

Pippa Garner: 'I've Done Some of My Best Work on Ecstasy'

In June, Art Omi, New York, will present a survey exhibition of sculptures, drawings, videos, installations and garments from the past 50 years by Pippa Garner. The 81-year-old artist has spent her career skewing familiar objects with absurdist operational designs to satirize US consumer habits. Since the 1970s, Garner has produced hundreds of impractical product sketches and prototypes, many of which she self-published in *Better Living Catalog* (1982) – including *High-Heel Skates* for the busy woman and *Shower in a Can* for those looking to stay fresh on the go.

For Garner, however, there is no consumer product more deserving of parody than the car. Some of her best-known works include *Kar-Mann (Half Human Half Car)* (1969), a sculpture of a classic Volkswagen Karmann Ghia that morphs into the legs of a squatting man, a project which hastened her expulsion from an automotive design course in Pasadena. In 1973, the artist remodelled a 1959 Chevy to appear as if it were driving in reverse – to the horror of everyone on Golden Gate Bridge (*Backwards Car*). Garner will revisit this stunt in a new commission for Art Omi, *Haulin' Ass!* (2023), in which the exterior shell of a pick-up truck has been rotated 180 degrees and welded back onto the chassis.

Like the vehicles that feature so prominently in Garner's work, the artist believes the body can also be modified, refitted or overhauled. With the help of Hollywood Boulevard sex workers, the artist began her transition journey in the 1980s. After receiving top surgery, however, Garner was all but disavowed by the Californian art community, and it has taken 60 years for audiences to see her prescient art as an expression of our current postmodern ambivalence to binaries.

In this interview with hannah baer, author of *trans girl suicide museum* (2019), the artist shares how she felt 'no obligation' to her body, viewing it not as 'something useful but amusing'. –*Angel Lambo*

Hannah Baer If you could have picked your gender at birth, do you know what you would have chosen?

Pippa Garner I would have had the same attitude toward whatever body I got. I wouldn't want to write the specifications down and send them in. Humans are the only creatures that can invent things that don't exist in nature. [In pre-modern times], science was considered evil magic. Now, we are in the information age and the floating question is: where's that going?

HB Could you have imagined the future we're currently in or the success of your work?

PG Never. I wasn't really thinking about trying to become successful as an artist. After I flunked out of a couple of art schools, I got drafted and sent to Vietnam in the mid-1960s, which is one of the reasons I'm having health problems now. I have leukaemia that ostensibly originated from exposure to Agent Orange.

When I returned, I settled into doing commercially viable art. I've been lucky because all that early work I thought would not amount to more than immediate gratification has value to another generation decades later.

HB This question about historical periods is interesting. I'm 35, and I don't know many trans women who are older than me. I then think about the AIDS epidemic and how many people we lost. What do you remember from this time?

PG That was before I did anything, other than have private feelings about 'gender hacking'. When I was living in New York in 1981, I was friends with Frank Israel, a hot young architect who was a protege of Frank Gehry. We'd go to bars together to find all the weird stuff that people consider unacceptable. Human behaviour is intriguing, and I wanted to know what was out there. Then, all of a sudden, AIDS stopped everything. But I'm glad I was able to have a glimpse of the culture. Then things started to evolve in terms of gender exploration; hormone treatments and even the first affordable surgeries arrived.

When I started taking hormones there was an incredible difference. It just took the edge off things, so I could have a really nice relationship with a woman and not have sex be the motivation. I said: 'This is it. I don't ever want to go back to testosterone. It's just overwhelming and distracting.'

HB What happened to your relationships after that?

PG Well, I had been married for seven years to a well-known painter. It was a good relationship, but I didn't tell her or anybody about the transition. I just did it.

A lot of the work I did at that time involved consumer appliances and automobiles, which I would modify to change their functions. Then, I looked in the mirror and thought: 'I'm an object too. What can I do to play with my body?' I had the opportunity to get breast implants at a reasonable price, so I went ahead and did it. I went to Brussels in 1992 and came home with a vagina. I gradually got more into Bay Area trans activities: bars, panel discussions. I was still a fringe member at that time, and not altogether accepted, but I was trying to be a part of it.

HB I heard that drugs and psychedelics also play a role in your art.

PG The only drug that is really affecting for me is ecstasy. It's blissful and it doesn't interfere with my ideas: in fact, it encourages them. I've found that I've done some of my best work on ecstasy. I can do everything; I can draw – well, I can't draw anymore, because my vision is gone, but I used it a lot during the 1990s when I was doing a lot of detailed pencil drawings.

HB When you were young and getting into cars, did you think they were sexy?

PG Well, no; I thought they were alive. I would burst into tears when I saw the smashed up front-end of a car. I have a sense of what's alive and what isn't.

HB I see that in your artwork. You bring a kind of hopefulness or imagination to technology and consumer products. You look under the surface and see their possibilities.

PG That's why I like the idea of *trompe l'oeil*. I was hit by a car in 2000 and ended up in hospital for more than three months. When they put my left leg back together, it didn't match the right leg. So, I thought: 'What can I do to overcome that?' In Santa Fe, I found Dawn Purnell, one of the top tattoo artists in the country, who drew me a wooden leg. It truly fooled people. So, later, I asked her: 'Could you do a bra?' So, she did that, too. But then I thought: 'I don't want to be half naked. I better have a thong with it.'

HB That's so fun!

PG I'm just having a good time. My body's been a great pleasure to me. I have no complaints. It's been a huge amusement and joy. On the other hand, it may be that what I've done is limited. There's so much out there, it's hard to know, but I did what I could with what I had.

PIPPA GARNER: \$ELL YOUR \$ELF is on view at Art Omi, New York from 24 June

Main image: Pippa Garner, *Untitled (Virtual Womanoid 2000)*, c.1995, classified ad. Courtesy: the artist and STARS Gallery, Los Angeles