

# ARTFORUM

In print November 2019



## Pippa Garner

O-TOWN HOUSE  
REDLING FINE ART

There was a time when the designation “LA art” actually meant something, not because the art of this region ever hewed to a definable style but because it was relatively style-free, peripheral to what was recognized as art at all. This “outsider” history of the scene is easily overstated, to be sure, but serviceable. This was especially true in its earliest days, during the 1960s, when Pippa Garner, then Philip Garner (the artist underwent gender reassignment surgery in 1993) was still studying in the transportation design department at ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena. Garner opted for a career in fine art only later in life, in the '70s, after serving in Vietnam, but the lingering perception is that she shifted gears swiftly, at no expense to her applied-art work.

Garner's technical education coincided with the first authentically homegrown movements in art, Light and Space and Finish Fetish, which were likewise rooted more in the culture of custom cars than in that of the gallery and museum. But whereas an artist such as Robert Irwin would have to be placed closer to the Minimalist end of the spectrum, Garner is all about extreme modification. Baroquely retrofitted cars abound in her oeuvre, from Nauti-Mobile, 1986, a Buick LeSabre onto which is grafted the bow and raised steering cabin of a yacht, to The World's Most Fuel-Efficient Car, 2007, a Honda 600 equipped with bicycle pedals in place of a motor. The latter piece was featured at Redling Fine Art's now-closed Hollywood gallery in 2017, in Garner's first solo exhibition. No actual cars were included in this more recent outing, hosted by O-Town House in the MacArthur Park area. But there were numerous drawings of cars and things that are car-like, everyday commercial items that have been "overhauled" in appearance or "souped-up" in function as a car might be: triplicate shoes, for instance, connected end to end to distribute the effort of walking among three individuals, thus producing a kind of human bus. These drawings were executed in the once-familiar idiom of the promotional pitch (think *Mad Men*), at once technical and folksy, demonstrating convincing expertise embellished with the jaunty touches of consumer appeal.

Garner's work skewers the American cult of transcendence through gadgetry but does so from the perspective of a self-exiled devotee. Here, the archetype of the garage inventor doggedly pursuing unrealizable plans is not a laughable figure but a hero, precisely because this figure operates somewhere outside capitalism, beyond the market and the commodity, aiming to single-handedly transform the stuff of the world. Perusing her "wares," we were reminded that all inventors were once also amateurs. And with that nudge came a question: What is the place of such a person at present, when the greatest invention is a black box with an operating system that is utterly unfathomable to all but the most specialized?

The various "needs" (for transformation, reinvention, novelty) that Garner's work answers to have mostly been met on the internet, where we are transported to possible futures without a hitch. Yet there remains the problem of the body, this thing that stubbornly remains in place as our thoughts travel elsewhere. Two sculptures, one produced for this show, and both activated by the artist during the opening, respond to the zeitgeist in no uncertain terms. *Action Figure*, 2019, comprises standard gym machinery rigged up to dangle Garner like a marionette for the viewer to manipulate. *Shadow of My Former Self*, 2019, which resembles the automated fortune-teller at a fairground, is essentially a tall box with two openings through which are exposed Garner's face, captured on video, and her actual naked torso. From within this contraption, she delivers a monologue about life after death—the conceit is that she has already passed and donated her body to science—while also enjoining the audience to pinch her flesh. The performance struck an elegiac note. If it brought to mind any cars, it was those stopped in traffic, as are most now in LA. Then again, it was precisely the anticipation of stasis that reminded us that the most distant frontier was never far from the chassis.

— Jan Tumlir