

EDWYNN HOUK GALLERY

VALÉRIE BELIN/REFLECTION

Victoria & Albert Museum

Project Space / Gallery 101 in the Photography Centre

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Valérie Belin (b. 1964) is an internationally acclaimed French artist known for her monumental photographs exploring artifice, identity and representation. Belin's work challenges viewers to question their inherent perspectives on the world, encouraged by a sense of fantasy and eerie surreality present in her pictures. The V&A invited Belin to make a new series inspired by its photography collection. She chose to explore street photography, focussing particularly on images depicting shopfronts and window displays. The seductive nature of the street has drawn attention throughout the history of photography, including from well-known practitioners such as Eugène Atget (1857–1927), Walker Evans (1903–75) and Lee Friedlander (b. 1934). It has also featured in commercial practices, such as those of the New York Worsinger Window Service or graphic designer Robert Brownjohn (1925–70). Through this subject, Belin examines the visual vernacular of the street, emphasising the illusory effects created by layered reflections. This project continues her ongoing inquiry into the tension between the real and the imaginary, interrogating stereotypes and encouraging viewers to confront what they see.

The window display introduces readymade theatre to the street, a space for passers-by to experience the archetypal ideal and engage in the acts of looking and being seen. Spurred on by his concern about the disappearance of historic architecture, Atget recorded the streets of Paris for almost three decades. In his photographs, the simultaneously reflective and transparent qualities of the windowglass evoke a dreamlike vision of the city. Though he primarily considered himself a documentarian, the camera's long exposure often rendered Atget's figures either absent or ghost-like, endowing his pictures with a surreal ethereality. Friedlander was also enticed by the window, drawn in by the tantalizing prospect of a reflected self-portrait. His photographs explore the line between presence and absence, superimposing almost indiscernible representations of the photographer onto the city behind him.

While these examples exploit the illusory aspects of the window, photographs by the Worsinger Window Service mute such immaterial elements. A commercial firm based in New York, Karl J. Worsinger's company was engaged to record the window displays of department stores such as Saks Fifth Avenue during a period of growing American

consumerism from the 1930s to the early 1950s. Often photographing painstakingly arranged compositions, the firm demonstrated a meticulous approach to ensuring the clarity of the displays. Any reflections in the glass were eliminated, leaving fantasy scenes reminiscent of film stills or stage sets. Worsinger did not, however, eliminate the presence of the photographer entirely, as each image maintains a view of the window's frame. This simple decision introduces layers of depth, situating the photographer and thus the viewer, on opposite sides of the pane of glass.

Another element of the street that piqued Belin's interest was typography. In a tradition going back to the nineteenth century, signage has often provided a textual counterpart to the visual language of photography. For example, *Signs, Southern Carolina*, photographed by Walker Evans in 1936, tells the varied history of a building – as an art school, a fish company and the location of an historic public speech. On the topic of text, however, it was the work of Robert Brownjohn that resonated in particular with Belin. Brownjohn photographed the typographic environment of London as it emerged from post-war austerity in the 1960s. He used these photographs as source material and inspiration for his design process. Belin has demonstrated a similar approach, photographing streets and shopfronts in American cities as material for building up layers of imagery. These thousands of photographs, gathered by Belin throughout years of travel, have previously acted as supplementary materials and backgrounds. However, this project gave licence for these pictures to take centre stage, forming the focal component of her new series.

Themes of reflection, depth, representation, artifice and identity – the drivers of Belin's conceptual approach – are echoed in the fragmented visual narratives present in this new commission. The photographs are comprised of rich, textural layers of images, constructed using her signature process of superimposition. Belin arranged images upon one another, starting with the photographs she made herself but then adding material from graphic novels, magazines and film noir. Her nuanced placement of images results in dynamic juxtapositions, encouraging the viewer to imagine fictitious narratives to fill the dreamlike compositions. These photographs do not depict humans, however they do convey a human essence in the vibrant stories her designs and arrangements invoke: stories of an imagined population, referenced yet absent in the pictures; stories of dialogue between the artist of today and the history of the past; and stories of Belin's unique vision, which flourishes during the experimental process of digital postproduction.

By applying her perspective to the V&A's photography collections in this way, Belin interrogates the relationship between seeing and being seen, light and dark,

transparency and opacity. While these can be seen to connect to human behaviours, they also relate closely to enduring issues in the medium of photography, mirroring the intersection of Belin's artistic approach with the V&A's historic collection. Belin's contemporary perspective reimagines pictures from past moments, bringing a new relevance to the museum's collection and a new experience for visitors.

Catherine Troiano, former curator, Photographs, V&A

AN INTERVIEW WITH VALÉRIE BELIN

What inspires you about the V&A's collections?

The V&A extends across the field of art in a way I have always found inspiring; as a museum that is multidisciplinary and not strictly artistic, and because of its rich collection of applied arts. It's a treasure trove, filled with amazing decorative art, graphic design, fashion and photography – all the things I've drawn upon in my own work. Going to museums is part of the artist's life – artists go to museums to be faced with history and to find resources

What did you respond to during your time in the V&A's Prints & Drawings Study Room?

When I was doing my research for this project I went to the Study Room to look at the V&A photography collection. Photographs by the Worsinger Window Service fascinated me. They are bound in albums like a picture book and document sophisticated storefront window displays in New York City during the mid-twentieth century. They were commissioned at a time when department stores were becoming increasingly popular. Traders were no longer showing their wares in the street and goods were carefully arranged in wonderfully complicated window displays. This reminded me in many ways of my own work.

The Worsinger albums were a really exciting discovery; the pictures feel like they might come alive, as if the mannequins would pick up the bags beside them and put on the shoes. The photographer's attention to detail creates a complex surreality, like a crime scene or a frame from a Hitchcock movie. Worsinger always included part of the window frame in the image. This emphasizes the presence of the photographer and indicates their position in space, as well as their active decision to frame the picture in this particular way. Although the photographs depict windows, there is no reflection in the glass separating the street from the arrangement of objects. This creates the feeling

that just as the photograph was made to show the window display, the window display was also made to be photographed.

Another discovery was the work of Robert Brownjohn, an American graphic designer who photographed the signage and typography on London streets in the 1960s. He collected these vernacular visual references as inspiration for his own work. This interested me because I too like to photograph aspects of urban life when I travel, to use as material later in my process.

The V&A has a rich collection of work by historic photographers and some of the pictures I looked at in the Study Room were already familiar to me, such as street scenes by Eugène Atget, Lee Friedlander and Walker Evans. These artists have inspired me throughout my career, so it was a thrill to see their original prints for the first time.

How did these scenes relate to your new works?

This commission was an opportunity to step away from my usual way of working, in which I use street views and other images to enhance the background texture of my pictures, instead taking these as the main component. In a sense, the V&A is itself like a big window display, so the shop window theme felt like a fitting vehicle for exploring imagination, theatre and the decorative arts in the particular context of this collaboration. You could say that looking at photographs of shop windows and street scenes from the V&A collection authorized me to do something on a similar theme with the pictures I'd taken myself.

What interests you about the window specifically?

The motif of the window recurs throughout my work. As a place of representation, fantasy and glamour, it speaks to the line between artifice and reality. The window display is ideal for delving into these ideas – it is a place of clichés and stereotypes, testing the extent to which viewers will accept a staged reality. I'm obsessed with stereotypes and with the way people use them to transform themselves into something else. For me, engaging with the idea of stereotypes also means deconstructing them through photography, emphasizing the falsehoods we take for granted in images.

There are many equivalences between window displays and photography: a window display is made to be seen; it is dedicated to the viewing experience, just like a photograph. I've always been attracted by subjects that are there to be seen. For me, objects are metaphors of human presence. When I photograph an object that represents somebody, like a mannequin in a window display, I try to bring it to life and emphasize the paradoxical nature of the human condition. In this series there is a human presence in every picture, evoked by the object or in the shadows around it,

contained by the window or reflected in it. This references the tension between presence and absence, between the artificial and the natural.

How have you made your new works? Talk to us a bit about your process.

For this project I used a digital process to build up layers of images through superimposition. The pictures I used were originally colour photographs from my archive, made during trips to the USA. I started by layering different photographs of window displays. I then began to add other images, accumulating a richness of texture by including graphic illustrations, pictures from magazines and stills from film noir movies. The result is an abstracted, fractured scene with multiple viewpoints, almost like a Cubist painting. As in Cubism, the process of superimposition in my work brings everything to the surface and negates any illusion of perspective. Superimposition as a process appeared gradually in my work, evolving organically in the early 2000s as digital tools and post-production became more common. I find working with superimposed images very natural. As a photographer, I'm used to the idea of layering; it's an essential concept in analogue photography when making negatives and prints from negatives. Superimposition is a form of reflection – a conscious or constructed reflection. Each layer could be a reflection in its own right and together they convey a fictional depth in which juxtaposed images create a fantastical truth. The pictures in this series show a dreamlike vision of the street utterly different from the actual streets I photographed; they are an imagined urban landscape.

Did you have an idea of what you wanted them to look like? How do you navigate the intersection of the digital and physical elements of a project like this?

I always work intuitively, with no preconceptions about how an image should look in the end. I am guided by my process, so it's during the experimentation of the postproduction phase that the vision comes to life. In fact, this phase has become increasingly important in my work. It's when I question and challenge the pictures I have gathered and use tools like Photoshop to achieve my viewpoint.

I often feel that the digital revolution has shifted the decisive moment in photography – what was decisive when a picture was made has become decisive at the point of postproduction. At the beginning of my career, when I worked with black-and-white analogue processes, I was very close to the definition of photography as drawing by light – or, in other words, the reflection of things by light. As digital post-production has taken on a greater role in my creative process this has changed. Postproduction is now the place to make important and impactful decisions. I don't use Photoshop to correct or erase things, I use it in an unorthodox manner, seeking new discoveries.

Photoshop is a creative tool – as creative as a camera. I am still close to my medium, but this is now the digital side of photography.

How does this project relate to others, to your broader artistic approach?

There is a strong connection between this series and my earlier work. The Silver series (1990s), in the V&A collection, consists of photographs of window displays of silver in department stores. The displays were photographed very simply and show my enduring interest in theatrical storefronts. In my still-life photographs (2000s), also at the V&A, the action of arranging still-life compositions echoes the process of constructing window displays. It's the same process – the same objects, the same sense of staging with the aim of eliciting a response from the viewer. There is also a relationship between my work and the photographic process itself. For example, my images can become a visualization of the chemical photographic process of silver darkening, thanks to the deep contrast rendered from monochromatic tones and dramatic lighting. It can be difficult to tell whether the image is a positive or a negative. In turn, this circles back to my visual inspiration, evoking a sense of ghostlike Hollywood glamour.

We live in a world where superimposition is part of our basic human condition. We are constantly dealing with different types of information, fielding multiple things at once. Maybe these pictures reflect the fact that it's easy to lose ourselves in the atmosphere generated by mass consumption. I would like viewers of my work to feel this too – for visitors to the V&A to question what it is they're looking at and perhaps challenge their usual way of seeing the world. These photographs are like a broken mirror. The original images are lost in the overarching sense of fragmentation. Each element works in relation to another, is informed by another – it's like looking into the kaleidoscope of life.

Conversation with Catherine Troiano at Valérie Belin's studio, Paris, 2019