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Pippa Garner

Immaculate Misconceptions

September 18 – December 18, 2021

JOAN is pleased to present *Immaculate Misconceptions*, an exhibition by Pippa Garner (b. 1942) spanning the six-decade career of the prolific and polymathic artist and inventor. Currently based in Long Beach, Garner has lived and worked in California since returning in 1967 from the Vietnam War, where she served as a combat illustrator.

Garner's work is commonly linked to a specific mode and topic—satire on consumerism—to the extent that virtually every explanation of the artist includes a variation of this description. This is not an inaccurate frame as the bulk of her oeuvre consists of hundreds if not thousands of implausible, dysfunctional or impossible devices that ratchet up American fixations with comfort, convenience and optimization to poetic levels of absurdity. Many of these are collected in three books published in the 1980s: *Better Living Catalog: 62 Absolute Necessities for Contemporary Survival* (Putnam, 1982), *Utopia—or Bust! Products for the Perfect World* (Putnam, 1984), and *Garner's Gizmos & Gadgets* (Perigee Trade, 1987). A fourth book, *Beauty 2000* (1985), has been published as a zine on the occasion of the exhibition. It focuses specifically on conceptual beauty products and treatments: stick-on tears and dimples; a money facial; a “Magnificent Millennium Makeover” that calls for circling the eyes with lipstick, the mouth with eyeshadow, and a number of other feature scrambling procedures, plus making a trip to a busy supermarket to gauge reactions.

Roughly a dozen of Garner's inventions have been fabricated for the first time for this show: a gooseneck lamp whose base is a plate of dinner; a trapezoidal box with a rudimentary dial called the *Genderometer*. These works are joined by others like the

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Chevrolounge, a quadrant of a classic car that has been adapted into a couch, which was fabricated in 1985 and belongs to a collector of Garner's, as well as a wholly new work, *Breathing Bed*, which is a bed whose mattress has been mechanically outfitted to simulate the rise and fall of breath.

One wonders if Garner would have manufactured all her ideas if the resources to do so were available, or if graphite cartoons with their pithy levity were the final form intended for most. Regardless, the majority of her inventions live to this day on the page. Perusing them in the digital age, they feel like the doodles of the Home Shopping Network era's DaVinci. HSN, America's first 24/7 cable broadcast mall, was in fact founded in 1982—the same year that Garner's first book was released, and subsequently, that she was interviewed live on *The Tonight Show* by Johnny Carson. During the nine-minute segment, Garner demonstrated nearly as many (realized) inventions, from a crop-top business suit to an umbrella whose canopy is constructed of palm fronds, which were met, varyingly, with delight and discomfort by the host.

In an unpublished essay called "On Gender," which Garner wrote in 2005, she recounts this time and the persona that was produced from it:

"I ended up doing the talk show circuit and creating a character for myself that was kind of a small-town inventor that had come up with all these wonderful new products for a better world that in fact were ridiculous. But the inventor didn't quite realize that. As I say, it was kind of a shtick that I had created inadvertently. I began to see myself as an artifact."

Indeed, both on-screen in the homes of America's families, and in the meticulously stylized design and copy of her drawings, she strikes a persistent balance between

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incisive cleverness and oblivious earnestness. Under close inspection, Garner is an enigma, but as an impulse buy, these contradictory qualities make Garner, the artifact, curiously appetizing—not only to the culture industry, but, perhaps even more so, to anyone.

For context, in 1982, the Whitney Museum of American Art presented solo shows by John Cage, Nam June Paik and Robert Smithson, three artists who, like Garner, were working with mediums that expanded popular conceptions of what visual art could be. Whereas two of these men, for what it's worth, also had their work platformed by *The Tonight Show*—when cellist Charlotte Moorman memorably performed a piece composed by Cage on an instrument made by Paik, topless—it bears mentioning that, unlike Garner, Carson did not chat with either of them.

Conversely, the art world did not pay significant attention to Garner until recently, with projects at Parker Gallery (2015), Redling Fine Arts (2017, 2018), and STARS Gallery (2021). During the 1970s and 1980s she was frequently featured in a range of publications like *Rolling Stone*, *Esquire*, *Interview*, *Vogue*, and *Playboy* but had no solo exhibitions at museums or galleries, and was included in just a handful of group shows. Looking back, Garner, a resident of Hollywood, was a cultural figure functioning more like a media personality than an artist, in an institutional sense. However taken as *gesamtkunstwerk*, her life itself was already a fascinating artistic product.

This exhibition coincides with the release of a short documentary about the artist titled *Pippa: Queen Of The Future*. Soon to be finished at the time of writing, I am told some of the interviews explicitly address Garner's experience of being abandoned by friends and colleagues in the art world when she began her gender transition from male to female in the late 1980s. Three vitrines in the gallery are filled with loosely chronological

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texts and images tracing Garner's life and work, including personal materials about this process, from correspondence with her doctor and her new birth certificate with her correct new name, to drawings and ideas on the subject of gender and a piece of paper on which she has tried new names and signatures to match her female gender.

The myth that progress eventually *catches up* to geniuses who are *before their time* has always, for me, felt somewhat falsely resolved, because people, especially artists like Garner, are not static. Absolutely, there are visionaries, trailblazers and prophetic individuals who have shifted culture, science, reality, etc. But by the time society meets them where they were in the past, there may still remain a jarring temporal dissonance between the present-day individual and the newly but lately enlightened world that surrounds them. The so-called "inventors office" at the center of the gallery appropriately conjures the feeling of entering a space that is itself misplaced in time. The 10 foot by 10 foot room sits like a set on a soundstage, a utilitarian mid-century office with wood panelling, mustard carpet and a hulking steel tanker desk. The walls are dressed with pencil and paper sketches and storyboards from Garner's extensive archive, plus some photographs. Their topics range from gadgets for aliens and television show pitches to business attire and erotic devices.

There is an appendix at the end of Garner's *Utopia... Or Bust!* titled "Do-It-Yourself Thinking." The first half, "How to come up with an idea," offers an aspiring inventor some tips that steer them away from conditions that ought to facilitate orderly productivity and instead towards cultivating disorientation. But the more interesting part is the second, "How to get rid of your idea," which outlines how and why one should purge their ideas before they become stale and cumbersome:

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“The process of bringing an idea to a state of fruition is an occupation in itself... and leaves scant opportunity for the continued pursuit of creative innovation. It may be better to begin again with a clear slate, as in playing a game, and enjoy as often as possible that delicious moment at which ‘the light bulb goes off’...”

What better upending of such a game is there than a retrospective? As for its title, *Immaculate Misconceptions*, it seems this could refer both to erroneous miracles and to miraculous errors, both perfect in their confusion. Life’s imitation of art and vice versa are well trodden binaries. Garner’s reverence for the idea as a third creative ilk puts her on another, inimitable plane.

“My own history has become abstract; real and unreal at the same time. Like a story one has read over and over but...” — Pippa Garner, 1995

- Kevin McGarry