When Men Aren't Enough

PIPPA

Alternative Pleasure
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WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

PIPPA GARNER: $ELL YOUR $ELF

JUNE 24 – OCTOBER 29, 2023

ART
OMI

YUMMY $LURP! THE Pippa GARNER Story

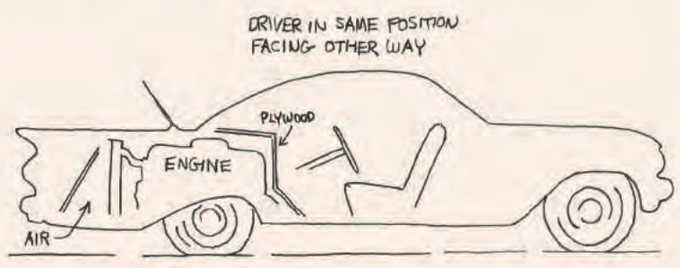
NAYLAND BLAKE

I was seven years old when I hit the jackpot. After weeks of staking out the gumball machines at the local grocery store and cadging nickels from my parents at every opportunity, I had a plastic capsule in my hand and in that capsule was my new mascot: a hairy, rotund figure with popping eyes, a feral grin, notched ears, and patched overalls with the letters "R.F." appliqued to the front that identified what my new treasure was: a Rat Fink.

Created by car customizer and counter cultural antihero Ed "Big Daddy" Roth in 1963, Rat Fink was a character initially conceived as an answer to the oppressive blandness of the 1950s iteration of Mickey Mouse. In place of Mickey's smooth, rounded outlines, staid family-friendly success, and suburban leisure clothing, the Fink is all jagged lines and antisocial aggression. He looks like he smells bad, even if you don't notice the flies buzzing around his clearly unwashed feet. He's probably a speed freak in both senses of the word. The card that was stuck to the front of the gumball machine was a marvel of advertising: a group of Rat Fink key fobs are surrounded by phrases like "I'M SLOPPY," "I'M VICIOUS," "I'M SELFISH," "I'M DIRTY," "I'M DANGEROUS," "I'M NASTY," the whole thing surmounted by the phrase "RAT FINK: That's Me!" Seven-year-old me could not resist that siren call, somehow sensing that I had more in common with the monstrous rat than with the milquetoast mouse.

Every notion of progress, whether it be social or aesthetic, creates the possibility of its shadow at the moment of its conception. That shadow, composed of everything that "progress" must repress to assert its own positivity, resides within culture as a place of potential power, a location that can correct the stupidity and brutality that often walks alongside forces of "progress."
The flush of economic power that the United States experienced in the aftermath of World War II jump-started a positivist cultural imperialism built on extravagant consumer culture and social conservatism. American capitalism positioned itself as the antidote to global communism as well as all kinds of social deviance. American automobiles in particular were advertised as symbols of freedom, virility, and triumphant individuality, in spite of them merely being mass-produced, mass-marketed commodities. And these symbols of supposed progress called forth their shadow: a counterculture of the customized, the anti-social, the hybridized, and monstrous.

Custom car culture was the freaky, dirty reaction to the gloss of American consumerism. It was dirty, handmade, unshaven, and misshapen, created by ne'er-do-wells in greasy garages who pillaged old junkers and created rococo missiles out of the parts they found there. Custom car culture was twinned with the rise of "sick culture," the impulse that mostly played out in comedy and print media, encompassing creators like Charles Addams, Basil Wolverton, Lenny Bruce, and many more. Sick culture was surrealism's pop culture wing, delighting in monsters, grotesque bodies, and goofball cynicism. *Mad Magazine* was its most visible publication, trailing in its wake imitators like *Cracked*, *Thimk*, *Help!*, *Frenzy* and *Humbug*. Big Daddy Roth was the figure that forged the connection between custom car culture and sick culture, creating visions of goon-eyed hot-rodders whose bodies were as weird as their wheels.

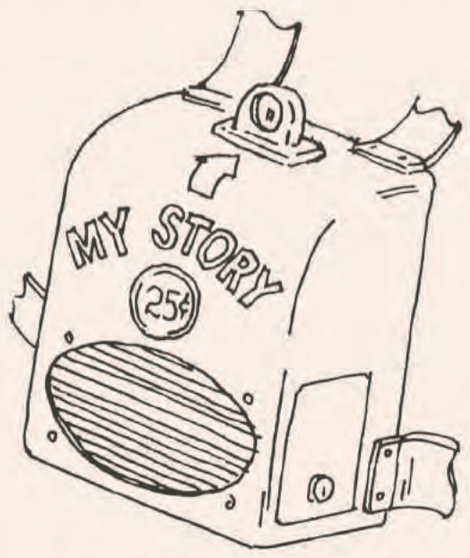


The counterculture of the 60s and 70s produced its own narratives of progress, built around bodily autonomy and liberation. In a funny way, the monsters of sick culture were tamed and mellowed into hippies for whom progress required nothing more than the twinned platitudes of Peace and Love. The possibilities of social revolution postulated by the New Left, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Women's Movement all were absorbed and transmuted into new varieties of soothing consumerism.

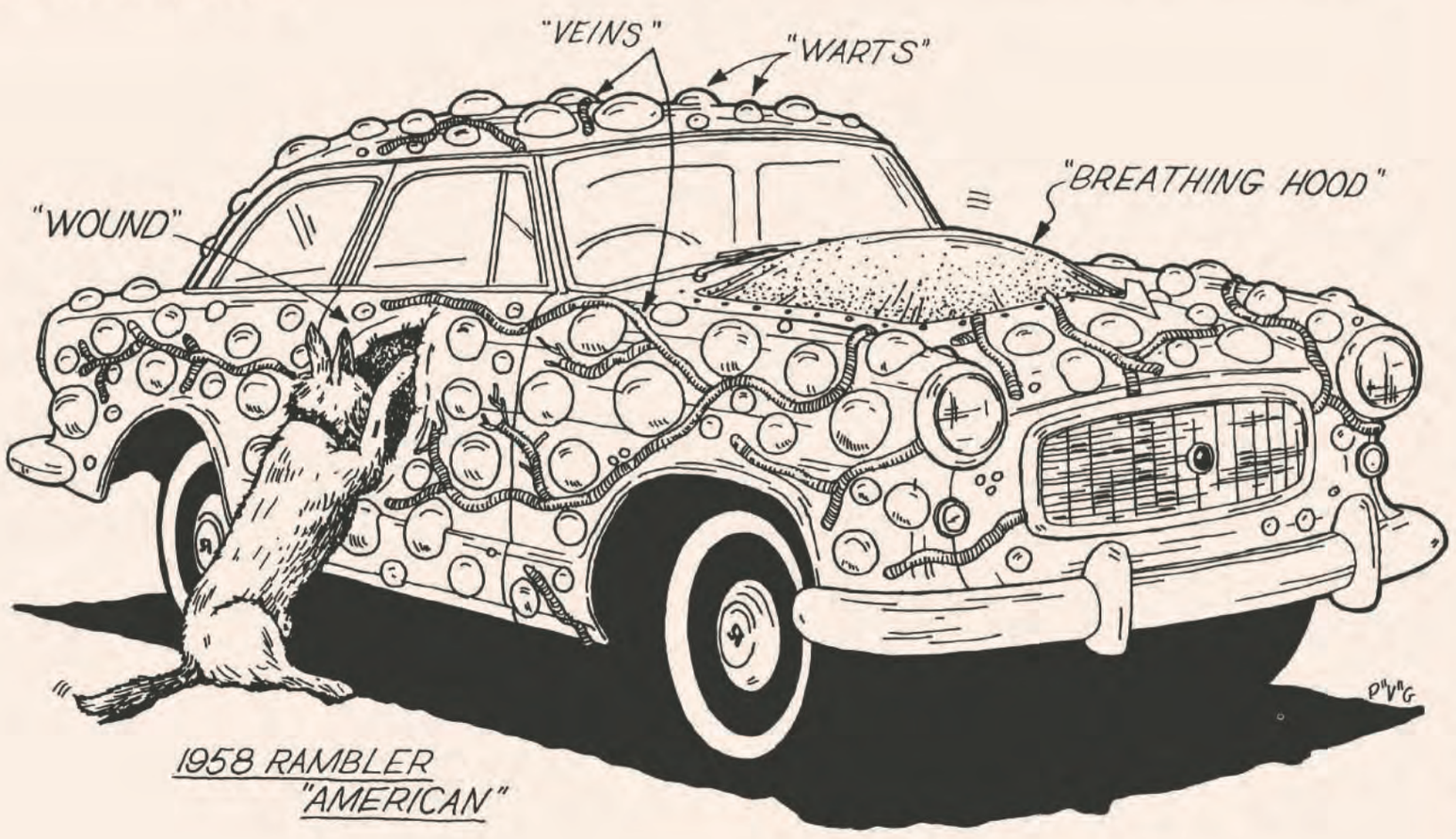
The commonality running through and linking all these developments is the sophisticated burbling of America's most evolved cultural language: advertising. Since the Second World War, American advertising has worked to sell the world on visions of prosperity, safety, stability, and conformism couched in a rhetoric of individualism. It has called for change, as long as change meant continuing to buy the same stuff. It has preached "togetherness" as an antidote to collective action, and has sold jeans, cigarettes, shotguns, and computer operating systems, all called "Maverick."

Enter Pippa Garner, child of an ad man, whose early life reads like a training course in mainstream identity: midwestern childhood, employment in an auto factory, stint in the military, college for auto design, job as illustrator for *Car and Driver* magazine. And yet . . . while steeped in the language and locations of advertising, Garner managed to see the shadows it birthed. As she says in an interview from 2021: "[T]he advertising, consumerism, in the background in my life, was very much gender-oriented. There were things for women and things for men. It was all-out masculinity or all-out femininity, macho or made up. And if you didn't feel that yourself, you felt uncomfortable. That was what they wanted, so that you would buy their products."[1] She saw the outfit that society had measured her for and knew that it didn't fit.

To begin with, she used the tools and language of mid-century American consumerism to call forth the monstrous and hybrid. She started customizing cars. Her approach was markedly different from that of the detailers and hot-rodders of an earlier generation. The Southern California scene, for all of its macho bluster, produced cars that were as camp as the outfits of any drag queen: acid yellow candy flaked curving bodies topped by plexi domes and dripping with chrome, flame jobs as carefully applied as any shadow and eyeliner. In contrast, Garner's vehicles present as midwestern butch. If you sell a car as just an extension of a guy's dick, she asked, why not a car with a dick? That proposal didn't go over well at automotive design school: they expelled her. She took on the identity of a tinkerer, a putterer, a customizer whose subversions could pass muster as mere eccentricities: "Hey that idea's so crazy it just might work!" Watch her deftly deadpan her way through an interview with that pillar of the American mainstream, Johnny Carson, presenting a series of gadgets that solve problems, which, on further reflection, are all problems of gender, alienation, loneliness, and social anxiety. Her patter is quiet and reserved: she's not pushing for jokes, she's letting the ideas do the work. (Now imagine what she could do with that temple of entrepreneurial pomposity, *Shark Tank*.) Her work at this point seems to me to be related to several other strains of subculture that employed similar imagery, like The Church of the SubGenius and DEVO.

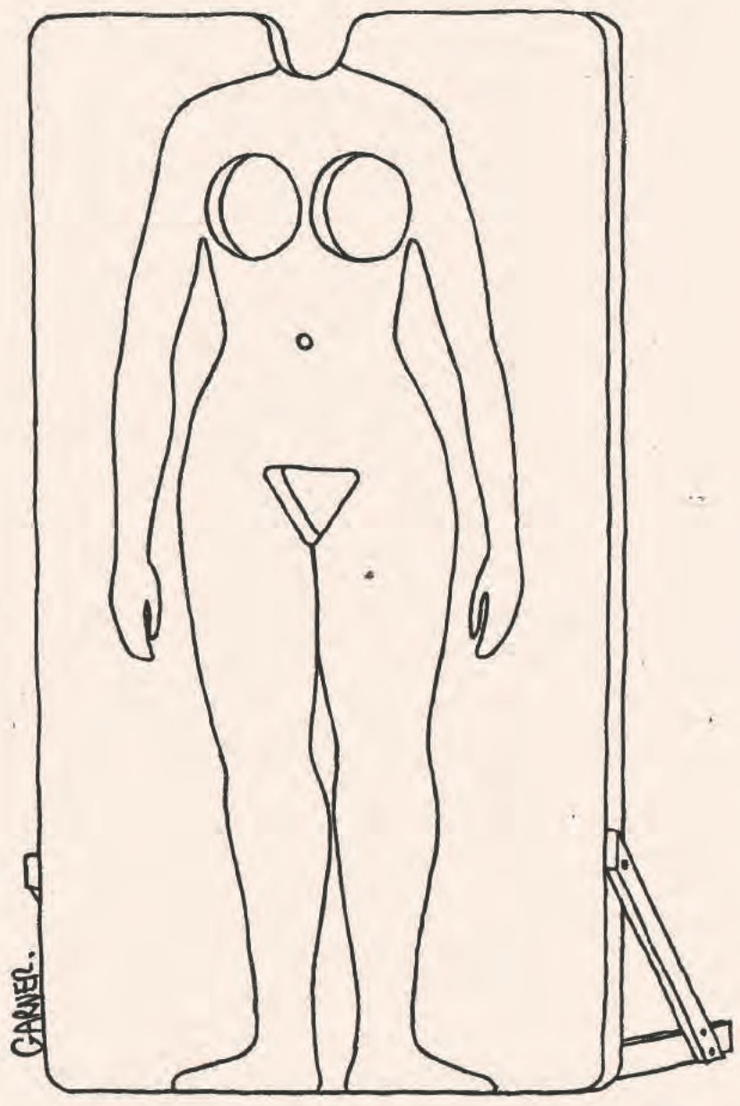


COIN-OPERATED MODEL



If I can customize my car's body, then why can't I customize my body? It's a simple question and Pippa was not alone in asking it. Throughout the 1980s several communities converged around the idea of body modification as performance art, spiritual quest, or personal adornment. In the Bay Area these explorers overlapped with the expanding tattoo culture and the leather scene, an interaction documented in the RE/Search publication *Modern Primitives*. Most of these modifiers weren't thinking about gender, and

even though there was an increasing number of visible trans people, they were discussed as being in transition from one side of a gender binary to another. The idea that it might be possible to walk away from a binary altogether was rarely brought up until the next decade when the concept of gender as performance began to gain purchase.



Pippa brought a customizer's sensibility to the problem of her gender, experimenting with her body's chemistry, looking at surgery and tattooing. Creating a new self. In this sense she is her most utopian work. But every utopia spawns a shadow, and it is the way Pippa has voiced that shadow that moves me most. To understand that, we need to return to advertising once again.

Behind every physical thing that advertising encourages you to consume there lurks another thing it is trying to sell you: the notion that your self is something that expresses its essence through the act of consumption, and not through the act of creation. This conflation of selfhood with consumption is a sophistry so pervasive that it allows people to measure their social actions in relation to what they term their "brand." We have internalized capitalism's transactional ontology so completely that we become willing advertisements for ourselves and by extension our communities. And so we get The Minority Role Model, precursor to, among other nightmares, The Influencer. Minorities are offered the chance for the basic human dignity they are owed, so long as they behave themselves and spout the same positivism as the mainstream. They are supposed to inspire with their courage, overcome the odds, express gratitude for the scraps.

Like any sensible monster, Pippa rejects that position too, refusing to be looked up to, refusing to repackage her pain and desires into uplift and inspiration. My favorite works of Pippa's tackle this state of affairs directly: how do we demand what we want when all we can use is the debased language of advertising and we know how debased that language is? I'm talking about the series of personal ads she posted in several alternative weeklies since her transition and the sloganizing t-shirts she continues to make. These ads bounce between disdain and desperation, exuberance and raucous humor, all in the space of a few well-tuned phrases:

> **SEX CHANGED DEVIL GIRL** I AM the battle of the sexes—the worst traits of man and woman convoluted into one demented soul. Step into my lair and you are lost irretrievably. Even reading this is dangerous. Yummy, slurp!
>
> **✆ 6094 exp** **10/18**

This is masterful writing, and as wonderful a piece of gender demolition as I have ever encountered. In these pieces Garner reveals the inadequacies of another positivism, one based in her position as a trans woman. She refuses to settle for being a role model and demands that the world meet her terms. It's as if Rat Fink was asking me out on a date and daring me to be worthy of the honor.

That Pippa tinkers with her gender to please herself is her greatest power. That she is self satisfied, remaking her body and her self as she sees fit, while retaining her skepticism regarding all organized positivism, is the thing that makes her work even more important today. Her choices and her honesty about those choices remind me of the difference between real human autonomy and the manufactured non-choices dished up by our contracting society. Pippa is irredeemable. That makes her precious.

Nayland Blake is an artist, writer, educator, and curator, whose works on race, sexuality, and gender have been exhibited throughout the United States and Europe. Their career retrospective *No Wrong Holes: Thirty Years of Nayland Blake* opened in 2019 at the Institute for Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and closed in 2021 at the MIT List Center. They are currently the Co-Director of the Studio Arts Program at Bard College.

1. Dunham, Hayden. "Pippa Garner and Hayden Dunham on the Struggle of Being Inside Bodies." *Interview Magazine*, May 19, 2021.

CAPTIONS

FRONT COVER: Pippa Garner, *Untitled (Calling Card)*, c. 1995. Ink on paper, dimensions variable; *Untitled (What's wrong with this picture?)*, n.d. Pencil on paper, 10¾ x 14½ in. (36.8 x 27.3 cm). Collection of Stefan Simchowitz; **BACK COVER:** *Untitled (Pain at the Pump)*, n.d. Pencil on paper, 14½ x 11 in. (36.8 x 27.9 cm).

ESSAY (left to right, top to bottom): Pippa Garner, *Untitled*, c. 1970s. Ink on paper, dimensions variable; *Untitled (Backwards Car)*, 1973. Ink on paper, dimensions variable; *Untitled*, c. 1970s. Ink on paper, dimensions variable; *Untitled (My Story, Coin-Operated Model)*, 1973. Ink on paper, dimensions variable; *Untitled*, c. 1970s. Ink on paper, dimensions variable; *Untitled (Backwards Car)*, 1973. Ink on paper, dimensions variable.

All courtesy of the artist and STARS Gallery, Los Angeles

PIPPA GARNER: $ELL YOUR $ELF
June 24 – October 29, 2023

Art Omi presents *$ELL YOUR $ELF*, the first New York institutional solo exhibition of visionary artist Pippa Garner (American, b. 1942). For more than five decades, Garner has embedded her work in the world, often realizing projects outside the confines of galleries, museums, or the boundaries of what has been strictly defined as art. Her works take the form of mail-order catalogs, classified ads, garments, cars, and performances on the streets or on television. Garner offers deviant solutions for tackling everyday problems in post-Fordist America. Directly addressing the anxiety, alienation, and paranoia that course through the office and home, Garner proposes devices to deflect, subvert, or retool the mounting pressures of productivity and visibility today.

$ELL YOUR $ELF underscores Garner's interest in how self is commodified and instrumentalized in today's world. Camouflaging her work in the shiny optimism of a sales pitch, Garner expresses pessimism, ambivalence, and exhaustion. Knowing how the language of liberation is co-opted by commercial forces, Garner offers a rejoinder, cloaking herself within the machinery of the apparatus in an attempt to trip its circuit. Garner embraces pleasure, kink, and the perversion of mass-produced products as tools for proposing altered working conditions and conceptualizations of self.

The exhibition premieres *Haulin' Ass!* (2023), Garner's newest custom car unveiled on the fiftieth anniversary of her first major car work, *Backwards Car* (1973–1974). Commissioned by Art Omi, *Haulin' Ass!* is a 2003 red Ford Ranger removed from its chassis, rotated, and welded back together, replete with super-sized truck nuts. Fully functional, it will make appearances in the Hudson Valley and New York City this summer and fall.

This exhibition was curated by Sara O'Keeffe, with Guy Weltchek.

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PUBLICATION
In conjunction with the exhibition, Art Omi and Pioneer Works Press are co-publishing *$ELL YOUR $ELF*, a kaleidoscopic introduction to Garner's practice that brings together more than fifty years of her work across media for the first time. The book features contributions from Nayland Blake, House of Ladosha, Chip Lord, Ed Ruscha, Philippa Snow, and McKenzie Wark.

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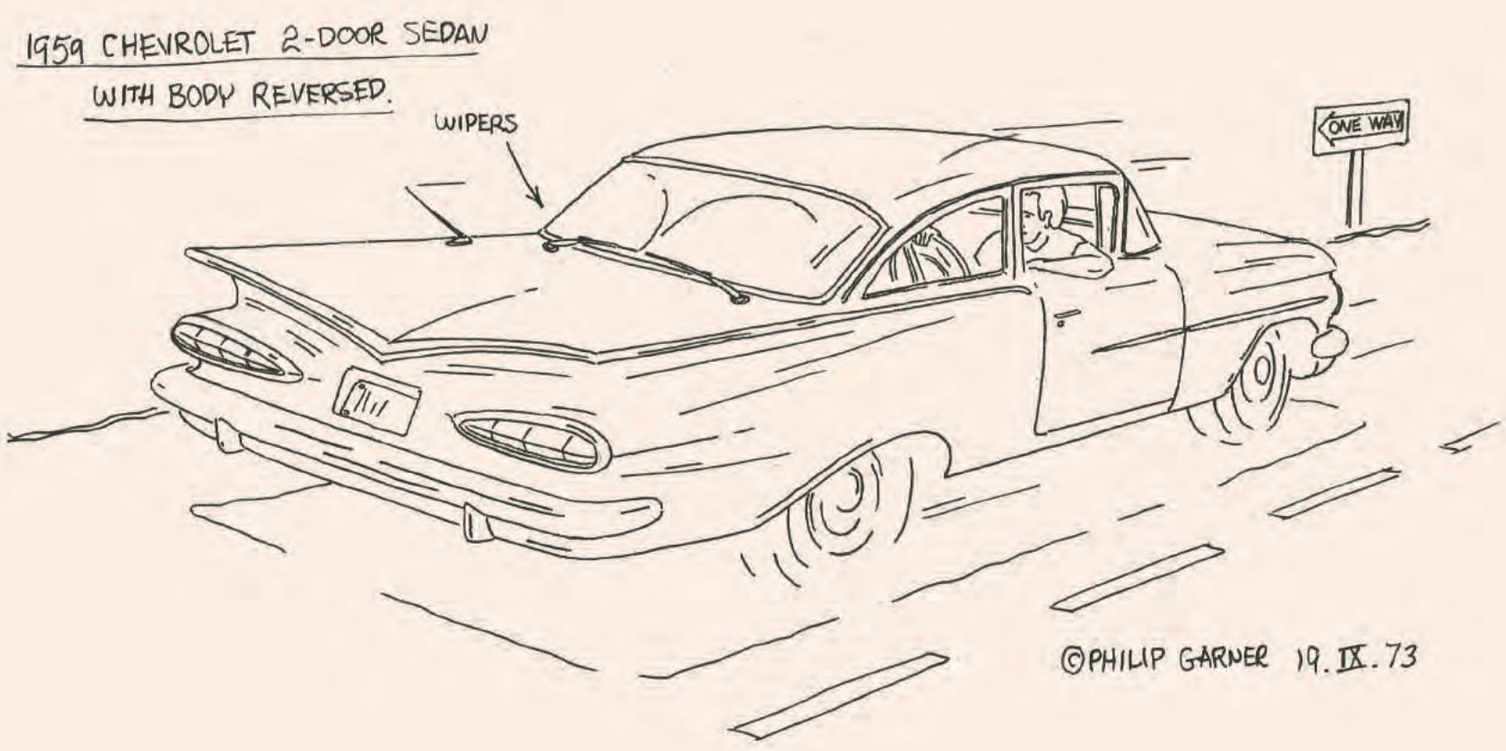

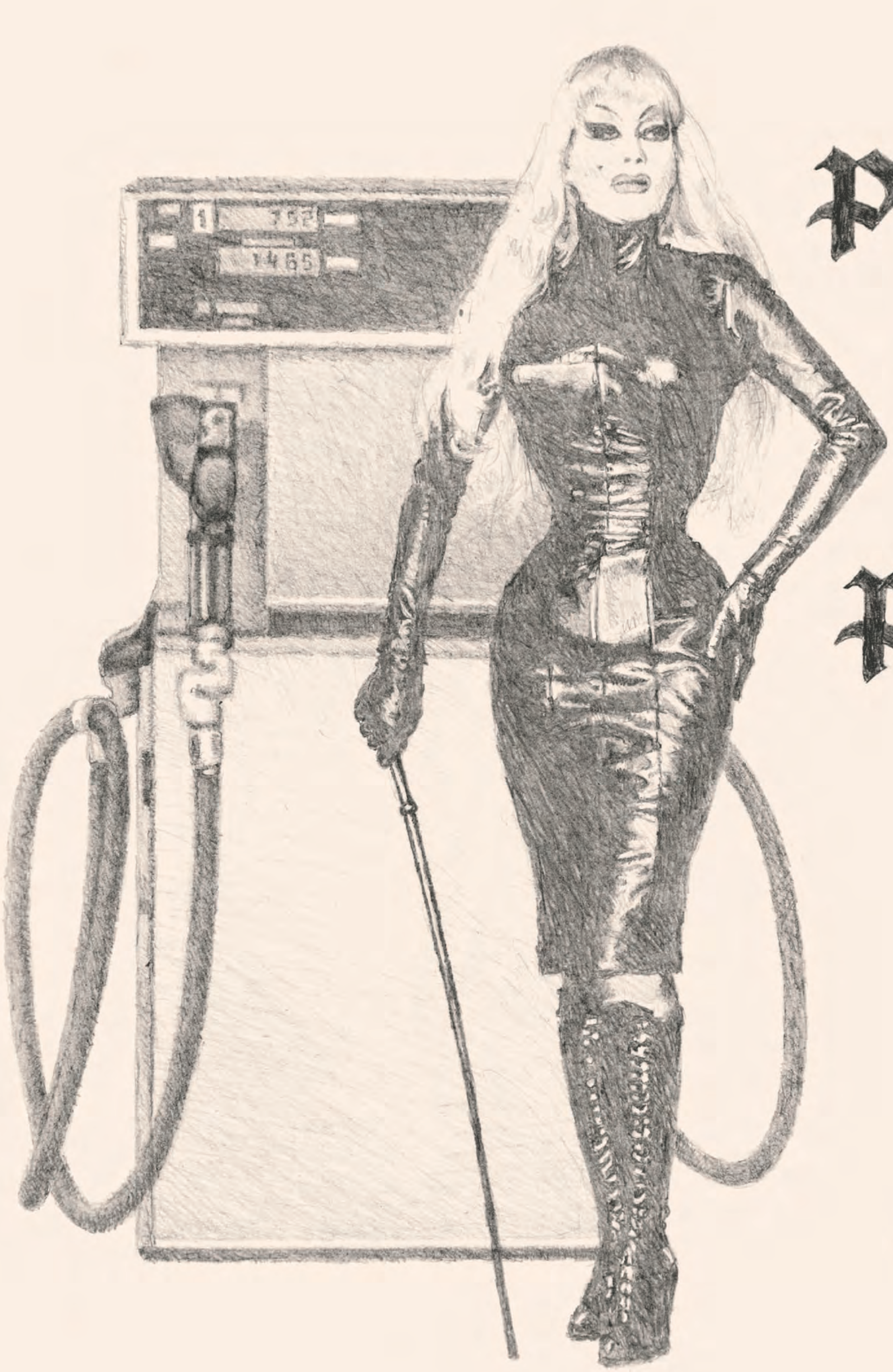

Pain at the Pump

GARNER