

TAKE ME TO CHURCH

Genevieve Gaignard takes selfie culture to a whole new level in her latest show with Shulamit Nazarian.

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE
SELF-PORTRAIT BY GENEVIEVE GAIGNARD

Shortly after arriving in Los Angeles in October of 2014—hot off her MFA in photography from Yale, and some years mining the conceptual terrains of Diane Arbus, Leigh Ledare and, Cindy Sherman (albeit in a much campier fashion)—Massachusetts-born artist Genevieve Gaignard made her California solo debut at The Cabin LA, an artist-run space in Hancock Park meant to look like the Unabomber's hovel. It was there she unveiled a wholly Gaignardian visual language with a series of domestic collages merging photocopied wallpapers and reclaimed sexting selfies alongside a dozen vamped up portraits acting out various Hollywood stereotypes—from a peroxide starlet sipping champagne by a palatial pool to a diva donning a black bustier—as well as a few East Coast characters she shot while still in grad school.

"When I think back to the early stuff it's about being in a new place and trying to fit in and, for me, my concerns of being a mixed race woman are always feeling like, 'Where do I fit in?'" says Gaignard dressed casually in jeans and a military coat, with her ginger curls pulled back in a bun, seated inside the Modernist Hollywood office of her primary dealer Shulamit Nazarian. "These characters are on that journey as well. Sometimes they find their spot and other times they're teetering on this line of 'Why is this person in this setting?'"

In early 2015, Gaignard raised the bar with an acclaimed solo outing, "Us Only," at Nazarian's Venice space. She filled the gallery with a suite of metaphorically charged, sometimes neon-lit vignettes (referencing everything from John Waters's *Hairspray* to Harmony Korine's *Gummo*) with hyperbolic selfies of three character types—The Afro Punk, The Cat Lady and The Hair Hopper—hung in found frames embedded into diaristic corner installations chock full of the psychologically fraught objects that defined her childhood (think pink moon boots, porcelain feline and Mammy figurines or Aretha Franklin's *Young, Gifted and Black* album), much of which was sourced from or by her antiquing mother.

"My mom had a black history collection in our house," says Gaignard. "It was a white woman trying to teach her mixed race children about their culture."

While Gaignard and her three brothers were under the assumption that they were "not to mess with" this ancestral trove it provided a material foundation (in addition to records, posters, or Cabbage Patch and MC Hammer dolls from her childhood bedroom) for "Smell the Roses," the artist's deeply personal and political fall 2016 solo show at the California African American Museum. There Gaignard managed to tackle losses near (the death of her young niece in a house fire) and far (the rash of police shootings across the country) via throwback selfies shot between the poles of her family roots (in New England and New Orleans) and L.A.; a rendition of Diana Ross's *Missing You* mashed up with radio chatter from police shootings (transferring the mourning from Marvin Gaye to Trayvon Martin and the multitude of police shooting victims); and immersive installations of a New Orleans shotgun house (to honor the victims of Hurricane Katrina) and a New England vernacular home evoking her late niece's bedroom anchored with numerous assemblage sculptures.

"Presenting her work felt like an important step for CAAM because the question of race is foregrounded and thrown back at the spectator and, in doing so, it becomes exactly that: a provocative question rather than an empirical fact," says Naima Keith, the museum's deputy director of exhibitions and programs. "I liked the fact that her work takes a progressive stance towards examining race."

While walking through Nazarian's new Hollywood space, where the artist will open "The Powder Room," her second solo exhibition with the gallery the Saturday before Easter, Gaignard insists, "I wanted this show to be a little more lighthearted. Maybe it's about moving on but not forgetting."

This through the looking glass work picks up where Gaignard left off: the titular self-portrait from her CAAM show featuring a "church lady" character dressed in her Sunday's best, head bowed with the brim of her hat shading her face. For Gaignard, *The Line Up* series—silhouetted images of herself wearing hats she's collected over the years playing various church ladies against monochrome L.A. walls waiting in formation (a Beyoncé reference) before

entering a house of worship—is also a nod to the hip One Church International next door to the gallery, which Queen Bey is rumored to frequent.

"My dad grew up super Catholic in New Orleans and my mom's father was a pastor in Maine," says Gaignard. "I'm not necessarily drawn to that as my religion, it's more a pop culture reference. I also thought of black folks praying to a white Jesus, which is a very strange thing if you chip away at it."

The latter reference filters throughout the show, most notably in an image taken in the bathtub inside the disco-era steam room of the apartment above the gallery. While the mise en scene seems familiar, her new portraits are getting more environmental while leaving the installation environment behind. In the process, the historical references are less obvious, but more rewarding: she's making the viewer work a little harder, or resign to simply appreciating the splendor of her complex tableaux. Meanwhile, she's further blurring the lines of her "passing" via shoots in neighborhoods around L.A. that read more like anodyne Hollywood sets (devoid of racial signifiers) while wearing wigs that are marketed for black women and purchased in predominantly black neighborhoods. She's also pushing the boundaries of gender identity via maximalist makeup applications and mashup porcelain sculptures of heads from mammy dolls grafted onto the bodies of white figurines transforming the black figure into "the Southern Belle she deserves to be." She's even creating a large wall installation hewn from hand mirrors.

"I was holding a hand mirror in my studio a few months back and I had this thought 'Wow, this is the original selfie,'" says Gaignard, who considers her portraits a nod to selfie culture at large. It's intriguing then, that one of her most probing meditations on this topic, which we examine on a laptop in the gallery, didn't make the show. In the image, Gaignard plays a pink-wigged Divine-like character gazing into her cell phone, seemingly trapped inside a Modernist glass house in the San Fernando Valley.

"Is that me looking out at the viewer?" she asks, "Or are we all just looking in on this person, putting our own story onto them?"

Gaignard's *Holler Than Thou*, 2017, is included in her new exhibition, "The Powder Room." A separate edition from this series will be available exclusively as an edition of 10 on Culturedmag.com.

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