

People

'It's in My Nature to Play': Artist Pippa Garner on Her 50-Year Conceptual Project to Hack Consumerism—and Her Own Body

Garner's latest solo institutional show, "SELL YOUR SELF," opens June 24 at Art Omi in Ghent, New York.

Min Chen, June 23, 2023



Pippa Garner, *Specimen Under Glass* (2018). Courtesy of the artist and STARS Gallery, Los Angeles.

Some 50 years ago, Pippa Garner drove a car backwards across the Golden Gate Bridge. Well, sort of: the body of the 1959 Chevy she was in had been rotated 180 degrees, so it only looked like it was rolling down the San Francisco streets the wrong way. It was her artful way of lampooning the car culture that consumed America through the '60s, but more so, she just got a kick out of it.

"It was amazing because anybody that was on the sidewalk would see this thing and think there was something wrong with their vision," she told Artnet News. "It was just a crazy wave of reactions."

As part of the piece, Garner intended for the *Backwards Car* to make just the one-time appearance, that it might be "a ghost," as in "something that people thought they saw and lived their lives wondering if that really existed." She junked the car, though not the idea.



Pippa Garner, *Backwards Car* (1973-74). Performance documentation on Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco. Courtesy of the artist and STARS Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff Cohen.

On June 24, when Garner's latest solo institutional show opens at Art Omi in Ghent, New York, the artist's *Backwards Car* will be resurrected, taking the form of a 2003 Ford Ranger pickup truck with a similarly flipped exterior. Titled *Haulin' Ass!* (2023), the work comes with truck nuts attached, of course.

"It's back," said Garner. "Maybe it's a good time for it to reappear, when things are changing again with human mobility. It's an interesting time for a statement about the absurdity of a vehicle."

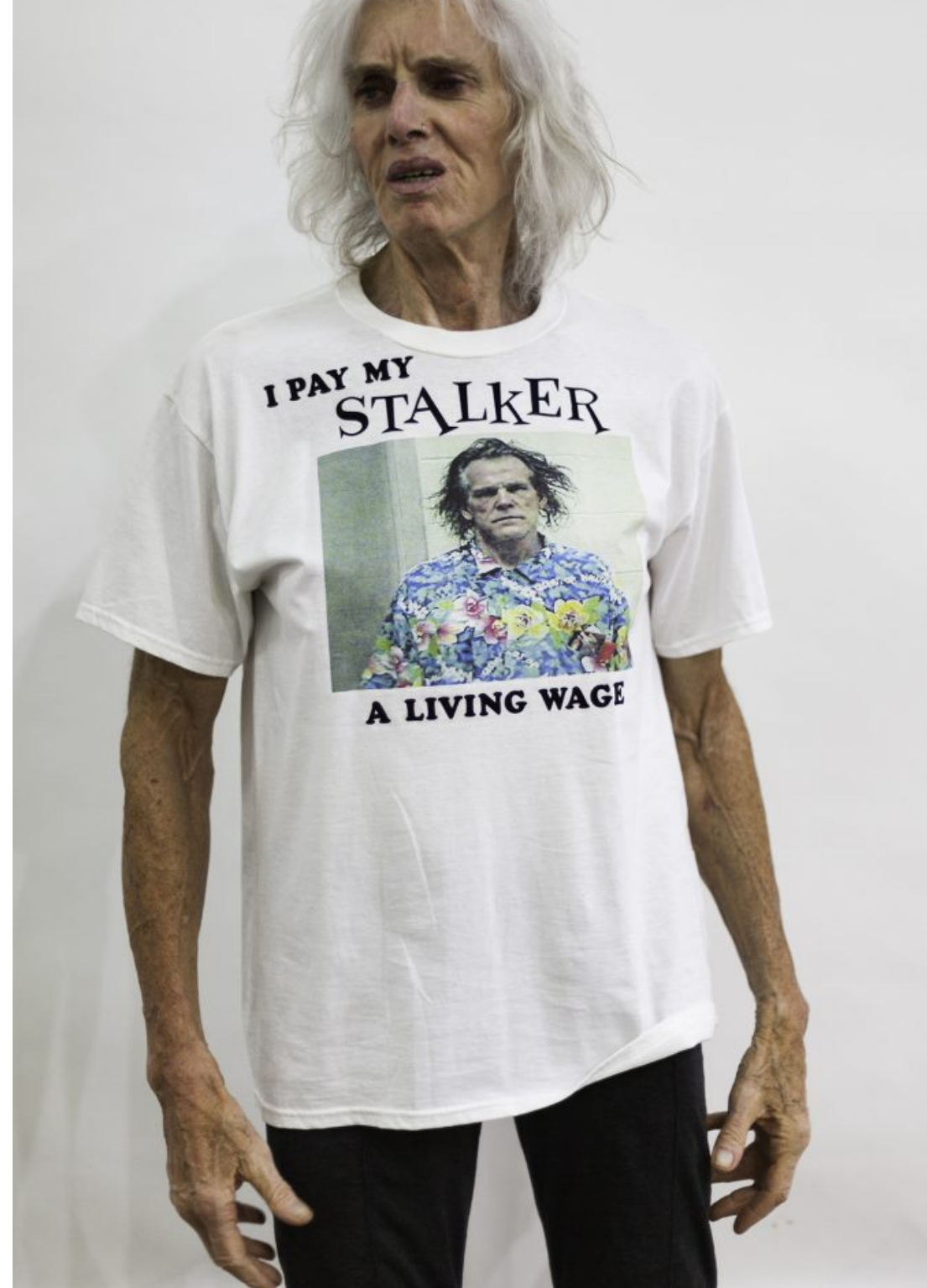
One could also argue that there's never not a good time for a statement from Garner, who, over the course of a five-decade practice, has satirized, subverted, and otherwise sent up the ever-present scourge of consumerism. The appropriately titled "**SELL YOUR SELF**" at Art Omi features more than 100 of her works, ranging from drawings and sculptures to videos and garments, all bearing marks of the absurdist and conceptual relish with which Garner has attacked her subject.



Pippa Garner, *Kar-Mann (Half Human, Half Car)* (1969). Courtesy of the artist and STARS, Los Angeles.

There's her cheeky *Kar-Mann* (1969), a sculpture melding a car and a human body; her self-published mail order catalogues from the 1980s hawking fictional and ludicrous inventions (high heels with roller skates, anyone?); and her recent t-shirt designs, featuring perversions of clichéd phrases. Running throughout is Garner's obsession with mass-produced goods and her accompanying desire to upend their existence.

"I've just had it in my nature to play and juxtapose—I might consider myself a 'juxtaposer,'" said the California-based artist. "You know, lift things up and see what happens."



Pippa Garner, *I PAY MY STALKER A LIVING WAGE*, from the series "Shirtstorm" (c. 2005-). Courtesy of the artist and STARS Gallery, Los Angeles.

Garner was born in Illinois in 1942, and in a few years, with the rise of postwar manufacturing capacity, so was the American consumer. She grew up avidly drawing, though her eye was also drawn to the wave of newfangled appliances that were hitting the market. Eggbeaters, electric refrigerators, waffle irons, and the like were emerging and just as quickly becoming obsolete as newer versions replaced them. Watching these outmoded consumer products wind up at yard sales and thrift stores, Garner said, "I started to almost feel sorry for some of these things."

"Somebody spent a lot of time to make this thing just the way you wanted it. And now it's considered to be junk," she added. "I thought, well, maybe I can bring them back to life somehow."

It was a seed that followed Garner as she entered the ArtCenter College of Design's transportation design program in 1969—from which she would be booting out for submitting a proposal of a car that morphed into a human body.



Pippa Garner, *Conversation Pt I* (1973). Courtesy of the artist and STARS Gallery, Los Angeles.

Undaunted, she would go on to realize—and make her name on—the *Backwards Car* in 1973, selecting a Chevy for its highly directional form. Notably, too, the final piece was sent not into a gallery, but on the road and into the pages of *Esquire* magazine, bearing out Garner's understanding of the reach of mass media.

"You could do something that is opposed to a handful in a gallery. The art versus commercial thing was very much a division during that time. If you started doing stuff for magazines, you were considered to not be up to the standards of gallery art, though you would shine," she said.

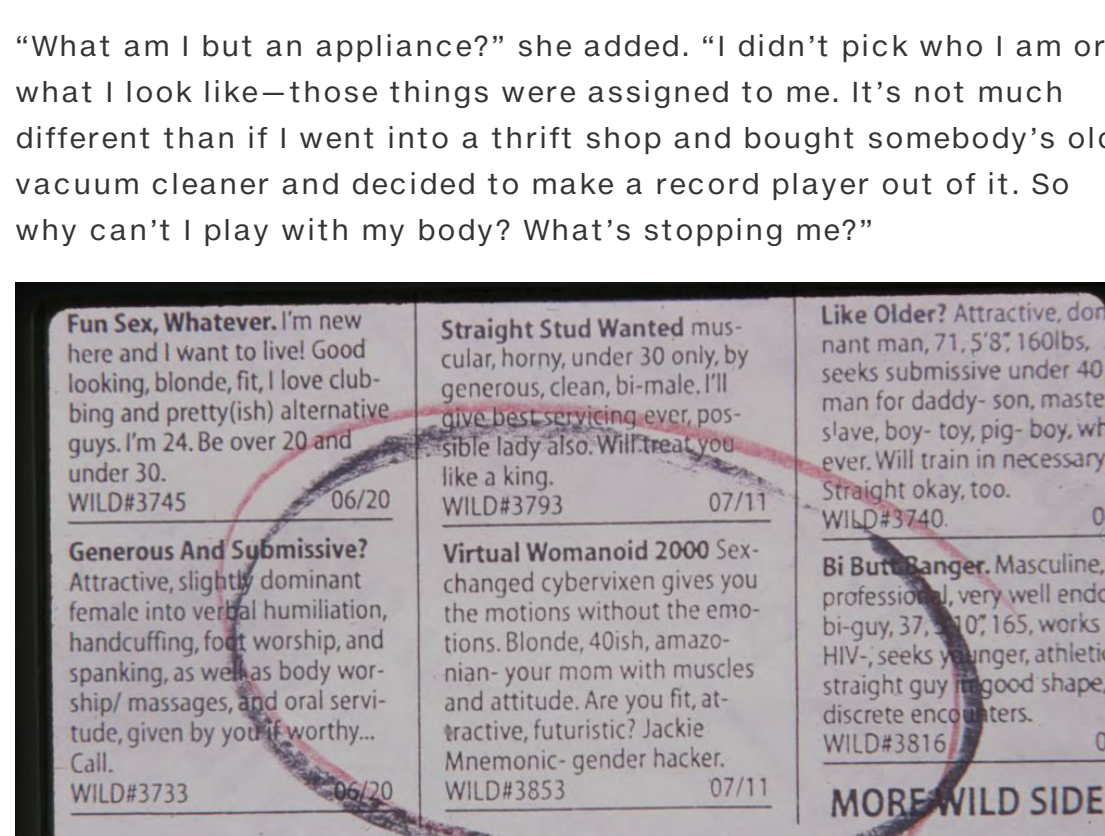
Mass media would serve as Garner's platform for years to come. She gatecrashed classified ads, public access television, and mail order catalogues with conceptual pieces and performances that challenged the presentation of art—and ultimately, self.



Pippa Garner, *Untitled (SELL YOUR SELF)* (1996). Courtesy of the artist and STARS Gallery, Los Angeles.

In the 1980s, just as she hacked mass-produced goods, Garner began a project of hacking her own gender and body. Born biologically male as Philip Garner, she commenced a regimen of hormones and eventually surgery to transition to a female gender. She was motivated less by any form of dysphoria, but a desire to "fuck around" with her body because: "I wouldn't have wanted to leave it the way it was."

"What am I but an appliance?" she added. "I didn't pick who I am or what I look like—those things were assigned to me. It's not much different than if I went into a thrift shop and bought out of it. So why can't I play with my body? What's stopping me?"



Pippa Garner, *Untitled (Virtual Womanoid 2000)* (c. 1995). Courtesy of the artist and STARS Gallery, Los Angeles.

Today, at 81, Garner's body has weathered ravages beyond her control. She's been diagnosed with leukemia and glaucoma—the former, she said, caused by exposure to Agent Orange when she was drafted into military service during the Vietnam War. When she spoke, she was just recovering from a bout of pneumonia that had landed her in the hospital for a month.

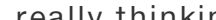
Not that any of it has dampened her creative drive. She expressed frustration at not being able to get more involved with "SELL YOUR SELF," crediting curator Sara O'Keefe for doing "a great job" going through her archive. More so, Garner is looking forward to getting past her health troubles so she can "get back at being productive for a little while."

But as Garner put it, productivity for her remains not so much about making art than doing that which entertains her. Or maybe, they're the same thing.

"I never thought of these things as having any value, but then people started telling me that they were art," she said. "I wasn't really thinking about myself as an artist at all. I was just doing stuff that amused me."

"Pippa Garner: **SELL YOUR SELF**" is on view at Art Omi, 1405 County Route 22, Ghent, New York, from June 24 through October 29.

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