-between is really my place.

1. & 2. *Étant donné, le loris perché sur son socle néo-classique*, 2008, polystyrene, concrete adhesive, paper, paint, 68 x 25 x 21 inches.

3. & 4. *Je suis une image*, 2014, forton, modified hanging system, underwear, synthetic hair extensions, 50 x 18 x 28 inches. Installation view, "My Life," 2015, Artspeak, Vancouver. Photo: Blaine Campbell.



1



2

You use hands a lot. For a sculptor, the hand is the implement of making, so when hands appear in your work, do they reflect a methodology?

No, but I recognize that I don't make many faces. There are very few *visages*. But the hands speak a lot. The hand is intention and it is action. I'm also fascinated by the feet and the nose and in not giving attention to some part of the body. I play with that kind of surrealist thing. My work is about distortion and confusion. You see something and you imagine it is a part of something. The picture I'm using can be a joke, and I like a sense of humour that has a bit of a twist. I like to trick you and make you doubt what it is you are seeing.

Hair also turns up in your work a lot. Is it a kind of fetish?

I had wanted to make something using hair, but the hair had the same pattern as muscle and only after I made it did I realize that it might have been sexy. I'm really shy, and when I look at my work, it makes me feel even more shy. But hair in sculpture is like apparel. It is something that is on the body but it is not a real body. When I use hair it is more like a shape, like material, it is this thing

with texture. I find it interesting because it can become a form; it can be changed like drapery in sculpture. I have made only three pieces with hair, and I was mostly using it as a way of representing the body without having to include the body. But I don't want to work with hair anymore.

What was the idea behind *Femme panier* (2010)?

It was just a collage. I use collage because the easiest way to express myself is to glue stuff together. When I started I was using real clothes and found objects that I put together. The *Femme panier* was a deconstructed body who doesn't have a head on her shoulders, but she has a head in her hand.

Are you bothered by the fact that some critics see your work as having a surrealistic quality?

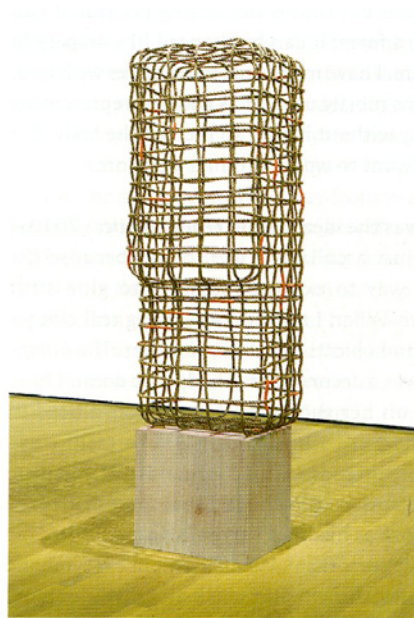
No, I like surrealism. What I don't like is symbolic art. It's too brown and black and dirty-looking. But the bad thing about surrealism is its tactic of putting disparate things together. It's a trick that is used too much in advertising and for publicity. I like some of the writing that talks about my work in Rabelaisian terms. For me, the monster is the opposite of the classical monument.



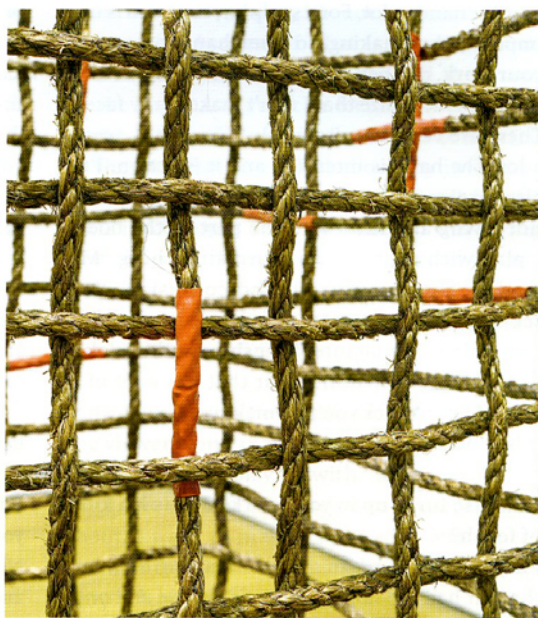
3



4



1



2

Where do you see your work going now, and how is that direction different from where you've been in the last decade or so?

I want to make work that is more anchored in reality now. I'm trying to distance myself from doing an interpretation of reality; I work with live models in my studio and I'm trying to capture a specific and a real moment. I do many sessions at my studio with live models and I ask them to perform certain roles, or an attitude, and I document their poses and action in the process. My goal after is to redo these scenes as sculpture with as limited elements as possible. In a way this is the same relationship that you see in the series I did with puppets, where the work is about what you see and what you don't see.

But you've done that before.

Yes, but when people think about my work, they think about my 2008 show at the Musée d'art contemporain in Montreal. So for the Oakville exhibition, "The Mime, the Model and the Dupe," we chose pieces that explain how my work is changing. It will be interesting for people to see because while I'm still looking for things that surprise me, now I am looking at real things. Working with the real model began when I started using photography in 2015 when I was preparing my exhibition at Catriona Jeffries. I started to work with this method where I used a real model to get at the idea of an invisible character. In the Biennale de Montreal in 2016, I had two sculptures that were using that method: *Le principe de la sueur: transpiration, évaporation, chaleur*; and *Mieux vaut une vraie tristesse qu'une fausse joie*. But it was already

in my work before that. It started with the sculpture called *Cargo Culte* (2011). The piece was named after a 1971 song by Serge Gainsbourg. It is realistic and figurative because I made a mould of a real hand. I love the hand with the cigar and the ashtray. There are many separate things in the sculpture, but they all have to operate as part of the same thing. It's a little bit like the way different things work in chemistry. Sometimes when I make an abstract sculpture, it looks super anthropomorphic. For me, it is both abstract and figurative, so you have the ashtray and the cigar in *Cargo Culte*. What I love about this is you have two things that are really real and then between them you have nothing. I am interested in this combination of continuity and discontinuity. In a way my work is about the continuation of discontinuity.

Do you work on a number of sculptures at the same time?

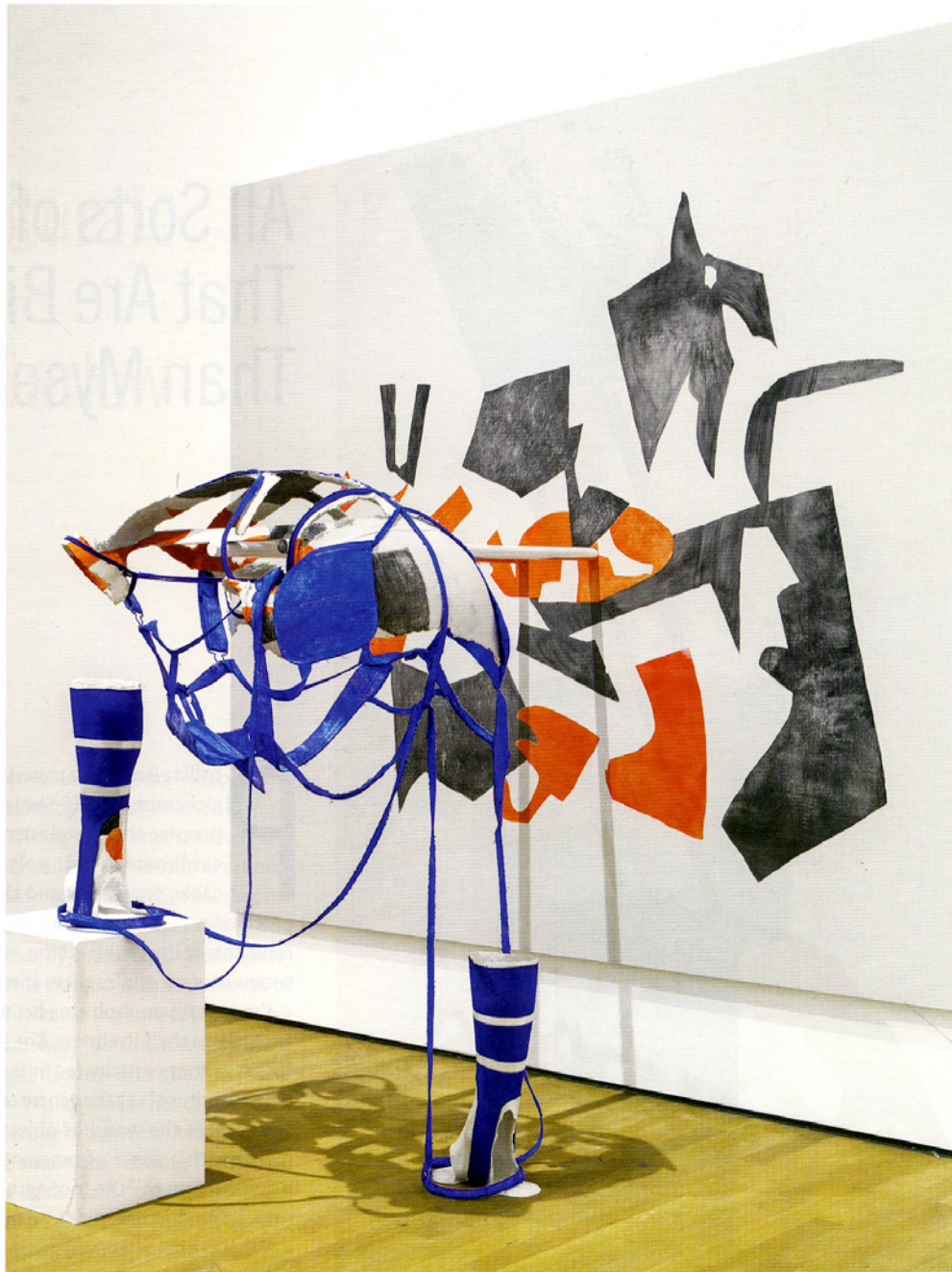
Yes, it is usually what I do for an exhibition. If you come through my studio months before a show, everything is started and nothing is finished.

Do you have more confidence now that you can do what you want?

When you start out as a young artist, you do something because you want to know what is happening and what will it look like when it's finished. The stuff I did before doesn't interest me now. I'm a little bored with it. I need to do something more complicated. I look at artists who make simple things that I could do as a young artist and I love it, and while the result is good, I need something more now, something different. Collage

1. & 2. *Ma substance n'est rien devant vous*, 2016, string, resin, paint, plinth, 49 x 18 x 17 inches. Installation view, "La Grand Balcon," 2016, La Biennale de Montréal, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.

3. *Le principe de la sueur: transpiration, évaporation, chaleur*, 2016, fabric, resin, polymer, forton, painting, 51 x 20 x 30 inches. Installation view, "La Grand Balcon," 2016, La Biennale de Montréal, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.



3

is the easiest way to find something cool and it's magic when you find the right object, but I'm not using collage and found objects as much. It's more to do with being realistic, more about mixing the object with photography. To express myself, when I mix two things I need to engage some process of distortion and not just use objects. I can't do the kind of sculpture where I would use a cat and the cat makes the nose and then I make the tail and it becomes a guy with a big nose but the big nose also looks like a penis. I can't do that anymore because the representation looks too much like a

cartoon. I still like it when you see two things at the same time, but I want to stay in reality. That's the difference. I also think it's more like an installation because I can now put in more than one sculpture.

But whatever you do, this notion of surprise and doubleness has stayed with you. Your work is still destabilizing. What seems to be constant is that nothing is only just what it seems; it is what it looks like and then something else as well. I assume that continues in the new work.

Yes. ■