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Pippa Garner’s Crossover Art of Gizmos, Gadgets, and Gender

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Lita Barie | May 25, 2017



Installation view of “Pippa Garner: Tinker Tantrum” (2017), Redling Fine Art, Los Angeles (all images courtesy Redling Fine Art, Los Angeles)

Pippa Garner is a crossover artist with a penchant for satirical inventions and ideas. Tinker Tantrum at Redling Fine Art includes pencil drawings and texts, mixed media assemblages, and video performances from the 1970s to the present that showcase Garner’s ingenuity as an absurdist and bricoleur, exploring a vein of popular science mined by R. Crumb and Al Jaffee to lampoon American consumerism and culture.

Garner has been an absurdist for four decades, satirizing consumerism, marketing, and waste in performance art, videos, sculpture, installations, drawings and magazine editorials and art pages. She came to fame in the early 1980s, in her former identity as Philip Garner, after the publication of her books of madcap inventions, Philip Garner’s Better Living Catalog (1982) and Utopia – or Bust (1984). Her self-effacing humor and quirky utility apparel, including men’s midriff half-suits and umbrellas made from palm fronds, gained a wide audience through appearances on such talk shows as The Tonight Show, Today, and The Merv Griffin Show.



Pippa Garner, "Utopia or Bust" (2013), film still, 7 min 33 sec, edition of 5

Recalling Oscar Wilde's famous comment, "One should either be a work of art or wear a work of art," Garner emphasizes that the gender transition "is part of my work. I look at my body as being an appliance not unrelated to things in my works. This is something I have to work with. I had a playful attitude, which was the same as my books." Moreover, "mixing characteristics of two genders short-circuits the system. A man can feminize, but can't cross, because we can't simulate the experience a woman has from a built-in reproductive system."



Pippa Garner, "Tinker Tantrum" (2013), film still, 3 min 29 sec, edition of 5

The exhibition takes its title from a series of Tinker Tantrum videos (2013). In one video An In 'Faux' Mercial, Garner appears as both Gadget Girl and Gadget Guy, wearing headphones meant to make a personal statement, such as Barbie headphones for convicted pedophiles, bread loaf headphones for the gluten-friendly and “hear no evil” devotional hands.

In another video, Garner demonstrates pedal cars for sporty men and fashion-conscious women and showcases personal utility gadgets, and “more friendly iterations of up-cycled technologies” like the Personal Utility Drone (or PUD) engineered as a “handy household helper” for shopping errands. Her gender performance also extends to playing a leather-clad dominatrix, “Reprimand-a.”

For the video series Onboard Trophy Wife (2013), Garner appears as both a bride and groom in a marriage ceremony, which ends with a wedding pedal car and a protest sign to “legalize self-marriage.”



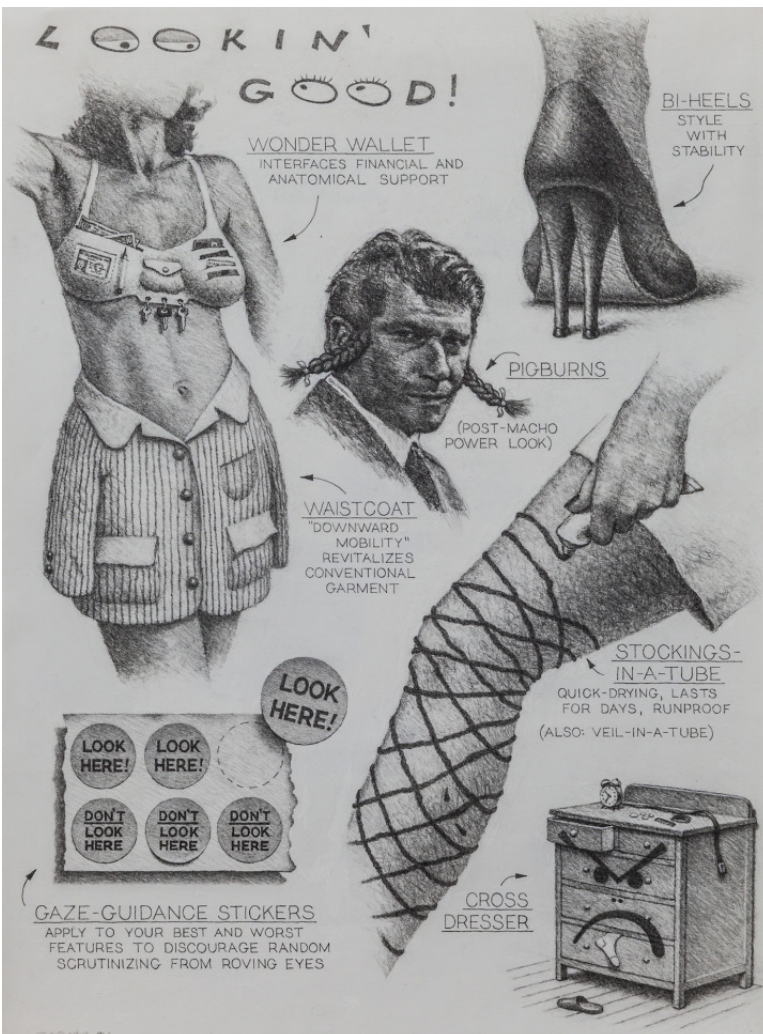
Pippa Garner, “Onboard Trophy Wife” (2013), film still, 4 min 6 sec, edition of 5

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) philosopher Judith Butler analyzes gender as “improvised performance,” proposing drag to destabilize and poke fun at the notion of a universal or original gender. While artists have performed gender by playing with drag at least since Duchamp, few have been as subversive as Garner in both re-engineering their sexed body and legally changing the sex on their birth certificate post-op, two decades before transgender politics blurred gender binaries.

Garner creates a dialogue on the inefficiency of greed and waste in consumer culture with “The World’s Most Efficient Car” (2007) and “Crowd Shroud” (2017). The former is an old Honda 600 converted into a human-powered, vinyl-floored, decal-tagged “misc.pippa.” The latter, a wheelchair with a two-way mirror and bicycle lights, overturns the logic of privilege behind Victorian carriages that used underpaid human labor to carry aristocrats through crowded streets; Garner re-engineers this signifier of class into a vehicle of independence for a disabled passenger.



Pippa Garner, "Crowd Shroud" (2017), wheelchair, wood, paint, vinyl, two-way mirror, bicycle lights, 54 x 42 x 19.50 inches



Pippa Garner, "Lookin' Good" (1996), pencil on paper, 11.25 x 15 inches

The suite of pencil drawings from the 1970s to 2000 with illustrations of various inventions demonstrates the broad range of Garner's skills as a draftsman, inventor, and perceptive cultural commentator. These drawings show the influence of Zap Comix, Mad magazine, automotive design training, and a childhood in Illinois when boys learned to become jack-of-all-trades from their fathers by tinkering with do-it-yourself projects.

Garner's inventions capture the American ethos of ingenuity — although their future may or may not arrive. Although she skewers conventional logic, her madcap inventions lack the accusatory tone that characterizes some political art. Rather, her goofy, light-hearted touch allows her subversive satire to cross over to a broader audience.

Tinker Tantrum continues at Redling Fine Art (6757 Santa Monica Blvd, Los Angeles) through June 3.

Garner will be in conversation with Zachary Drucker today and with Laura Fried on June 3, followed by a performance.