

Ghent, NY- “This is a show that I’ve been fantasizing about for six years,” says Sara O’Keefe, senior curator at Art Omi, on the upcoming exhibition: Pippa Garner: *Sell Your \$elf*. “Pippa has just turned 81, and it feels essential to work with artists as much as possible while they are still with us.”

This sense of urgency is reflected in the artist’s approach to collaborating with O’Keefe, who primarily wanted to create a new piece for the show. “One of the things that I think is amazing about Pippa is that she is always interested in the next thing; that’s just kind of always been her mode...and that’s where we started.” *Haulin’ Ass*, 2023, is the piece that emerged- a Ford Ranger pickup truck that has been completely broken down and reassembled to drive backwards.

Coming of age in the 1950s, Garner grew up seeing the presentation of white femininity as a commodity at a time when car manufacturers presented outrageous dispositions similar to fashion houses today. While working on an assembly line at a car plant, Garner was drafted into the Vietnam War as a US Army Combat Artist.

When she returned, she also returned to her interest in cars, attending the Automotive Design department at ArtCenter College of Design in Los Angeles. She would subsequently be expelled when she presented *Un(tit)led (Man with Kar-Mann)*, circa 1969–72, a sculptural design for a car whose rear half was shaped as a naked man kneeling and lifting a leg, mimicking a dog pissing. This work, now lost and only existing in photographs, is exemplary of the kind of postmodernist satire the artist would become known for and on which she would build her extremely prolific, decades-long career. Undeterred by the rejection, Garner went on to design and build her first fully realised car work, *Backwards Car*, 1973-1974, a 1959 Chevy which, like *Haulin’ Ass*, has been retrofitted to appear to be driving in reverse.

Surveying works from the 50 years which separate these two pieces, part of the curatorial mission of *Sell Your \$elf* is to affirm Garner’s position within the absurdist LA narrative, in which she was a formative player. Garner was in dialogue with many West Coast artists of the time, such as Chip Lord (Ant Farm), Ed Ruscha, Chris Burden and John Baldessari, artists associated with themes of advertising, mass media, Machismo and car culture. Garner underwent gender transition in the 80s as a conceptual artwork, and as a result, is written out of the historical narrative.

In a way, Garner’s treatment as a visibly trans-woman represents the essence of her oeuvre; her works illuminate the shadow of American consumerism. Garner operates within established systems of dissemination to upset institutional structures. Presenting gonzo inventions, such as high-heeled roller skates, from her “Better Living Catalog: Absolute Necessities for Contemporary Survival” on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson, and including her exquisitely modelled drawings in *Car and Driver* magazine, Garner’s works were intended to surprise and awe. Existing as a ghost-like apparition within the corners of

mainstream culture, Garner's art cleverly infiltrated the banality of American suburbia with a snarky and cutting criticism of this nebulous utopia. Re-engineering everyday consumerism to reveal sinister truths about excess consumption, Garner deconstructs the foundational pillars of gender and sexuality through the products and mechanisms of Capitalism.

In *Sell Your Self*, O'Keefe culls many of Garner's works, which directly address the idea of simultaneously obscuring and revealing one's identity to survive (or escape) contemporary life. "Framing and thinking about selfhood," says O'Keefe, "the objectification of self, and the pressures to commodify the self, plus the way that her works are always diverting or redirecting productivity and issues of visibility are central themes that I wanted to contend with when building an institutional presentation."

Almost prophetically, Garner's philosophies mapped through the ephemera, notes and doodles displayed in vitrines under plexiglass seem like precursors to the current era driven by social media. One of the stand-out pieces from Garner's sketchbook is an absurdly long list of over 50 subcultures which the artist feels describe her identity. Many other of the works in the show are sculptural performance props which require activation by the artist or a participant to reach "completion".

To understand Garner's work, you must breathe in an essence which directly opposes the Capitalist status quo. The great irony in the transphobic exclusion of Garner from the art historical canon is that this existence as an experiential aura that lingers without clear definition is mirrored at the core of her practice. While anti-marketability goes against the grain in the contemporary art world, the works in *Sell Your Self* asks us to use the artist's identity as a lens to examine what we gain and, more importantly, what is lost, as we play our ascribed roles in today's increasingly digitised world.

Words by Orlando Estrada