

Pippa Garner: \$ell Your \$elf

Grace Byron :: 12/3/2023

AFTER BEING KICKED OUT of art school for creating a model car with human legs that looked like it was pissing on a map of Detroit, the Conceptual artist Pippa Garner built her infamous *Backwards Car* (1973–74), reconfiguring a 1959 Chevrolet Biscayne to drive trunk-first. On its maiden voyage, drivers were stunned: “I could have caused a fifty-car pileup without breaking the law. Terrorism meets art,” Garner later said. Her cars-as-sculpture, gizmos, and sketches are documented in *\$ell Your \$elf*, a new book released through Pioneer Works Press in conjunction with a major retrospective at Art Omi. The eighty-one-year-old Garner is finally getting her due at the same time that trans visibility is no longer seen as a net good. Instead, it seems like a dead end. Garner’s playful tenacity and utopian contraptions gesture toward another politic—an eternal tinkering.

Early in her career, Garner took on the persona of an impish inventor, creating the *Better Living Catalog*. (2023 is Pippa’s year: A facsimile edition of the *Better Living Catalog* joins the comprehensive monograph, *Act Like You Know Me*.) Contrived products like midriff-baring suits and clunky, music-playing blaster bras explore commodity fetishism, commenting on the lure of productivity or normative gender performance. She giddily plays with the relationship between selling and selling out, the viewer and the viewed, the lover and the fool. Her notebooks reveal an ever-churning brainiac who enjoys punking the public. But for every sketch that features a dick or a pair of tits, there is a prophetic commentary on contemporary self-branding: rubber stamps that replicate your body scent, pencils with your face instead of an eraser, and boots with spring-loaded tips to keep doors open when you’re trying to get a leg up in your industry.

When Garner turned to body hacking, she approached hormones, tattoos, and surgery with the same joie de vivre. Transitioning was just as much a performance piece as an expression of her true nature. Her body is an exuberant playground—there’s lingerie tattooed on her skin—and she is never shy about her work’s erotic quality. After her vaginoplasty, she wrote classified ads marketing herself as a “Man-Maid Surgical Doll” and an “Amazon blonde Gym-bunny with brains.” Cars hold the same sexual charge. She recently riffed on *Backwards Car* with a backward pickup truck called *Haulin’ Ass!* (2023)—complete with huge plastic testicles.

The provocative photograph *Get Out, Get Under* (2015) features the Olympian artist tinkering under a car. Wearing only a rolled-up T-shirt and combat boots, her tongue-in-cheek tattoos are fully visible: a trompe l’oeil wooden leg, fading fuchsia bra, and light-blue thong with Monopoly money tucked in—an anarchic combination of the industrial and the corporeal that characterizes most of her work. She’s nearly nude, but that’s not obvious until you spot her pierced vagina. Bodies and cars can always be improved through

mechanical intervention; voyeurs are welcome to intrude in Garner's sexy, wacky world. A wink can be more suggestive than a kiss.