CANADIANART

REVIEWS

Valérie Blass

Valerie Blass, Spring 2009, pp 110-111

MARCH 1, 2009

BY CAMERON SKENE



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Kai Althoff

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Parisian Laundry, an expansive three-storey gallery in the alternately dilapidated and gentrified Montreal district of St-Henri, is a strangely suitable venue for the work of the Montreal sculptor Valérie Blass. Named for its previous incarnation—"Parisian Laundry" is carved in stone above the entrance—the gallery occupies yet another renovated early-20th-century industrial building, gutted and refitted like so many others in Montreal's recent orgy of development. The gutted and refitted aesthetic of Blass's work keenly reflects the fragmented, erotically charged dystopia of her hometown.

Blass is definitely a product of Montreal. Here, one's first walk down any street will visually oppress the visitor with the historical patchwork of the city's urban development. Blass's recent contribution to the Québec Triennial at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, which involved out-of-context items engagingly cobbled together, demonstrated real originality. Using such varied materials as rubber insulation for hydro cables (how very Quebec!), Chinatown trinkets, fake fur, thrift-store treasures and cement, she creates an amalgam of banal materials and avant-garde tradition, all folded into a formal matrix.

Like another painter-turned-sculptor, Eva Hesse, Blass makes work that in spite of, or perhaps because of, its base materials, contains a distinct "whiff of the erotic." Her use of rubber insulation is a case in point: after collecting mass-produced trinkets like Royal Doulton figurines and vintage toys, Blass arranges them in a row, moulding them in plaster in a repetitive pattern that can extend as infinitely as one of Brancusi's endless columns. She paints lines on the rubber insulation, shuffles it around the form and heat-shrinks it until the original objects peek through the rubber coating.

The effect is an erotic murmur on auto repeat: the forms twist and poke through the tough matrix of coloured rubber, more compelling to the eye than a revelatory close-up of the tainted, perhaps pimpled original underneath. In other pieces, like *Cette Femme ne sait pas s'habiller* (2007), an obscured object transitions through plaster, leatherette and expandable insulation foam into a final assemblage of moulded pieces of drapery. The struggle for crisp form takes place underneath the sensuous draping and layered materials. The real meat is the work's surface sensuality and colouring, the suggestion of order: veiled possibilities.

In *Deux assemblages crédibles à mon environnement immediate* (2007), Blass assembles a writhing interlacing of lumpy, disjointed objects whose shape is echoed in a more formalist construction of veneered flooring. It is presented on a filing-cabinet base, alluding to the dull and deliberate struggle to create order. Blass's vocabulary is wide, but its range never seems to jar the viewer: moving from cement moulding to miles of camouflage material veiling a semi-human form like a mouldy sasquatch to broken Chinese trinkets reassembled in a matrix of plaster, Blass, like Hesse, follows the linguistic rules of the material she's working with—sensitive to its irony, in-jokes, cadence and, when the mood's right, sexual innuendo.