VAN DER GRINTEN GALERIE

Valérie Belin

Le songe des idoles

05.09.2026–07.11.2026

Since the late 1990s, Valérie Belin has produced around fifty series, during the course of which she has developed a powerful visual language that also displays a striking thematic coherence. Initially working under the constraints of analogue photography and studio settings she then little by little integrated new technological possibilities into her work. Belin's large-format black and white series *'Miroirs'* (1997), *'Body- builders'* (1999), *'Mariées marocaines'* (2000) and *'Mannequins'* (2003) are now iconic. Characterized by sculptural precision and a hyper-natural sharp focus they have made a significant mark on the history of contemporary figurative photography. Since 2010, she has taken the various elements meticulously photographed in the studio – models, magazines, flowers, reflections ... – and then, in a painstaking digital postproduction process, assembled them in complex multi-layered montages to create images reminiscent of painterly composition. From the puristic to the supersaturated, Belin's wide-ranging pictorial language is a testa- ment to the intensity of her artistic explorations and deliberations.

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The exhibition *'Le songe des idoles'* is centered on images of individual women, a recurring theme in the oeuvre of Valérie Belin. For her, the woman – the eternal feminine – is *the* object of projection and stereotyping, bar none. From the comic book heroine to the pin-up, et al, Belin interprets the normative codes anew. For series such as *'New Marilyns'* (2024), *'Lady Stardust'* (2023), *'Heroes'* (2022), 'All Star' (2016) and *'China Girls'* (2018), from which we are showing works, she selects real agency models to photograph in studio stagings. These are faces of perfect beauty – mainly according to the canon of the 1950s/60s. Imper- sonal, mute and motionless – they offer the ideal surface upon which to project any fantasy.

Their museal measurements (170 × 130 cm) give them the lofty stature of idols in the original sense of the word (Latin: *idolum*, from the Greek *eidôlon*, from *eidos*, shape, form): *"A material object that is worshipped as a god"*, *"an image used as an object of worship"*, (image, statue). Contrary to highly expressive and lively portraits these are sleek, masklike figures with an absent gaze that loses itself in a dimension other than our own. However, with the multi-layering of visual imagery – speech bubbles and comic book drawings from the 1950s, newspaper head- lines, photographs of objects or flowers that cover the entire pictorial space – the artist provokes a visual detonation. The energetic density creates a captivating visual tension. What do these overladen, palimpsestic pictures show us, and what do they conceal?

In addition to the large-format black and white and color pigment prints we are showing 4 smaller photogravure pictures from the *'New Marilyns'* series (2024), 66×49,5 cm, a traditional manual etching technique considered to be the most beautiful method of printing photographs on paper. Here, too, the dynamic visuals of old-fashioned comics seem to flood the portraits inspired by Marilyn's beauty, demanding a concerted effort at encryption.

In playing with the principles of construction and deconstruction of the image Valérie Belin relentlessly scrutinizes and explores the codes of semblance and of beauty. Regardless of the motif her works always draw on opposites – stillness and movement, presence and absence, the natural and the artificial. They simultaneously provoke contradictory feelings: attraction and aversion, the urge to seduce and deep distrust. They thus trigger a singular

state of unease in which the portrayal of reality, the image itself and its power, are called into question.

Valérie Belin (1964) studied art and the philosophy of art from 1983 to 1989 in Bourges and Paris. Retrospectives and solo shows have been exhibited in renowned international museums, including: The Huis Marseille *in Amsterdam (2007), the* Maison Européenne de la Photographie, *Paris (2008), the* Musée de l'Elysée, *Lausanne (2008), the* Centre Pompidou, *Paris (2015), the* Victoria & Albert, *London (2019) and the* Musée Picasso, *Barcelona (2026). In 2022 Valérie Belin was named* Commandeur de l'Ordre des Art et des Lettres, *and in 2024 she was elected as a member of the* Académie des beaux-arts. *Since 1994 numerous comprehensive monographs have been published to accompany exhibitions and document her work. Her works are held in the collections of leading institutions, including the* MoMA *in New York, the* Centre Pompidou *in Paris, the* V & A *in London, the* Maison Européenne de la Photographie *in Paris, the* Musée de l'Élysée *in Lausanne, the* Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, *the* Kunsthaus Zürich, *the* MUDAM, *Luxembourg, the* Sammlung Essl, *Klosterneuburg, and the* San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.