

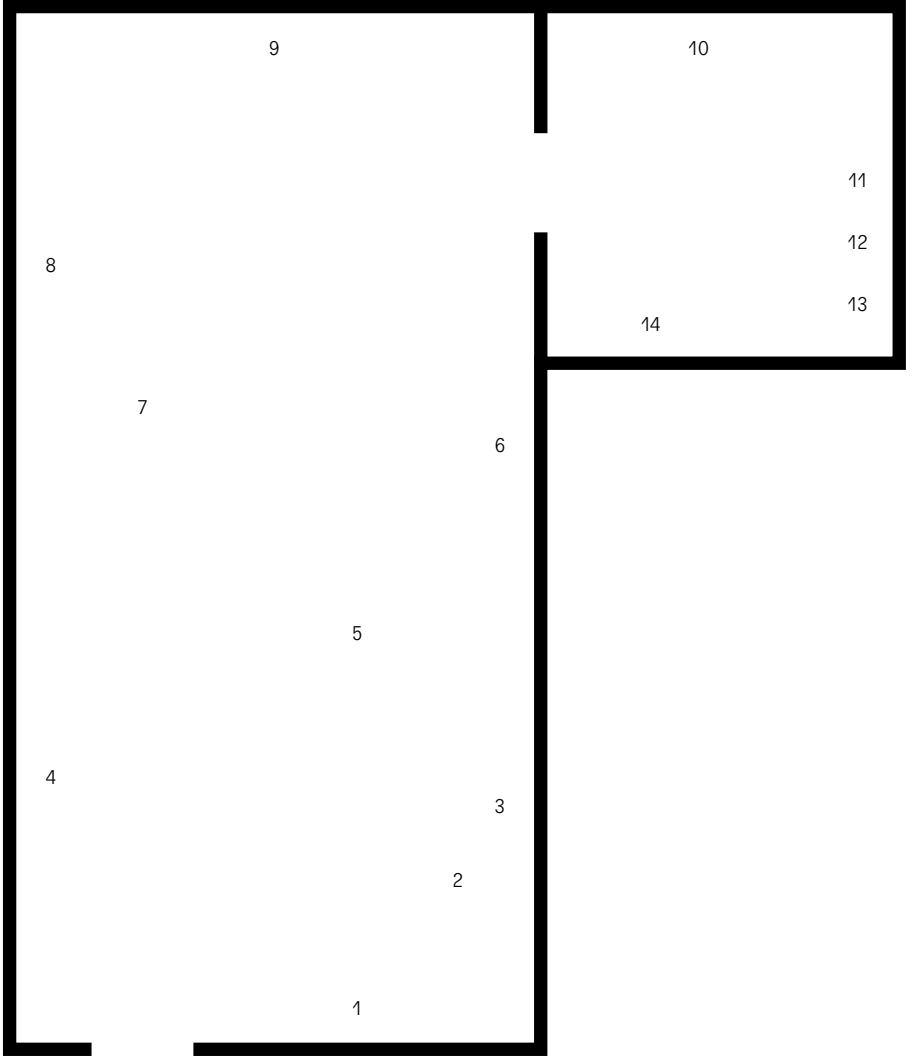
Valérie Blass  
*When I feel shy*

Sonya Kelliher-Combs  
*remnant*

September 19–November 8, 2024

Catriona Jeffries

950 East Cordova Street Vancouver, British Columbia V6A 1M6 Canada



1

Valérie Blass, *Voir les signaux faibles / See weak signals*, 2024, wood, polymer clay, 103 x 17 x 2 in. (262 x 42 x 5 cm)

2

Valérie Blass, *Le retour du bâton (Malleus Maleficarum) / The cycle of the mallet (Malleus Maleficarum)*, 2024, wooden mallets, 38 x 36 x 8 in. (95 x 91 x 20 cm) and 32 x 18 x 5 in. (81 x 46 x 13 cm)

3

Valérie Blass, *La sculpture de ma mère / My mother's sculpture*, c. 1960, ceramic, 5 x 3 x 1 in. (13 x 6 x 3 cm)

4

Valérie Blass, *On ne peut pas toucher l'unité, va falloir rajouter ou retrancher / We can't touch it all, we have to add or subtract*, 2024, wood, canvas, mesh fabric, hydrocal cement, forton acrylic, paint, metal handles, wooden candle holder, almond oil bottle, marquetry board, wooden door, wooden frame, 67 x 194 x 4 in. (170 x 493 x 9 cm)

5

Valérie Blass, *L'érotisme du ventriloque / The erotic ventriloquist*, 2024, mask stand, wooden head, glass bell, sweaters, log hook, candlestick, porous stone carved in the shape of a dog, moth, ceramic kiln brick, driftwood, burnt wood, belt, display base, ceramic, epoxy clay, polymer clay, hydrocal cement, forton acrylic, welded steel, studio table, painted plinth 77 x 92 x 40 in. (196 x 232 x 100 cm)

6

Valérie Blass, *Beauté inadressée / Unaddressed beauty*, 2024, hydrocal cement, forton acrylic, metal clamp, steel rod, 130 x 7 x 2 in. (330 x 18 x 5 cm)

7

Valérie Blass, *Se chatouiller soi-même / Tickle yourself softly*, 2024, hydrocal cement, sodium bicarbonate, pigments, 97 x 8 x 7 in. (246 x 20 x 17 cm)

8

Valérie Blass, *Il s'agit de décrire une poussée plutôt qu'une intention / This is to describe a push rather than an intention*, 2024, polymer clay, steel plate, 19 x 6 x 2 in. (48 x 15 x 4 cm)

9

Valérie Blass, *Carte mentale (il faut raboter ce pouvoir autant que possible) / Mind map (I need to shave this power off as much as possible)*, 2024, wood, canvas, mesh fabric, hydrocal cement, forton acrylic, paint, copper, bag of coal, plastic 3D print, cast iron skillet, vinyl record sleeve, metal handles, 67 x 197 x 5 in. (170 x 500 x 13 cm)

10

Sonya Kelliher-Combs, *Remnant, Moose Legging*, 2024, commercially-tanned moose legging, wood frame, acrylic polymer, moose and caribou fur, acrylic paint, porcupine quill, nylon thread, 24 x 24 in. (61 x 61 cm)

11

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The gallery walls offer little in the way of camouflage. In fact, those who traverse this environment rarely seek to blend into the overbright expanse—beings and objects alike are set in high relief against the monochromatic backdrop. But for those who feel shy, other forms of concealment are necessary. The work of Valérie Blass and Sonya Kelliher-Combs exists within this tension of visibility, signification, and dissimulation. Both artists use forms of crypsis to confuse and reconsider an object's surface—downplaying the familiar and amplifying the overlooked. In faint lettering, Blass' work scrawls, *Les non dits le silence désigne une forme parce qu'on peut voir la forme du silence*. ('Things unsaid in silence point to a form because you can see the shape of silence.')

Like the snowy tundra, the white cube is largely devoid of foliage or other obstructions that could disguise a hulking silhouette. Creatures like the Alaska moose, who roam the subarctic, therefore do not rely on countershading or mimetic colouration to ward off predators. Moose fur is dense and dark except for grey, stocking-like marks where their legs meet the snowpack. In *remnant*, Kelliher-Combs ensconces five moose feet within white frames, almost as if viewed from beneath the ice. What is dissimulated here is not the moose, but the skin-like membrane against which the dewclaws strain. Taut as a drum, yet struck from behind, these skins are embedded with moose and caribou fur, ink, paint, and threaded quills. The surfaces could be hides or tanned garments if they did not possess the translucency of shrink-wrap. Are the moose leggings preserved, or are they trapped? Are we to read a dichotomy of nature and culture, the animal held back from the human world by a veil of our own making? That the moose is present only as skin, held within a kind of skin, suggests a more complicated nesting of organisms—the bounds of the body as physical self extend within and without these rectilinear shapes.

Where the works in Kelliher-Combs' *remnant* protrude against the membranes of their walls, Blass' work recedes back into them. Household objects—an oil bottle, a cabinet door, frames, and vases—are nearly swallowed by form-fitting alcoves. It is as if the house, as one of the many skins we wear, subsumed the belongings within. But a closer look reveals that these objects are, already, only their outermost layer of self: the interior of the barbecue briquettes bag is inlaid with copper, the cabinet lacks a carcass, and the vase is sealed shut.

*When I feel shy* contains many such objects. In Blass' hands, they tend towards viscosity—their solidity uncertain as they slouch around the room. Separate links in a chain blur into each other. Lacking distinction from the whole and its parts, each are images camouflaged as objects. The use of polymer clay compounds this sensation—its colours run deep, not merely decorating the surface with patterns and linework, but flowing through the object. Hammers, amongst other tools, are rearranged to become portrait busts. Lacking bodies, we can only infer the missing limbs based on the shapes of an elongated bottle, an oversized candle holder, or a stiffened belt.

Like the solitary moose joined by a fifth foot, these shy and absent bodies suggest that camouflage here is not about deception but revelation. When we say 'there is more than meets the eye,' we imply that the eye must strain harder, looking for the forensic traces of time, labour, and meaning that inevitably accumulate on a surface. Yet, as these assemblages reveal, the surface is never singular—it's always layered, nested within other membranes and bodies. The patient eye meets itself if it looks long enough.

Valérie Blass (b. 1967, Montreal; lives/works: Montreal) is an artist whose sculptural language plays with traditional and contemporary materials, techniques, and tropes. Her set-like installations and assemblages frequently make of found objects and textiles alongside plaster, fimo, marble, and wood to create sculptures that evoke absent human bodies. Present only through frozen garments, distorted utensils, and occasional photos, the figure is both elusive and distorted throughout her work.

Blass studied at the Université du Québec à Montréal, receiving a BFA in 1998, and a MFA in 2006. She has presented notable solo exhibitions at Fonderie Darling, Montreal (2023), Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver (2020, 2015); Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (2019); Oakville Galleries, Canada (2019); Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin (2019); Artspeak, Vancouver (2015); Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (2012); and MOCA Toronto (2009). In 2013, she presented a new commission for the Public Art Fund in New York. Blass' work has been included in numerous group exhibitions including at MOMENTA Biennale de l'image, Montreal (2023), Musée Zadkine, Paris (2021); Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California (2021); Centre d'art contemporain d'Ivry – le Crédac, France (2019); National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (2017, 2011); La Biennale de Montréal (2016); Vancouver Art Gallery (2016); Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland (2016); Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City (2016, 2011); and Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal (2014, 2010). In 2017, she was the recipient of the Gershon Iskowitz Prize.

Sonya Kelliher-Combs (Iñupiaq/Athabaskan, b. 1969, Nome, Alaska; lives/works: Anchorage) uses mixed media painting and sculpture to explore the relationship of material culture to the environment. Frequently working with materials central to subsistence hunting—such as skins and intestines from walrus, seal, and reindeer—she also incorporates synthetic materials and modern techniques to produce an expansive definition of skin, bodies, and identity.

Kelliher-Combs holds a BFA from the University of Alaska Fairbanks (1992) and an MFA from Arizona State University (1998). Her solo exhibitions include Tureen, Dallas (2023); Yukon Arts Center, Whitehorse (2019); Minus Space, Brooklyn (2019); Carrie McLain Museum, Alaska (2016, 1994, 1990); International Gallery of Contemporary Art, Anchorage (2015); Gorman Gallery, UC Davis (2012); Museum of Contemporary Native Art, Santa Fe (2011); National Museum of Indian Art, New York (2010); and Anchorage Museum (2005). Past group exhibitions include Alaska State Museum (2023), Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax (2023); The Power Plant, Toronto (2022); Minneapolis Institute of Art (2019); Crystal Bridges, Arkansas (2018); SITE Santa Fe (2016); and National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (2013). She is a recipient of the United States Arts Fellowship, Joan Mitchell Fellowship, Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art, Rasmuson Fellowship, and Alaska Governor's Individual Artist Award. A forthcoming monograph *Mark: Sonya Kelliher-Combs*, edited by Julie Decker, will be published by Hirmer and Anchorage Art Museum in October 2024.