Janet Werner (b. 1959) and Valérie Blass (b. 1967) both implicate the viewer in their artworks. It is through the distortions of their respective mediums that these two artists engage the viewer in an encounter between their own bodies and the artist’s objects in space. More precisely, what is enacted within this space is an anxious relationship between viewer and artwork. There is a process of re-formulation and re-materialization that is necessary on the part of the viewer to confront these artworks, not only formally, but more importantly, spatially and phenomenologically. The active bodies of these artists, through the fragmenting and the deforming of their mediums, seem to haunt not only the spaces within their work, but also the spaces within their exhibitions. To quote, phenomenological philosopher Maurice-Merleau Ponty, “Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space.”

What this statement essentially implies is that human experience, notably perception, is experienced corporeally, through our flesh.

Both the works of Werner and Blass negotiate the existential feminine condition. In formal terms, Werner does so through the re-purposed images of hyper-femininity of popular culture, and Blass through the ambiguously sculpted female figures, rendered alive by the debris of material culture. Both infuse their works with the tension between abstraction and figuration to initiate this anxious act of re-formulation and re-materialization on the part of the viewer. The haunting effect of the artist’s bodies, through the performative distortive qualities of their works,
enacts a corporeal, or rather a fleshy encounter that connects the body of the artist to the body of the figure of their work, and subsequently connects both to the body of the viewer.

Janet Werner

de Mille, 2010

38x32”

Oil on canvas

http://www.birchlibralato.com/artists/?artist=27&work=2215

Valérie Blass

Sans titre, 2010

14x9”

Mixed media on paper

It has been commented that Janet Werner’s sequences of faces seem to be “evolving into subjects.” Rather than being presented as coherent and unitary selves, it is through the representation of the popular cultural images, on which Werner bases her portraits that these women are “continually on the move through networks of representations, acquiring and losing layers of identity along the way.” It could be said that Werner’s portraits are in the process of becoming or perhaps in the process of un-becoming. It could equally be said that Valerie Blass’ sculptures are engaged in the same existential predicament. A semantic dialogue between what is perceived and what is real, through Valérie Blass’ intentional levelling of sculptural abstraction and figuration, represents the female figure as one that is entangled in a teasing play of female existential angst. There is a movement and a process in the perception of these subjects that implies a directness of experience on the part of the viewer. A fleshy experience expands the space of the gallery into an extra-dimensional space that is sensorial, on the edge of the physical and the virtual, the optical and the haptic, and the real and the fictive.

Montreal based artist, Janet Werner holds a BFA from Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore and a MFA from Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. She currently teaches painting in Studio Arts at Concordia’s Fine Arts department. Her art practice as painter is one that centres on female representation within portraiture. She creates fictional portraits that are composites of figures drawn from popular culture, including dolls, figurines, models and celebrities.
In large female portraits such as *Barbie* (2003), and *Sweetie 2* (2002) figures are fashioned through the entrancing technical virtuosity of Werner’s handling of paint. The painterly assuredness of her brush strokes have been called “I-was-right-the-first-time” brushstrokes, and she wields an arresting deftness with light and shadow.\(^5\) But there is an abstraction to her work that comes to challenge these formal elements of figuration. This formal abstraction is paralleled in the perceptual abstraction in the viewer, who is pressed into the necessary act of re-figuration. Her paintings firstly instil a sense of tranquillity; our bodies in the usually white and bare physical structure of exhibition spaces seek to be grounded by Werner’s female figure, which inhabits the most minimal and ethereal of space inside the painting. But moving closer to these
figures, their faces and bodies seem to be enlisting our own perceptions of seeing and being, to materialize and ground them.

Werner claims that her work in portraiture is concerned with the ways and means of looking. This highlights her preoccupation with the status of the figure as both subject, viewer and viewed. Through her portraits, Werner implicates us in a model of experience and perception based on a sort of dialectical triad of viewer/viewing/viewed. Her technical virtuosity points to

Janet Werner

*Lucy*, 2011

88x66”

Oil on canvas

Private collection


Janet Werner

*Mouse*, 2011

20x16”

Oil on canvas

the subject’s unarticulated introspection rather than the eloquence of the painted exterior subject. The “anti-portraiture” of her depiction of faces in works such as Lucy (2011) and Mouse (2011) reveals a purposeful failing of technical virtuosity. This failing and intentional acknowledgment of formal ineffectuality is one she has admitted to herself, as an awkwardness in paint handling, and the use of pastel or high key colours, where her painterly assuredness is transformed into painterly tentativeness to underline the unsettledness of her subjects.

Montreal based artist, Valérie Blass (b.1967) holds a BFA and a MFA in Visual and Media arts from Université du Québec à Montréal. Her artistic practice is one that explores the tensions and relationships between form and figure, materials and art historical tropes such as material culture and classical sculpture. Through the use of both everyday objects and industrial materials, Blass addresses the history of sculpture, and in turn fashions her own versions of figures and icons. Blass’ sculptural works seem to be questioning what a body is and how it occupies space, and how the body of the viewer occupies that same shared space. It is through Blass’ explicitly female works that the bodily encounter between Blass’ own female body and the female body of her figures are projected onto the viewer.
In Blass’ *Femme panier* (2010) a demonstrable female figure is at once threatening and vulnerable. Blass creates a dissonance that imbricates the viewer in the anxious process of the re-materialization of this materially dense artwork consisting of the lower torso of a mannequin, the loudly patterned shirt and the displaced wicker basket, that seems to offer a multiplicity of images and inner logics. Yes, she brandishes a weapon but she is also headless, and her too small
fish-net stockings droop at the crotch. Does this body project defiance? Do the feminine markers on her body signal a deficiency or a lack? Is this an identity in the process of becoming or in the process of rejecting?

Valérie Blass

*She Was a Big Success*, 2009

96 x 32 x 32”

Styrofoam, wood, artificial hair, pigment

Permanent collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Art

[http://www.parisianlaundry.com/en/artists/valerieblass/she-was-a-big-success](http://www.parisianlaundry.com/en/artists/valerieblass/she-was-a-big-success)
Blass’ ambivalent female figure is transformed into ambivalent seductive femininity in *She Was a Big Success* (2009), a figure that exudes a certain sexuality but whose distortions quickly instill an anxious play on the desiring of the female body in the desiring gaze of the viewer. A monstrous head of hair sits atop, and almost subsumes, two life-sized female high-heeled-shoed legs, while a single arm emerges to balance and ground the figure’s pose. Our perceptual senses are actively and anxiously trying to decipher the corporeal remnants of this figure in a state of suspension, rendered so through the formal elements of sculptural figuration and abstraction. Inspired by notions of translation, surplus, loss and experimentality, this sculpture is in the process of becoming, or transcending, through its absences and its presences, and can be interpreted as speaking of the existential condition of the feminine.⁸
NOTES

7 Campbell, 69.
8 Blass, 132.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


