

# The New York Times

## An Artist Stands Before Her Fun House Mirror

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*Priscilla*, from "The New New," 2015

LOS ANGELES - On a recent Friday afternoon, Genevieve Gaignard, a photographer, collagist and installation artist, was sitting on her bed in the room she rents in the Echo Park neighborhood. For the last year, Ms. Gaignard, who takes self-portraits costumed as various alter egos she imagines, then builds fictional domestic spaces for them, has lived in this nondescript, book-filled and thoroughly carpeted apartment with a professional couple in their late 20s, their chatty lime-green parrot and three cats.

Ms. Gaignard, who is 34, with strawberry-blond hair and long, acrylic nails painted the matte pastel colors of Jordan almonds, had decorated her bedroom with charmingly girlish touches, like a white net canopy befitting a fairy-tale princess and a Felix the Cat clock with a pendulum tail. On every surface were snowdrifts of stuff: piles of clothing, toiletries, plastic sunglasses. On her desk, a bra and a half-eaten granola bar shared space with an assortment of wigs. "This is what happens; this is how involved I get in the artmaking," she said, waving a manicured hand around at the clutter. "Everything else sort of falls apart."

A 2014 graduate of Yale's photography M.F.A. program, Ms. Gaignard does work that reclaims everyday items: hair curlers, curling irons, plastic party favors, costume jewelry, towels. These

she finds at thrift shops, dollar and beauty supply stores, or via her mother, who, she says with affection, "is kind of a hoarder." A forest of Vanillaroma air fresheners dangles from a pair of yellow knee-high boots. A collage made to resemble the faux-wood paneling of a suburban basement is appended with miniature knickknacks. "It's not like, 'Hmm, can I make something out of nothing?'" Ms. Gaignard said. "It's literally like, 'What do I have access to?'"

Her recent show, "Us Only," at Shulamit Nazarian Gallery in the Venice neighborhood, featured a variety of pieces that blurred the lines between highbrow and vernacular, unraveling stereotypes of gender, race and class in the process. Her photos are often likened to those of Cindy Sherman, arguably our most famous costumed self-portraitist. But this comparison takes into account neither the animating impulses of her art - Ms. Gaignard is biracial, and her background forms an essential through line in her work - nor the decades of intervening culture since Ms. Sherman began taking pictures in the late 1970s. Third-wave feminism, online dating, even the ascent of the selfie: All are likely influences on a female artist photographing herself today. (Ms. Gaignard told me that Diane Arbus, not Ms. Sherman, was her seminal artistic inspiration, in part because she feels like "one of the people she photographed.")

The show included two hilarious digital videos and several truly singular objects. These took the form of hand-built trophies she topped with a 3-D printout of her silhouette in lieu of the standard slender gold figure - an oblique statement on body image - as well as wild, ornate shoes that looked at once like Surrealist ready-mades and the sort of footwear Alexander McQueen sent down the runway. Ms. Gaignard's sculptural footwear and trophies are but two examples of the unexpected, cheekily clever ways she explores various axes of identity.

In her art and her life, Ms. Gaignard pushes against society's corseting beauty norms. On Instagram, she posts under the handle @creativecurvyginger, sometimes using the plus-size model Tess Holliday's hashtag #effyourbeautystandards. At one point, she reached over and covered my recorder to confess that a male relative, whom she asked remain anonymous, said that she needed to lose weight because "no one wants to buy pictures of a large woman." But one look at her portraits makes clear that her vulnerability is an essential, complicating note in photos that are charismatic, intense and cathartically defiant.

We got in Ms. Gaignard's car, a 2010 white Volkswagen Jetta, to drive to the gallery. She navigated side streets while the Waze app barked orders from her phone. She talked about being, as she puts it, a "mixed-race woman of color" - her father, a bassoonist turned high school music teacher, is black; her mother, a receptionist who used to own a rubber stamp business, is white - who grew up "around mostly white people" in a small town in rural Massachusetts. About her characters, she said, "I see them all as mixed, but they kind of read as one way or another." The reactions they get echo her own experiences as a biracial woman with light skin. "I've had people say, 'There's no way your dad's black,'" she said. "They can't see it. And I'm just like, 'I'm not here to make you believe me.'" Her work points out the tendency to label according to visual cues despite the fact that reality is rarely so straightforward or pat.

In "Us Only," a hot pink sweatshirt appliquéd with cats, pale pink Ugg boots and a crimped wig the color of her own hair all evoke a "Cat Lady." Waist-length braids, an African print head scarf and gold bamboo hoop earrings transform her into a character she calls "Afropunk." And in a blond Amy Winehouse bouffant, cat-eye glasses and a mustard-colored sweater, she becomes the "Hair Hopper," a nod to Tracy Turnblad, the Aqua Net-happy heroine of John Waters's "Hairspray."

The detailed, immersive, delightfully kitschy environments she creates for these personas - like

campy stage sets from a Waters movie - confound expectations and clichés. Isn't the Cat Lady too young to have such a dowdy and extensive collection of porcelain cats? And why does the Afropunk display a Pee-wee Herman doll, that avatar of white male nerdiness, in her ultracool studio apartment? "I like to throw a few things in there that seem off and force the viewer to think in a different way," Ms. Gaignard said.

Sarah Lewis, a professor of history of art and architecture and African and African-American studies at Harvard, said that Ms. Gaignard's art explores "the often undiscussed subject of racial indeterminacy." It is, Professor Lewis notes, a topic well covered by 20th-century writers - Jean Toomer, Nella Larsen, Danzy Senna - but by few contemporary visual artists. Ms. Gaignard's approach is not narrative, didactic or overtly political; she wittily employs symbols a viewer understands on a visceral level, even as a more explicit meaning remains elusive.

"Her work avoids any easy answers about race or identity," said Gregory Crewdson, the director of graduate studies in photography at Yale. "I don't think it's in any conventional sense a critique. It's more ambiguous than that. And that's part of its power."

Two hours later, when we finally arrived in Venice and viewed her show, I was struck by the fact that Ms. Gaignard's art enacts the project many young women are engaged in today: chronically documenting themselves, selecting what to reveal and what to disguise. "I think she's partly responding to the rigors of it all," said the gallerist Diane Rosenstein, who held two group shows that included Ms. Gaignard's work. Indeed, in a conversation about her collages, each of which centers on a nude selfie she texted to a man, Ms. Gaignard told me, "I have to reclaim this image that I put out and gave to someone, not knowing where it would end up."

At the opening the previous night, I had sat and watched her videos while three 20-something women stood giggling in the doorway behind me. In "Chat Roulette," a bewigged and heavily made up Ms. Gaignard lip-syncs via webcam to a series of men on Chatroulette. The guys laugh, make lewd tongue gestures and give her the thumbs-up sign. One pair critiques her as if they are Olympic judges, then motion as though lifting their respective top lips up on a string. "Oh my God! Oh my God! So many creepy dudes!" the girl chorus said. "I can't!" In the video, Ms. Gaignard sings on, unperturbed, all the while recording the experience to transfigure it into art.

"Do those guys know they're in your video?" I later asked her.

She smiled slyly, shrugged and said, "They don't."