

## Misc. Pippa Garner

Santa Fe, New Mexico | July 2005

I'm Misc. Pippa Garner. I go by M-i-s-c, which is kind of a definition of my self-image at this point. My femininity was store-bought thirteen years ago at a point in which I had gotten kind of stale with my career as an artist.

I very early on started doing work for magazines and evolved a sort of satire on consumerism as my theme, using consumer products and man-made artifacts of my culture as a way of spinning off and creating kind of an absurdity with these things. I've done a lot of that over many years, including several full-size car projects. This was as my previous identity, Philip. I felt that I was kind of repeating myself and also being stereotyped for what I was doing. I did a couple of books in the eighties. One of them was called *The Better Living Catalogue*, which was a satire on consumer products. It turned out to be quite popular, and 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. My style, and even the fact that I was Caucasian, you know, as a kind of a symbol of the privileged class in our culture. And I thought, *What can I do? There's maybe some potential there for satire.* So I kinda turned this beam that I had focused on things that were external at myself, and I saw potential for an art project that would be ongoing, that would always create a disorientation in my position in society, and sort of balk any possibility of ever falling into a stereotype again.

I wasn't quite sure what direction this might take or what form it would take. There was a lot of attention in the media at that time on gender. It had possibly evolved from some of the things that had gone on in the seventies and into the eighties, of feminism and other things that made people self-conscious about their gender role. I thought, *Well, you know, this is the cornerstone of identity: male or female.* If you go into a room of people, the first thing you pick

up is whether it's predominately masculine or feminine, and you build on that. I think it's more profound than race or any other thing that could be used as a way of making categories for different people. So I thought if I could hack gender, I'd really be onto something because it would alter everything else I did.

At the time I was approaching fifty. That's a time that you kind of reach a point where you start to look for a comfort zone, and settle into something that becomes consistent and reliable and will see you through the rest of your life, which I should have done at that point. But there's some kind of subversive ele-



*Trappings* interview portrait,  
Linda Durham Contemporary Art Gallery

ment in my personality that always wants to self-sabotage the minute I become too comfortable with anything. I was also quite masculine, had a strong male sex drive. I was never gay, and so I was pretty stereotypical as a male of my generation.

I thought, *What would happen if I just started experimenting with hormones?* That seemed to me a way of trying out gender hacking without having to commit myself too much, because I could always stop if I didn't care for what was happening. So I attempted to get the hormones legally and discovered that doctors were extremely paranoid about malpractice and you just can't walk into a doctor's office and say, "Hey, I want to do a little experimenting here, you know? My artistic license is valid, so you should be able to honor this."

So I ended up finding a tranny-hooker on Hollywood Boulevard one foggy October night. And I convinced her I wasn't a cop, which I did by paying money. She was very nice actually, and took me to her black-market source. I started on a hormone regime, which I maintained for five years from this black-market source. It did something quite profound. It took the edge off of my feeling about myself culturally. It was a de-masculinizing effect, which I found very comfortable. I was no longer obligated to behave the way that I had

been behaving for all my life. It was a new opportunity, although I was still identifying as male.

So, after five years, I thought, *If I go legit with this, and go to therapy, and do all the things that are required if you want to legally change your sex, then what would happen? How far could I get?* I had moved to San Francisco and started therapy. I had read several biographies of transsexuals and I knew kind of what the stereotype was for that, mainly to be born in the wrong body and feel, since childhood, that you were the wrong gender, and secretly cross-dress and all that, which I had never done. I never really had any issues about gender, and so I kind of mimicked that and passed with flying colors, and was able to then get the hormones legally. After five years I was convinced that that was my comfort zone and I had no intention of going the other way. I had the surgery in '93, and came out of it, again thinking in the back of my mind this was an art project. On the other hand, I had done something that altered my position in culture drastically.

The idea of being sort of irreverent about the whole thing was part of it for me. It wasn't like this big life-changing thing. In a sense, it's just like a commodity. It only cost me about five thousand dollars to have the two-and-a-half-hour sex-change surgery and seven days in the hospital. For that much money what could I get, a five-year-old Honda or something? It was a way of actually making a purchase of something that I can incorporate into myself, and know that it will never have to be insured or stolen or anything else. I went out and I bought this. You might have to go through a few hoops, but it's all part of the process.

It's an acting role to some extent to study the mannerisms of the other sex, and to figure out how to pass, as they say. The point of this whole project was to enter into something that had a real question mark floating over it, and then let it drift and see where I ended up. And I felt confident enough that I could deal with whatever insecurities came out of that. I've been through a number of other things that made me feel that I can handle this. I'm a Vietnam vet, I'd been through a lot of stuff up to that point. So I just kind of took my hands off the wheel, pardon the automobile analogy, and let the whole thing drift back to where I felt relaxed. That ended up in a position of ambiguity, which I found I liked because one of my themes as an artist is, well, paradox. I always considered myself a kind of juxtaposeur, and here I had found the perfect balance for that. So I've kind of left it there ever since.

But as far as the power look, which is what we're supposed to be talking about, as you might notice I have some tattoos. I never could find a bra that fit, being 6'3½" and athletic. I found this wonderful woman in town here who



does very skillful tattooing, and I thought, *Why not employ the technique of trompe l'oeil, fooling the eye, in tattoos?* So I had her tattoo a bra on me, so it's completely comfortable, and it'll last me for the rest of my life. It's funny because one of the issues, I think, with power dressing for both genders, but perhaps more so for women, is to use clothing as a way of kind of looking naked when you're dressed, bringing out certain contours of the body that would be seductive, and using that as a power implement. I've created the opposite; I look dressed when I'm naked. And then I thought, *Well, as long as we've done the bra, I don't want to be half-naked.* So I had her do a G-string also, which wasn't particularly comfortable, but, you know, it's there now. This woman really got into it. And she also did my wooden leg, which was another thing altogether.

I've been run over twice, as a cyclist, and badly injured. The first time they almost couldn't save this leg there was so much damage. When it all got put back together, it looked slightly different than the right one, and much straighter. And it kinda looked to me like a wooden leg. I had seen a painting



Pippa in the lowest form of media

that René Magritte, the Belgian surrealist, had done in the forties of a female torso, nude, that had sections of wood on the different parts. That kinda was in the back of my mind as a really cool thing, and so I went to the lumberyard with my Polaroid and photographed various woods to try to find something, a nice distinct grain and yet didn't look, you know, tacky like plywood. We picked American oak, which I thought was patriotic. And so that's my wooden leg.

So everything I have on is really part of my normal look. I always dress the same from the waist down because of my riding everywhere. I have to have my shoes and my tights. And I always either wear capris or else roll this side up so that the leg is exposed. So it's kind of a constant from the waist down. From the waist up, this is kind of my dressy look.

As an artist, I like to have a little bit of, not necessarily discomfort, but just curiosity and, you know, What the hell is that? I just enjoy that, and that's the way I like to feel when I'm with other people. To be comfortable, but at the same time be a little bit odd. So it isn't as much a pretentious thing as it is just that's where I am. After the surgery, when I came back, talk about creating chaos. And then having to work through that and find some order. I mean, in spite of my sort of intellectualizing the situation, I was still thrown for a loss. I realized they had done this surgery and, you know, changed my gender, and I was legally female. In fact the state of Illinois, where I was born, even reissued a birth certificate that I was born female in 1942, which I think is remarkable. I became aware, I think, of the separation between what is natural, what relates to anatomy and biology, and what is learned behavior.

It's interesting to be in between. If you want to think of a scale, with *M* over here and *F* over here, I've moved a few notches. I don't know whether I'll continue to move further in my life. I'm already sixty-three, so it could be that it's kind of reached a static point now. But maybe not. I have no idea. Things can happen that change a person's personal evolution totally drastically.

What I do for daily wear, I like to have something new every day. About three years ago, I got onto this idea of making a new t-shirt every day. I've been so repelled by that whole look of people, they pay to advertise other people's products on their clothes. And I thought, *That's just horrible*. Then I thought, *On the other hand, it's a great way of presenting an image*, because it's near eye level and you're moving so you get to see the reaction, but you get to move past relatively quickly, so there's no need to stop and dwell on it. You get these sound bytes of reaction. I got really attracted to that. I made this t-shirt that said PRAY YOUR BUTT OFF and started wearing that around. I get not only their reaction to me, the way I present myself, but then here's this caption on

the front of me, too, which puts another spin on it. That kind of enhanced the whole thing that I was doing.

It became like a daily one-liner. I can't stop. It's become an obsession. I have to go home every night before I go to work—I work at night mostly—and get the iron plugged in and get out the instant letters and put something together. So I brought a few. I have, I think, a total of about five hundred now if you edited down out of many more than that. Sometimes they're controversial and somewhat perhaps in poor taste, and I don't care. Whatever the best thing I came up with that day is what gets printed. I've been doing work for magazines for thirty years. I like the idea of mass media, and this is kind of a local version. Maybe the lowest form of media is the t-shirt. Bumper stickers are in there, but you need a bumper for a bumper sticker, and a t-shirt, all you need is a torso. So I think it's the lowest form of media. This one says DEFAULT MODE PARANOID. There isn't a lot to explain about these. It's just a matter of putting something on that raises the eyebrows.

IT'S ALL GOOD SINCE TV TURNED MY BRAIN TO MUSH. This was kind of a response to my having done a television show in Los Angeles called *Monster Garage*. They get a team of people that are experts in some kind of car work—I make all these human-powered vehicles. They played up the gender thing there, too. It's such a macho environment, and the host of the show, Jesse James, is this biker guy. His whole image is Mr. Macho with the choppers and





Pippa's viewpoint on the industry



all that. But we hit it off really great because we're both kind of fringe artists who are working in a sort of commercial way that isn't compatible with the structure of the art world.

There's a place in town called the Atomic Grill, which is open till three o'clock every night. The cops go in there. They're all in uniform and here I am. It's interesting to see how people at first are put off, and then something happens that they find common ground. My regular feature appears every month in *Car and Driver* as Miss Goodwrench, which is a pair of satirical drawings I do on the readers' page every month. Several of them had seen that, so once they found that I was, you know, kind of a gearhead, then they deal with these two things: Okay, here is a person that's transgender, and that's kinda hard to relate to, but at the same time, you know, we love cars. I like that kind of situation. There's always a little bit of edge to it, you know?

Every year, I go to Detroit for the press preview of the car show there, which is the biggest one in the world. The men are dressed in suits, and it's a big deal where all the CEOs get up and give a little presentation. I dress in something that's a little bit more conventional, you know, pants and a top, but I'm always given a lot of respect there somehow and there's never any ques-

tion raised about my gender. I've never seen another transgender person there, at least that I recognize. A lot of those people have followed my work, so they'll come up and say, "We really like your point of view on our industry."



Hot off the press, October 8, 2006

So it just becomes a kind of invisible thing there.

I'd sort of like to go around to different places in the world and just try myself out in different cultures and see what the reaction would be. I just think it's really important that we not put anybody at a disadvantage. We all have the same insides. Power can be used to support an agenda that a person has, and it can also be used as kind of a toy, you know, which is an agenda, too, I guess. But to just say, What if? What if I do this, what will the reaction be? That's my sense of it. I haven't really ever used power to further my bank account or any kind of personal gain, which means I'm not in a very advantageous position that

way. But I just like to think that I have the freedom to experiment. And that, to me, is what power constitutes. Hopefully I've created a situation where I'll be able to retain that indefinitely. Hopefully.