

PIPPA IN

Photography
Clara Cullen

Interview
Alex Hawgood

Throughout her six-decade-long career, the conceptual artist and madcap provocateur Pippa Garner has created absurdist works that not just parodied American culture, but ultimately predicted it.



All clothing by Pippa Garner.

THE FLESH



Long before today's algorithmic ecosystem of Instagram exhibitionism, smart-watch surveillance and cat influencers, *Pippa Garner's Better Living Catalog*, a satirical 1982 mail-order catalog recently reissued by the art imprint Primary Information, featured once-unimaginable gizmos and gadgets like a "reactiononometer" wristband that instantly measures social desirability, "digital diet loafers" that keep tabs on your weight and a "pet-a-vision TV" set for parasocial bonding with four-legged friends.

For her seminal 1974 sculpture and performance-art piece *Backwards Car*, Garner drove a flipped-chassis '59 Chevy across the Golden Gate Bridge, appearing to travel in reverse as she unnerved onlookers stuck in traffic. The automotive stunt was such a harbinger of the eerie driverless cars now seen on the streets of San Francisco that last year the arts center Art Omi commissioned a remake of the piece using a 2003 Ford Ranger pickup and a pair of oversize truck nuts. So is it any wonder that Garner was asked to participate in this year's Whitney Biennial? Her ongoing "gender hacking" project to transform her own body through surgeries and tattoos certainly helped pave the way for the exhibition's themes of identity, fluidity and embodiment.

But these days, at the age of 82, Garner now wrestles with a new set of corporeal issues. She was diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukemia two years ago, which, as a Vietnam veteran, she attributes to contamination from Agent Orange during her time in the Army. Speaking on the phone while recovering from treatment-related pneumonia, Garner discussed the spiritual aspects of androgyny, the aesthetic possibilities of autonomous wheels and the frailty of everything from household appliances to life itself.





Alex Hawgood: First things first, I wanted to ask you how you’re feeling.

Pippa Garner: I’ve got some major health issues, which I wish weren’t in the background at the moment. But my health is not going to change. If anything, it will decrease. I’ve got leukemia and I’m just getting over pneumonia, on top of that. I’m on some kind of really high-tech medication at the moment. We’ll see if it can buy me a little bit more time. I’m going to be 82 soon, and things just sort of wear out. Cars, humans, pencil sharpeners: It all wears out. So I’m hoping I can get through a little bit more. But forget all that, let’s talk about something nicer.

AH: It was certainly nice — or overdue, rather — to see your work featured in this year’s Whitney Biennial.

PG: One of the things that I think has drawn attention to my work now is that I really represent the information age of the 20th century. So it’s lucky timing, the way I look at it, that the people who seem to be giving me attention at the moment weren’t born then. It’s sort of strange.

AH: The exhibition, titled *Even Better Than the Real Thing*, explores the notion of “the real” amidst the white noise of artificial intelligence and identity politics. Since so much of your oeuvre is a send-up of America’s obsession

with innovation, I’m curious what you make of today’s hype around AI?

PG: Artificial intelligence? Not very bright yet, it just came out of the womb. AI has become sort of a buzzword now. It’s hard to know, but I’m sure there are going to be all levels of it, from ridiculous toys to things that affect people’s lives significantly. But I don’t know, it may be something that doesn’t have any substance and just sort of defeats its own purpose. You know, those things happen. So, we shall see. You will, anyway. It looks like I’m not gonna get much more than a taste of it, but maybe I will. Who knows?

AH: Speaking of “ridiculous toys,” to promote your *Better Living Catalog*, you famously wore a suit with a blazer resembling a navel-baring

crop top for an appearance on “The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson.” How on earth did you end up on late-night television? Even in 2024, guests on those types of shows are rarely, if ever, conceptual artists.

PG: Johnny Carson didn’t have artist guests very often, but I was billed as an inventor. I didn’t see it as anything more than playing with absurdity. You know, images and common things altered a little bit to make them ridiculous has always been my theme. But I was the last thing the audience expected, so the reaction was great. And Carson’s, too, because I don’t think he had looked at the book or anything before. So he didn’t really know my background at all. It was great when I put the high-heel roller skates up on his desk and he looked at it and said, “What the hell is this?”

AH: Another form of “living catalog” is your trompe-l’œil body art, such as a blue G-string stuffed with Monopoly money tattooed over your genitals and a pink bra over your breasts.

PG: Yes, although the tattoos were much later than that early stuff in the ’80s. I didn’t have those until the end of the ’80s and ’90s. It was a simple thing, really. I got tired of consumer goods. I had done so much with that. I was out of ideas and I felt like I was repeating myself. So I thought, what can I do? And then I just happened to be looking at myself in the mirror one day in my apartment and I thought, well,

“I just happened to be looking at myself in the mirror one day and I thought, well, I’m an object.”



Clockwise from top:

Dance Instruction Shoes, 1981–82. As published in the *Better Living Catalog*. Photo by Tim Street-Porter.

Buffer Zone: Functional Fashion, n.d., Pencil on paper, 8.5 x 11 in.

Future Man! (series). 1987. Photo by Tim Street-Porter.



Androgynesis (Pipptych), 2013.
Images on card by Wendy McEahern.

“I just did stuff that I thought was absurd or sexy at the moment.”

I’m an object as well. I’m organic, but what the hell, I’m just a thing. I didn’t pick who I was going to look like or anything like that. It was all assigned to me, this is what I got. So why not consider it fair game and do what I called “body hacking”: treating myself as I was treating all these commercial appliances.

AH: You’re often described as a “trans elder” by art critics. Does that characterization feel meaningful, or does it feel like some sort of label that is being projected onto you?

PG: It’s interesting because back when I did my gender hacking, there was no such word as “trans.” You had to jump over the fence, you couldn’t be in between. If you were a male and you wanted to be a female, you had to go through all this training to know how to walk and how to do all these things to “fake” being a female. And it was the same if you were a female who wanted to be a male. You had to invest in these therapies to “convert” you over completely, there wasn’t anything in between. So that was a big change when it started to be acknowledged that you can “mix” the genders, and they really got into this thing — what is it called? “Non-binary.” I thought that was, sort of, abusing the notion of sharing elements of the genders in one version. It just sounded clinical and cold. So I go back to early religions, how in a certain beautiful way, you’d have elements of both genders integrated, rather than

trans or non-binary. My preferred term is — why the hell can’t I think of it? You’ll have to excuse me, I’m usually much more on top of things than I am at the moment. It’s a simple term that I’m sure you’ll recognize instantly. It’s the same thing as blending the two sexes, but it’s not a harsh, clinical saying.

AH: Androgyny?

PG: Of course, yes. I like that because it goes way back to the earliest belief system, when there was an androgynous godhead from whom the male and the female sprang. The god was androgynous, and I liked that image rather than this modern, harsh thing. Back in the ’90s, it was beginning to become more comfortable to blend the genders. Maybe it was the influence of the culture at that time, but it struck me that I was not going to pretend that I was a woman just because I feel like a woman. Nonetheless, I took a little trip to Brussels in about ’92 with a penis, and I flew back with a vagina, which I bought, you know. It became a commodity as well. You could go out and buy these things, like breast implants or surgeries, just as commodities. I looked at it that way, at least. In that sense, it related to my earlier work; it just evolved from the metal-and-plastic world to the flesh-and-bone world. It was fascinating to me, but I wasn’t trying to be a woman. I’m still not, you know. 35 years later, I’m still comfortable with that attitude about the whole thing.

AH: Right. So, it sounds like it was less a *transition* than a *transaction*.

PG: Pretty much. I like to keep things a little bit superficial, because then you have a choice: You can leave it that way, or you can dig a little deeper later on. Start out with something a little bit shallow, and then you can either develop it or just let it disintegrate. But this one is interesting because I’m still living in this body, even though my health is troublesome at this point. The identity, in terms of gender, has always been stable. Well, the lack of identity, I guess, in terms of gender, because I don’t identify as a woman. Although, I’m legally a female. The state of Illinois, where I was born, changes your birth certificate, which is interesting. So my birth certificate says I was born female.

AH: A lot of people seem to assume you identify as a trans woman.

PG: Well, I only consider myself that when necessary. I have to identify male or female in some situations. But I just don’t think about it as part of my life. For me, it’s sensual, in a sense. The idea of being strictly male or strictly female eliminates some degree of sensuality that you get from a little bit of each, you know? Stirr ‘em up like a stew. I also liked the way it looks, which is just a matter of personal taste. It’s a new combination of things



Cut Out Blazer, 1989. *Act Like You Know Me*, Installation View, Kunstverein München, 2022. Photo by Constanza Meléndez.



Immaculate Misconceptions, Inventor’s Office, Joan, Los Angeles, 2021. Photo by Josh Schaedel.

everyone knows, maybe even predicting what the next species is going to be. I wonder what “normal” is going to be 30, 40 years from now. It might be a surprise to us.

AH: For one of your ongoing projects, *Shirtstorm*, you produce T-shirts, often daily, emblazoned with twisted phrases like “sexual distancing: look but don’t touch!” and “burn galleries not calories.” How many do you think you have made?

PG: The curator at Art Omi said that she counted 400. I don’t do any archival things at all. I’ve never been interested in looking to the past or looking back — or even looking forward, really. I like to work right now on whatever I’m interested in at the moment and not have to figure out if it’s something relevant to the culture. That’s somebody else’s job. I want to get the buzz from the idea and just feel it, like, oh my god, yes, you got to do that. I always go on to the next thing and try not to anticipate the future. But in terms of the T-shirts, it’s again this idea of sensuality found in opposing things that amuses me. My career has been about self amusement. Most careers are — or should be. Mine was, 100 percent. I just did stuff that I thought was absurd or sexy at the moment.

AH: Your shirts continue to be sold online and circulate among a new generation of audiences.

PG: Well, these things are starting to feel almost gone. It’s just a frustrating situation. I mean, I don’t know what’s gonna happen, you know, if I’m gonna survive very much past this or not. But I want to. I want to see what’s going to be crazy. I still haven’t seen a driverless car in action, you know. I mean, theoretically, you could have a driverless Model T Ford, or some flashy ’50s Cadillac with the big fins. The trouble with looking forward is that it’s infinite. It’s an eternity. I think of my life as one frame of an endless film. You get what you can out of the situation that’s in front of you and then one day you’re gone. It’s probably not uncommon for life to be a tease. You think, well, okay, I want to see the next part of the film. But that can’t be, because the human body wears out.

AH: How has chemotherapy and other radiation treatments affected how you see your body, which has been so integral to your art?

PG: I’ve been thinking a lot about mine. I spent the last 50 years really into intense fitness. I was a gym rat, always into really

intense cycling events and using human-powered pedal vehicles for transportation. All that made me feel like I was eternal, that nothing can take this away from me. But then it doesn’t work that way. Everything has a point at which it starts to degenerate and go back to the earth and somehow, one way or another, no longer be productive. Maybe this is common at this point; this frustrating situation of wanting to force things ahead and overcome the things that are naturally finishing in my body, even though I can’t admit it and I am afraid of it. When you’re young, you don’t think about these things. There’s nothing that’s just not “there.” You feel great, so why even think about it? I want to go back to that. I want to revert back maybe 10 years or something, to the attitude I had then, when I was still being highly productive and just keep going for a while. It may happen, if these drugs that I’m on work, chemo and so forth. They may give me some more time, so I can get back to feeling energy again and do some more stuff. I still have some things I want to do. I’ve got a couple of projects that need to be done. It’s just a matter of if I can pull it together and get it all done. At least by April Fools, which is the only holiday I celebrate. **H**

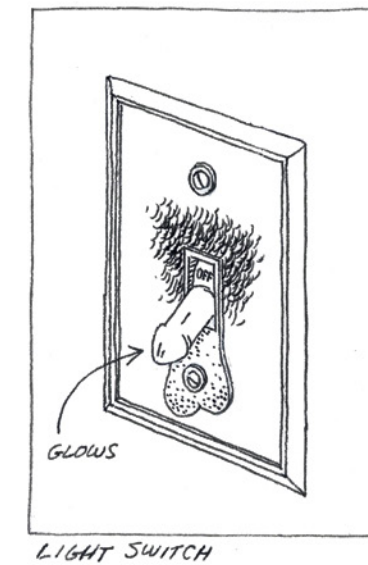
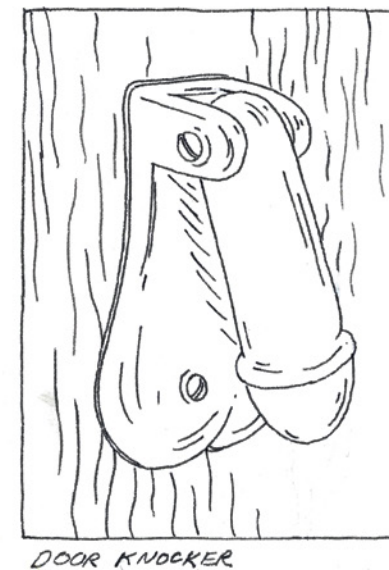
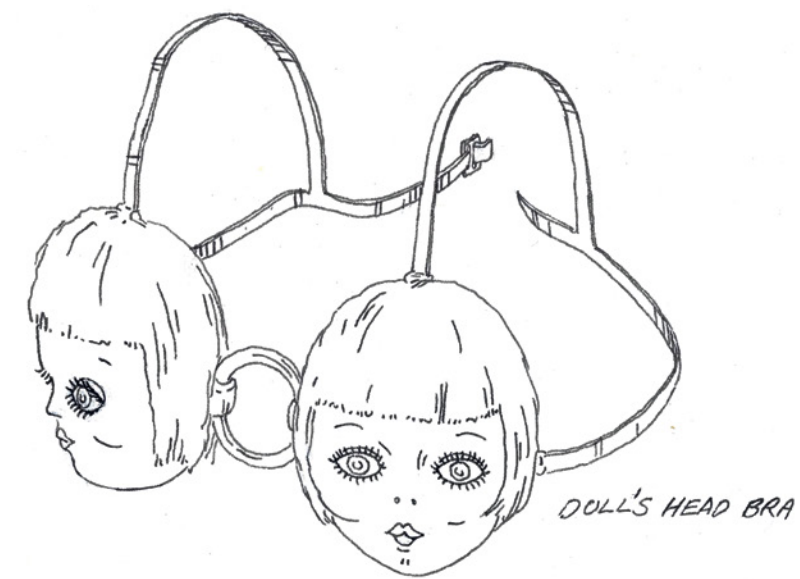
“I think of my life as one frame of an endless film.”



Opposite page, clockwise from top: Doll's Head Bra, T-shirt with Breast Holes, Door Knocker, Light Switch, 1973. Pen on paper, 8.5 x 11 in.

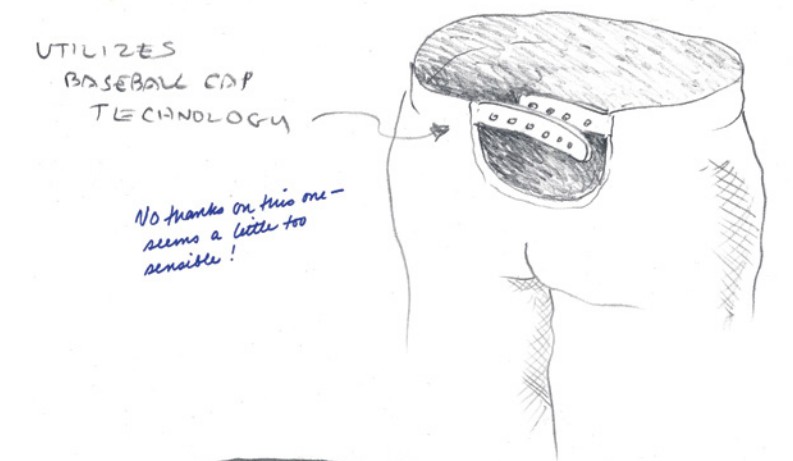
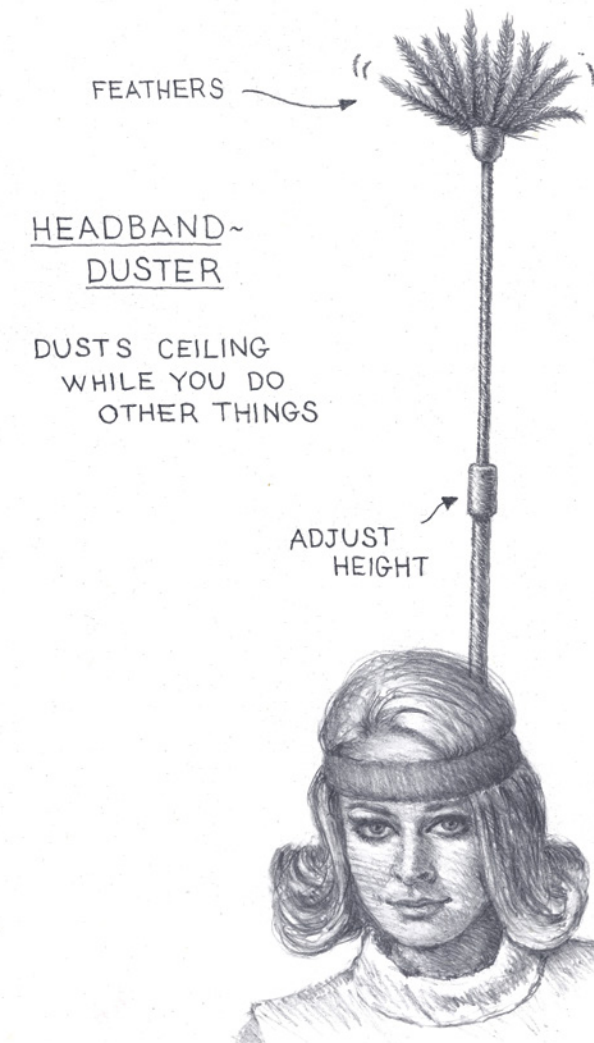
Adjustable Pants, Bellows Chair, 1989, Pen and pencil on paper, 11 x 8.5 in.

Headband Duster, 1989, Pencil on paper, 12 x 9 in.



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ADJUSTABLE PANTS
"one size fits all"



GARNER 89

