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Fiona Duncan, "Pippa Garner," *SPIKE ART QUARTERLY*, Autumn 2019, #57.

SPIKE

Back when artist Pippa Garner was still called Phil, she worked as a combat artist in the Vietnam War. After that she studied automobile design and designed ironic functional products for a future that was never to come. A conversation about living in willed alienation.



In pictures, I mistook Pippa Garner's left leg for a prosthesis. It's wood-grained (a tattoo) and so fit, with a fine ankle and high tight calf, as to appear carved. Garner has more trompe l'oeil tattoos: a red, white, and wavy bra cascades like silk, or the muscular system, with a strap falling off one shoulder; and inked into her groin is a g-string, similarly wavy, but the colour of American money. Five hundred Monopoly bucks are stuffed in its strap. When I ask about the tattoos, Garner shows me. She lifts up her T-shirt and lowers her leggings. Her tiny cat, Roxy (the colour of rocks but fluffy), sits by our feet as I inspect how Garner has illustrated, on own her body, the kind of punning play I've seen her make in many mediums.

Born outside of Chicago in 1942, Garner's art career started in Los Angeles in the 70s, when she went by Phil or Philip. She published consumer parody books and gave performances. Since then, she's continued to work in performance in addition to video, photo, illustration, body art, and sculpture. In the mid-80s, she started to transition courtesy of black-market hormones. The tattoos appeared in the mid-2000s. Now seventy-six, Garner lives in Long Beach, California, and she's back to productivity after a series of impairing health problems, including being broadsided by a Mercedes-Benz S-Class while biking, leukaemia, and declining vision. "In the mirror now," Garner says, "I look about fifteen. Everybody does. I can't see any wrinkles or distortion, only outlines."

The week we met, Garner was preparing for a performance at The Gallery at Michael's in Santa Monica, and making objects. She had few to show in her home studio, as many went to "Autonomy n'stuff (Garnerrhea)", a solo show at Redling Fine Art in Hollywood. "Tinker Tantrum", held in the same space in 2017, included a 1972 Honda 600 transformed into a pedal car, a series of parodic product illustrations, and a group of graphic tees hung in a circle on the wall. Garner places slogans over found images and her own designs on shirts, and more of these made their way into the latest show. "I Suck at Neurosurgery," a blood-splattered white tee reads. "Hire an Asshole," reads another with Mel Gibson's mugshot, "They get things done." In a self-portrait, Garner wears an Adidas polo that says "Badass" below the striped logo. I love her in a gray muscle tee (bra strap tattoo in view) with "Powered by Stress" printed across her chest.

Fiona Duncan: What brought you to Long Beach?

Pippa Garner: I lived in Santa Fe for a while – that's where I got the tattoos – but I found there wasn't enough of an art market. Then I tried Las Vegas but was depressed by this culture that makes its money off addiction, and I couldn't find the art community. I came back to the LA area in 2014, because I needed to be somewhere where I could reconnect. Not only were my vision problems starting, but I also had leukaemia that was getting worse – exposure from Agent Orange, I'm a Vietnam vet, and ostensibly that's what it was from. I was there in 1966, I was only 21, I was drafted. I went on a few missions as a combat artist in the planes from which they were spraying Agent Orange.

FD: What's a combat artist?

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PG: Being a combat artist sounds like it would be some sort of publicity thing but it's not. The military, going way back, has always had civilians tag along to document what is happening so that they can later gain insight on what went wrong and right, to use in future strategies. When I got to Vietnam, I was looking for a situation that would be interesting and discovered there was a combat art team. I found the officer in charge, did some quick sketches, and they were impressed. I did it for about fourteen months.

FD: What did you do after the war?

PG: I went to ArtCenter in Los Angeles. I used to have a lot of trouble with depression and anxiety when I was young. I was a spoiled kid: I was white, male, middle-class, and I was in a comfort zone that was maybe too comfortable. In the war, they'd say "back in the world," and it felt like you were really removed. I couldn't wait to get back. I thought, "Boy am I going to be motivated," and that's what happened. I went back and started to put everything into my work, and I've kept that up since.

FD: What stands out from your childhood?

PG: Consumerism. I was born in 1942. My father worked for McCall's, a women's magazine, but I grew up playing with technology and mechanical things. I made my first pedal car with a gas lawnmower engine when I was ten. I became fascinated by automobiles because they had distinct faces. They still have faces, but at that time they smiled, they frowned, they all had expressions. As a small child, if we were driving and saw a bad accident, there might be people bleeding in the street but if I saw the smashed-up face of the car, I'd start crying. That's a childlike start of seeing consumerism as a strange entity with a life of its own.

FD: What kind of car would you drive now if you could?

PG: The last car I had was an AMC Gremlin in the 80s. I got tired of driving. I got claustrophobic. And I'm just very physical – the body is the only thing you really own. I own my brain, I own my biceps, my knees, my toes. I didn't pick it, it was assigned to me somehow; I don't think I asked for this particular configuration. I look in the mirror and think, "This is just how I turned out looking." I didn't necessarily ask to be white or male or transgender, it's the package that I'm in. I like the sense of weirdness that this perspective generates, because it's not a comfortable way of approaching life, to have this abstraction of who you are.





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FD: How did you start making graphic T-shirts?

PG: I started those because I wanted to do a stand-up comedy routine. There was a club I knew that did a comedy night and I'd never done it, so I thought, "How am I going to test out jokes?" I decided to put them on T-shirts and wear them and see who responded. The T-shirts are interesting because it's a trash medium that sort of evolved out of the sandwich boards from the depression era. A person could walk around in front of a restaurant wearing a couple of strapped together panels with an ad. It was a pathetic, low-level way to get people to eat something. Now it's become a medium where people pay for the privilege of advertising a product. When I wear my shirts – no matter how graphic or outrageous the subject is – nobody notices, because everybody expects a T-shirt to have advertising. We screen them out like billboards.

FD: Where do you source the graphic T-shirts and other found materials you work with?

PG: eBay is the greatest resource I've ever had, particularly in this condition. It's like having access to all the closets in America, and it's organised for you. I've gotten really proficient at finding what I want through that system. There's such a range of images on shirts, I can find almost anything; something I would otherwise draw, I can find and collage.

FD: How do you see your work changing with your eyesight changing?



PG: There are so many ways to express an idea. Erica Redling, the director of the gallery I just showed with, suggested I do a performance at the end of the last show. So I took an idea for a tableau that I was unable to make and turned it into a performance – that's something I can do without having to draw or do a lot of dangerous work with tools. I don't have good depth perception so it's very easy for me to make mistakes with power tools; it's risky without help. I'm moving away from the detailed drawings I used to do; if I work really large, I can find a way. And I can still write. Another thing is that some psychoactive drugs like MDMA have been removed from the forbidden list, and they're now available for therapy. When I lived in the Bay Area in the mid-90s, around the time that I did a number of detailed car drawings, I had a neighbour who was older and had access to things, so I got some MDMA once for the heck of it. It turned out that not only could I still think clearly, but I could also work for hours on end, and very detailed. I extended my range tremendously. I got a stash and began using it as part of my drawing method. I wouldn't have otherwise had patience for a lot of the things I did, because some of them took thirty hours or more of very concentrated work. Lately, I get stressed out when I try to fight my vision impairment and at the same time try and concentrate on my ideas. If I were able to relax a little but still remain very lucid, I may be able to draw more. So here I am at seventy-six, contemplating psychedelic substances.

FD: Was it difficult to gain access to hormones to transition in the 80s?

PG: When I was first trying I was in my forties and at a point where I was tired of my male behaviour. I had a couple gay friends with liberal doctors. I went to them and they said it was against their ethics, but the more I get rejections, the more determined I am to do something. I knew there was a section of Hollywood Boulevard where transgender hookers were apt to be, so I went to this area, found one transgender girl, and went up and said, "Would you do me a favour and tell me about hormones?" She thought I was a cop, so I took out forty bucks and said, "Please, just sit with me at this bus stop for a couple minutes and tell me a few things." She took the risk. Within five minutes, she realised I was okay and poured out her whole life story. She finally agreed to take me to her black-market source for hormones because she needed some too. We went to an anonymous apartment, she went upstairs and came down about fifteen minutes later with a brown bag. We went to the sleazy motel where she was staying, and she shot me up with my first oestrogen. She said, "Come back in three days and I'll show you how to do this right." When I went back she was long gone, but fortunately, when she went into the apartment, I saw the number she pushed. I went back there for five years. It took about a month or two before the effects really started, but everyone noticed. They said, "You seem so much more relaxed and like you've gotten over your mid-life crisis."

FD: Wow.

PG: One of the unconscious motivations of being transgender, for me, is that it was a real alien thing to do when I did it, and it still is. I knew it would keep me in this peripheral, outsider vantage point, which is essential for my work; if I get too comfortable, there go the ideas. I eventually got an orchiectomy in Tijuana and the full sex change surgery in Belgium in 1993. It's done its job in keeping me alienated. I feel like a hybrid.

FD: What's something you learned from having transitioned?

PG: The thing that's unique at this point in my life is that I've never done anything to achieve real maturity, like having other people depend on me or owning property. I've never even owned an automobile that cost over three figures. The only wisdom I have is that in order for



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government to succeed we need a balance of male and female influence. If it's out of balance, it doesn't work. The whole idea of the patriarchy, of this hierarchy, came with the advent of property. Before, the two sides were more harmonious. We need to achieve that with our modern world, and that's the only wisdom I have! The rest is just knowledge.

FIONAL ALISON DUNCAN is a writer based in Los Angeles.

PIPPA GARNER was born 1942 in Evanston, Illinois, lives in Long Beach.

EXHIBITIONS: "Autonomy n' stuff (Garnerrhea)", Redling Fine Art, Los Angeles (solo) (2018), "Pippa Garner: Don't Fight The Weel", Peterson Automotive Museum, Los Angeles (solo); "MISC. MISFITS", The Landing, Los Angeles; "Tinker Tantrum", Redling Fine Art, Los Angeles (solo) (2017); "SPRING/BREAK Art Show", New York (solo); "Vroom, Vroom!", Outlet, New York (solo) (2015); "Sensationalism", Functional Art, Los Angeles (1986); "Art and Travel", San Francisco Airport Exhibitions; "The Automobile and Culture", The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1985); "Carplays", The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; "Artist's Olympics: Miniature Golf", Video Gallery, San Francisco; "One Man Show (Boiler house Project)", Victoria and Albert Museum, London (1984).