

A virtuoso of sculptural mash-up



MURRAY WHYTE

What to make of Valerie Blass? It's a question the fast-rising Montreal-based sculptress seems to ask of herself time and again. The Art Gallery of Hamilton has just opened a half-size version of Blass's gleefully irreverent, high-low mix-master of an exhibition mounted last year at Montreal's Museum of Contemporary Art and even the abbreviated version — 18 works here versus 30-plus there — will leave your head swimming.

I mean this in the best possible of ways. There's so much going on in any one of Blass's astoundingly complex, engaging and consistently hilarious pieces that keeping up can leave you short of breath. Blass embraces the history of her medium, sculpture, but churns it through with a joyful, absurdist and unabashed love of contemporary junk culture. The result is a tightly compressed art-historical tour — sometimes all at once in a single piece — all of it shot through with a particular, ridiculous delight.

It's almost impossible not to be magnetically drawn to Blass's 2008 work, *Etant donné le Loris perché sur son socle néo-classique*, which, to paraphrase, goes something like "The Loris perched on his neoclassical plinth." A stone-carved, satyr-like figure arches in primal repose; clinging to it is the Loris in question, a gangly, bug-eyed marsupial in glossy bright white, looking shocked by your presence.

The quick implication is one of startled guilt. But Blass toggles expertly between form and material, creating an exuberant mash-up between classical form and brash, cartoonish fantasy. More remarkable is the simple production of the piece: carving Styrofoam and applying a faux-concrete finish. Blass hand-made both the satyr and the Loris.

For a sculptor, this shouldn't surprise. But in an era where many artists simply draft computer models for expert fabricators, Blass, 44, crafts all her pieces in her studio herself.

Making is the root of Blass's practice and it includes a dizzying array of techniques. Remarkably enough, *le Loris* is one of the least complex works in the show. Blass is a famous scavenger, combing thrift stores and flea markets for objects and materials. The surrounding chaos is a raw material unto itself.

For her, "making" is a broad term. She spans the breadth of classical sculpting all the way through to the messier business of kit-bashing: forcing together unlike objects into vaguely recognizable, entirely new forms.

Here, Blass works in overdrive. A mash-up of trashy porcelain bric-a-brac — an Egyptian bust, a snarling panther, a bikini babe in repose, an ashtray in the shape of a swan — is coalesced, then coated in velvety black flocking, completing its transformation from throwaway lowbrow knick-knack to high art.

A classical bust, here in bachelor-pad glossy black, has various black objects glued to its face. Its name, *Midnight Viper*, is, like most of Blass's incomprehensible titles, a bamboozling thrill. My favourite, for whatever reason, is a small gold porcelain figure of a woman, with a green-copper construction safety dome fused to its head. Its name? *Bery: cris de mort de loulou dans loulou*. Of course.

All this mash-up business has clear roots in bricolage, the thoroughly post-modern practice of amalgamating objects readily at hand, most often throwaway consumer junk into a critical takeback of the disposable swirl that followed modernist austerity.

But Blass is more than this. As a hands-on maker of things, Blass's practice represents a collision of sensibilities and eras into a remarkable whole.

Her relationship to Marcel Duchamp and his revolutionary ready-mades is clear. At the same time, Blass sculpts and casts like a classicist; she embraces human figures. She also rescues objects from the scrap heap and reimagines them as pure form. All the while, she stays firmly planted in the junk pile.

Her gestures can be oddly subtle and canily



MURRAY WHYTE PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

From left, "Femme Planche" and "Femme Panier"; "Mesure en Pied, en Jambe et en Queue"; and "le Loris perché sur son socle néo-classique"

subversive. *Distortion et Aligment Animalier*, for example, is a ridged, striped tower of repeating forms, evocative of Romanist sculptor Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column*, an icon of pure Modernist form.

But look closer. Blass has skewered a dozen and a half rubber ducks on a pole, and forced the tower into a painted latex sheath. Blass subverts Brancusi's proposition, of the eternal, essential and pure, with a plasticized fusion of throwaways. The tension she triangulates, between material and form and towering historical precedent, is a delectable treat.

Mesure en Pied, en Jambe et en Queue, a mash-up of ceramic ashtrays shaped like a pipe, French onion soup bowls and a blowing-glass cowboy, is a symphony of junk-shop delights. But she knits it together with oddly primal forms that Modern sculptors like Barbara Hepworth or Henry Moore conured forth from suggestive found forms in wood and stone.

The show is a coup for the Hamilton gallery, which snapped it up the moment it was made available for touring. There are inspired pairings: A room off to the side of the main chamber positions two works, *Femme Planche* (Plank Woman) and *Femme Panier* (Basket Woman), in a kind of macabre duel, the latter, with her thorax crafted from wicker, brandishing a pointy, bright green lawn tool — I think — while the former, rendered in faux-driftwood finish, covers naughtily, a shovel positioned at the high-point of her downward-dog pose.

"When you look at an object, you want to find a reference point for stabilizing it, for recognizing it, very quickly," Blass said in a 2009 interview. "I like to stretch out that moment of trying to recognize." You don't say. What shouldn't be a stretch is the guess that the QEW will see a little more traffic this summer because of it. If this show can't pry Torontonians from the confines of the big city's own offerings, then nothing will.

Valerie Blass continues at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, 123 King St. W., Hamilton, to Sept. 23.



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When I gave permission I understood that I allowed the
public to see the thinking that I had done
on the finished work. — Roy Thomas

