

Valérie Blass: An Interview with Wayne Baerwaldt

Wayne Baerwaldt I'm interested to hear how you came to the process of making sculpture. Which artists inspire you, who are your mentors? Is there a particular aspect of sculpture or of art making in general that intrigues and stimulates you?

Valérie Blass When I started studying art in university, my practice was focused on painting and drawing. I took sculpture classes centred on wood and metal, as well as courses in video and photography, but sculpture became my main focus after I took a casting class. I was fascinated by the process of moulding a form and transposing it into another material; it opened up a new field of possibilities that at the time seemed to me infinite. It was then that I adopted a self-imposed constraint: I would try to make avant-garde works while remaining in the field of traditional sculpture—in other words, I would strive to create objects with their own aesthetic autonomy. The idea was simply to begin with a constraint.

WB How would you describe your investigation into form and materials?

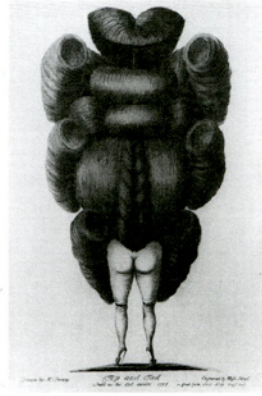
VB My sculptures are strangely familiar hybrid forms that straddle the line between the figurative and the abstract. By creating

works that are deliberately ambiguous, I am initiating a semantic dialogue between object and sculpture, between what is perceived and what is real, between the arbitrary and the logical. Some of the abstract shapes appear at first to belong to formalism, but as soon as one looks closer they take on an anthropomorphic quality. My purpose is, I openly admit, to trigger arbitrary comparisons and associations that undermine the hierarchies of abstraction and figuration; I want to upset our ability to identify, or rather I want the tendency to automatically link a work to a set of pre-established references to be submerged by a simultaneous loss and surplus of meaning. I want to set the viewer on the false tracks of surrealism, minimalism or genre sculpture.

WB Your approach to integrating ceramics with other materials (such as wood, metal or faux fur) extracts the medium from its artisanal, craft history. Although ceramics was once part of the artistic avant-garde in Canada, since the 1970s it has been largely absent from mainstream contemporary art, or certainly from so-called cutting-edge art. You've established a new focus for ceramics. Artists like Eric Cameron, Damian Moppett and Grayson Perry, for example, have used



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ceramics as a conceptual platform to open new discourses on art making. How do you critically view your own relationship with clay or ceramics?

VB I don't really work with ceramics. I'm not an expert in the technique. My father was a renowned Québec ceramist, but he was not given the time to pass his knowledge on to me. I use clay to model a form that I then turn into a mould, so I can transfer the form into another material.

My work reflects on all the aesthetic objects that surround us, the ones that are designed primarily to be looked at, from bibelot to toy, from classical sculpture to minimalist painting. A lot of these objects are ceramic. In this, I think my approach to ceramics is similar to Damian Moppett's. I love his *Untitled (Stabile)* series, where a metal prop reminiscent of Calder's sculptures is used to support the ceramics he has created.

WB Your work can be very sexy, open and alive, while simultaneously appearing to shut down your viewers' expectations by obscuring surfaces with material like faux fur or hair. *She Was a Big Success*, 2009, for instance, shows an incredible collision of materials. Can you describe this work for

me? I'm interested in how you see the end product, the decisions you made in arriving at the final form, and when you felt it was "finished"—is it in fact complete?

VB The piece is definitely finished. In this work the hair is not a material covering the object; rather, it is the tension of the hair pulled tightly over many hemispheres that creates the shape. The result is a form that resembles a muscle.

I like to set up situations of mediation that generate forms in which chance is partially constrained. During the creative process, I play with the different parts of the sculpture so that, once assembled, the result is a surprise even to me. Making a sculpture becomes an experiment. Given the multiplicity of formal elements, there is a random aspect—controlled, obviously—to each work. This means that the viewer's experience will be similar to mine. Viewers will be confronted by an unusual object whose genesis they will try to understand, without being able to grasp how the artist arrived at the result. Because of the strangeness of the object, the work will strike the viewer as an unsolvable enigma, which will make its reception a real experience.

In the catalogue of the exhibition *L'Empreinte*, Georges Didi-Huberman uses various concepts that have particular significance for me, such as translation, surplus, loss and experimentality. Speaking of the process of imprint, Didi-Huberman quotes Gilbert Simondon: "The man at work prepares the mediation, but he does not accomplish it: mediation accomplishes itself once the conditions have been created; thus, although the man is very close to this operation, he is not conversant with it."¹ Similarly, I build a form based on a number of referents without understanding their inner logic.

To create this sculpture, I started by making a quick clay model of a kind of monstrous head. Then I did a rough copy of the head in Styrofoam. After that, I added the hair, bound tightly over half spheres. It was only later, once the head was finished, that I juxtaposed it visually with images that had been in my studio for a while. The next step was to sculpt the legs to the right scale, so that the image became an object in 3D. Then I simply had to fit the two elements together.



She Was a Big Success, 2009
Styrofoam, wood, synthetic
hair, pigment
96 × 32 × 32 cm
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Wayne Baerwaldt is Acting Vice President for Research and Academic Affairs, as well as Director/Curator, Exhibitions at the Alberta College of Art + Design in Calgary. He was the director of The Power Plant in Toronto from 2002 to 2005, and served as the curator of the 2007 Biennale de Montréal, *Crack the Sky*. Baerwaldt has curated or co-curated many exhibitions both in Canada and internationally, including Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's *The Paradise Institute*, at the 49th Venice Biennale (2001); *Glenn Ligon: Death of Tom and Minnesota Massacre* (2009-2010); *Adam Pendleton: BAND* (2010); *Iran do Espirito Santo: Wall Drawings* (2011); and *Stephen Andrews: subject* (2011).

¹ Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (Paris: Éd. Aubier, "R.E.S. L'Invention philosophique" series, 1989 [1958]), p. 243 (trans.). Quoted by Georges Didi-Huberman in *L'Empreinte*, exhib. cat. (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997), p. 27.