



The Impossible Product

For over forty years, artist Pippa Garner has prodded and poked fun at the pillars of American life, from rampant consumerism to stoic masculinity.

Set to have her first major European solo exhibition this fall, Philippa Snow reckons with Garner's enduring and ever-humorous legacy.







There is a drawing by the artist Pippa Garner that depicts the actress Lindsay Lohan sleeping open-mouthed in the backseat of a car, and although the source material – a paparazzi photograph from 2007, taken shortly after Lohan was released from rehab – often ends up being compared to Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, Garner has decided to make art from it in a considerably more futuristic, Cronenbergian style. The sketch is, for the most part, faithful; any scholar of the tabloid culture of the noughties will immediately recognise the tousled hair, the gray-marl hoodie, the pervasive air of what the hedonistic memoirist Eve Babitz used to call "squalid overboogie." (Ecstasy, as it did for Saint Teresa, may have played its part in the creation of the scene, although the likelihood of Christ having been present at any point in the evening seems particularly slim.) From Lohan's forehead, though, springs an enormous, bulbous shape, not quite a boil and not quite a second head, looking more like a development of evolution than something artificial or man-made – the socialite equivalent of a bullfrog's throat. "SUBCUTANEOUS AIRBAG," yells a slogan directly beside the image. "KEEPS YOUNG DRIVERS SAFE REGARDLESS OF VEHICLE." Underneath the text, two cars collide, a vehicular crash straight out of J.G. Ballard, except for the fact that it has been decorated with a Lichtensteinian "POW!" What we are looking at, in other words, is not some freak natural amendment in the anatomy of the hard-partying noughties starlet, but an advert for an impossible product.

The impossible product – 'product' in the sense of 'a commercial item' and 'product' in the sense of 'a product of the environment' – is in some ways Pippa Garner's primary subject, and it seems important to note that in contrast to a great deal of material that uses Lohan's image, this particular drawing is not meant to poke fun at its model, but the culture that surrounds her. A gentler and more humanist touch than that of mainstream media satire is typical of Garner's jokes: her tone is always playful, never defeatist or cruel, and she often says she sees herself as functioning like a fool or court jester in the art world rather than a conscience. She, of all people, would not see the modification of one's body in order to allow life to be lived to the fullest as an act with any negative connotations; in the late 1980s, she began enacting a gradual gender reassignment, moving slowly so that, as when one sees footage of a Formula One driver gracefully speeding over the finish line, audiences could see every step in perfect detail. She called this 'gender-hacking.' "I always looked at my body as kind of a toy," she told the *Financial Times* this spring. "I looked in the mirror and I thought, I didn't pick this. It was assigned to me to be a hunky middle-class male." Now, she is a hunky woman, powerful and tall and possessed of some of the most impressive cheekbones ever committed to film, and at 80 she still exudes confidence and sensuality. Underneath her clothes, she has a full set of pink lingerie tattooed over her body, and her clothes themselves – self-made t-shirts, usually, with knife-sharp slogans and heavily collaged logos – telegraph the same dead-split of humor and sex. "I'm 79," one of Garner's t-shirts boasts, "but my tits are only 32." "INDECENT EXPOSURE," trumpets another: "ASK YOUR DOCTOR IF IT'S RIGHT FOR YOU."

Early on in her career, she had been obsessed with cars, being ejected from ArtCenter College of Design in California in 1969 for producing a sculpture that featured the front end of a car, and the back end of a man cocking up his leg to urinate. Around 1965, she was drafted into Vietnam and served for fourteen months, spending some of that time as a 'combat artist,' a position that required her to document the war through illustrations – a role that might be said to be a precursor to her long career of commenting, through the medium of art, on hyper-masculine and all-American pursuits. In the 70s, a photograph appeared in *Esquire* magazine that seemed to depict a 1959 Chevy going backwards on a freeway, causing quite a stir; in fact, it was a car of Garner's design, built with the chassis back-to-front as a piece of optical trickery, a *bona fide* work of art that also tripled as a functioning vehicle, and a prank. "I have this thing about enclosures," she told an interviewer at *X-Tra* magazine in 2019. "All creatures have to hide to protect themselves from the elements. Humans, with their bare skin, have had to be more resourceful. But our obsession with buffers has grown out of control, and the automobile is the most absurd and prominent symbol of that. It's ridiculous. People drive to the market three blocks away in three thousand pounds of machinery." It made perfectly logical sense, then, for her to progress to using the medium of the body, since what is the body but another enclosure? What could be more absurd, or more prominently placed at the center of modern life and tasked with constant self-improvement and perfection, than the human form? Aren't





women's bodies, in some ways, the most impossible (and misunderstood, and maligned, and fetishized) product of them all? Souping herself up like a slick vehicle, making an art form out of reshaping her body and fucking with spectators' heads, she is the most fearless kind of artist – one who makes work that is not merely reflective of herself, but literally *of herself*. Like the Canadian performance artist Nina Arsenault, a trans woman who exaggerates her secondary sexual characteristics to Barbie-like scale and records and screens her surgeries in order to emphasize to her audience the heroic hard work of being female, Garner exists as a living commentary on the commodification of the personal aesthetic, the potential flexibility in the outlines of the average human shape. “I could never find the right girl,” she has joked, “so I decided to build one in.”

Ultimately, almost all of Garner's work deals with desire – sometimes the desire in question is for self-improvement, self-advancement, or personal transformation; sometimes it is for a smoother passage through the day, facilitated by one of the aforementioned imaginary products being sold by her imaginary corporation; sometimes the desire for speed; sometimes simply the desire for self-expression. Recognizing that life is ridiculous and still remaining open to – and lusty for – its myriad possibilities anyway, she has argued, is the best way to engage with it whole-heartedly. And mocking a tradition or an institution that is contradictory or flawed can be the best way to interrogate it. Her few breaks into the mainstream were direct results of her interest in satirizing the traditional, wholesome image of the American man as an inveterate tinkerer, a mechanic or inventor with a gee-shucks attitude and an obsession with besting nature by producing implements for easier living: she appeared on *The Tonight Show* and the *Merv Griffin Show*, and her modified cars found their way into both *Vogue* and *Rolling Stone*. “In the late 1970s and 80s,” she recalled in that 2019 interview, “my image was really masculine. In my books and in my talk show appearances, I played the role of the eccentric small-town inventor. In a way, I was making fun of masculinity, but I didn't realize that's what I was doing. I wasn't ready to see it that way yet, but I was actually setting myself up for rejecting masculinity on some level.” Watch her mid-70s appearance on *The Tonight Show* now, and that puckish sense of making fun seems obvious in hindsight: the inventions she is showing off – a double-breasted business suit that has been cropped into a modish, belly-baring two-piece, and a parasol made from palm leaves – are feminine-coded, cheerfully absurd, and yet not a million miles away from something one might expect to see on a men's runway circa-now. (Even ASOS, the middling online retailer of high-street-level fashion, currently sells cropped suit jackets for men, styled with nothing underneath in much the same mode as the artist's “half suit.” Look to Miu Miu, too, and you will see a version of it in the form of the much-coveted two-piece miniskirt suit that dominated every editorial on earth for S/S22, modeled by all genders.) “It was my theory that the abbreviated fashions that have been around for years in womenswear should be adapted to menswear,” she informs Johnny Carson, in a deadpan tone that dares the audience to disagree.

In spite of insisting that the significance of her work tends to elude her until it is visible in the rear-view mirror, Garner (perhaps unconsciously?) foresaw a move away from binary gender in the future, and after producing an extensive *Better Living Catalog*, a book of 62 hypothetical and humorous inventions – a pair of high heels on wheels, a fedora that can be winched up above the wearer's head, a taco that for some reason is also an analogue radio – began to work in earnest on her greatest and most notable invention, Pippa Garner. Unlike many of the items in that catalog, this new product was not satire – but it was, as the book's subtitle says, “an absolute necessity for contemporary survival.”

“Men ran the 20th century,” she has said. “There was no question about that.” Still, now it is the 21st century, and men are wearing half suit-jackets, and movie stunt-drivers are driving cars with flipped-round chassis, and nobody has to be ‘just’ male or female anymore if they don't want to. If the mainstream was at one time only ready for the artist when she satirized the recognizable tropes of American masculinity, now I imagine it will be infinitely more amenable to her visions of a world where binaries are meaningless and possibilities are endless – visions that can be eccentric and a little humorous but, ultimately, rarely less than thrilling. With a major solo exhibition of Garner's work finally opening this month at the Kunstverein München, spanning fifty years of singular commentary on modern life and culture, it might finally end up being her year – or decade, or even century – to run, instead.

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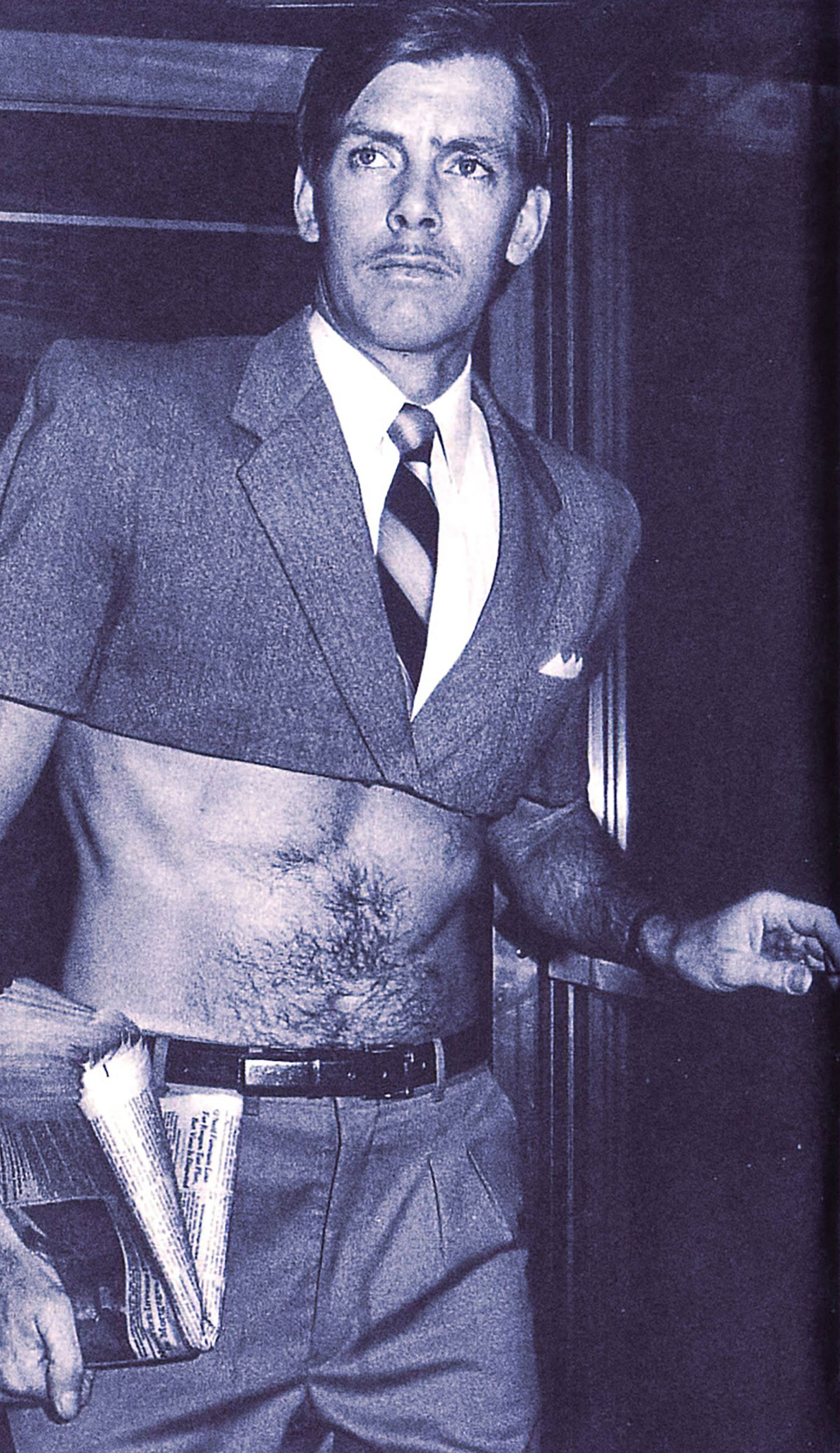
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