



Valérie Belin's Hypermodern Portraiture april 2022

In a new show, "Modern Royals", Belin presents a series of portraits of fictional nobility, blending time to create images that seem at once modern and dated.

What is the purpose of a portrait in the year 2022? At a time when cell phone cameras are omnipresent, there's hardly anyone who feels the need to have a formal portrait made: after all, why commemorate one moment in your life, when instead you can photograph them all? Yet in the annals of art history, the portrait reigns supreme, in times where only great nobility had the time and money to sit for a portrait that would be proudly hung in family homes and later, in museums. These portraits serve as the foundation for Valérie Belin's latest series, "[Modern Royals](#)", presented in a new show at Galerie Nathalie Obadia.

Both dark and dreamlike, Belin's portraits feel as if from a bygone era. One image, *Portrait of Joyce*, shows a model seated on a patterned chair, looking away from the lens with a slightly vacant expression, the way that portraits of nobility often have. Her skin has a waxy appearance, harkening back to an earlier series of Belin's, when she photographed celluloid mannequins. The inverse effect happens here: when earlier Belin made mannequins appear real, here real models appear like posed mannequins. The thin line between illusion and reality is apparent throughout Belin's work, often dipping into the uncanny valley, and bringing with it that slight eeriness and unease.

Atop the image is Belin's signature superimpositions, a mixture of imagery layered to create an unusual textured appearance. The result is an anachronistic feeling: text from 1950's-era signage, with its distinctive font, is inlaid atop the model, yet the height of her heels suggests a more modern era. "*I deliberately sought to give these images a timeless character. They do not refer to any particular culture or time,*" says Belin. "They are only images, they cannot be dated. This contradiction or paradox is found in the words – 'modern' and 'royals' – in the title given to the series. They refer to the pseudo-reality of the characters, but also to the image I gave them. This should be understood as a metaphor. For this I used 'unstylish' clothes and accessories as found in online stores and added patterns in the image to give the mood."



Each of the images has the same model, yet they're titled differently: there's *The Portrait of Joyce*, and *of Scarlett*, as well as *June*, and *Gaby*. There are slight changes in their appearance—some are blonde, some brunette—but each has that same blank, doll-like expression. And yet, Belin has given a name to each. Did she also create a backstory for each? "I gave each 'person' a name to identify them, but none of them have a particular story," she says. "So these portraits are not the result of a pre-constructed story. This leaves each person free to tell their own story about these photographs, based on their own imagination or references."

Ultimately, though the practice of portraiture served as an inspiration for this project, Belin finds inspiration across mediums. "I find my sources of inspiration mainly in art, paintings, museums, photography books, magazines, literature, movies, American series and in life and society in general – and wherever there are images. For this series, which I have entitled 'modern royals', I did not 'conceptualize' the characters beforehand because I work on intuition. It is above all a work on the image," she says. "The photographs were made day by day, the story and the title came at the end, when the work was done. The series is finally a gallery of portraits, the characters are fictional characters who seem to have escaped from a somewhat dystopian world."

For Belin, post-production is as integral to creating her images as her camera. Through a process of great experimentation, Belin builds her layers as she builds the world in which these modern royals inhabit. Though she has almost always used a camera in her work, the term "photographer" may be too limiting to define her. In a mixed-media world, perhaps the camera is just yet another tool in the artistic box, rather than a set vocation.

“I chose photography very early on because it is the tool we use today mainly to produce images. But we must also remember that photography comes from painting and that it is based on a conception of vision and representation that was literally invented in Florence during the Renaissance at the beginning of the 15th century. It has not stopped evolving since then and today it is digital,” she says. “So yes, the camera is one of the tools I use, and the computer is another. I’ve also used video as an exhibition device, silkscreening in large format, and also occasionally staged photographs in the form of performances.”

Belin cites David Hockney, who wrote in *A History of Pictures* that with the plenitude of cameras, everyone has become a photographer—and by extension, the title has lost its meaning. Similarly, the idea of a portrait as a symbol of status and wealth has also come to lose its meaning; if everyone who owns a camera is a photographer, then perhaps everyone whose picture is taken is a modern royal.