

Bloom Projects: Genevieve Gagnard, *Outside Looking In*

Genevieve Gagnard (b. 1981, Orange, Massachusetts), is an LA-based mixed media artist whose work addresses stereotypes of race, class, gender, and beauty through self-portraiture, installation, sculpture, and collage. Gagnard, born to a black father and a white mother in a small and predominantly white town, was faced with imposing feelings of not knowing how she fit in, or where she belonged. Gagnard reflects her experience and identity utilizing persona, popular culture, historical imagery, selfie culture, and humor to portray contrasting and blended realities. *Outside Looking In* brings together several bodies of work made between 2016 - 2019 that confront antiquated ideas pertaining to intersections where blackness, whiteness, femininity, and class collide and examine the complexities of self-presentation.

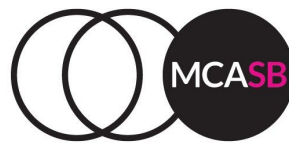
Upon entering the Museum the viewer is confronted by a wall, papered with images of white Victorian-era women with a single mirror of opaque dark glass reflecting their image back at them. The discomfort of seeing oneself as 'other' emphasizes the complexities of racial identity and racism drawn out through the exhibition.

Dominating the central space is a pink house combining two installations: 'Black is Beautiful' and 'Be More.' The viewer, as 'outsider,' peers through the windows of Gagnard's 'psychological space.' The installation is energized by objects and imagery that resonate between familiar and foreign, triggering reconsideration of insidious understandings of racial identity. Adopting visual languages from bygone decades, a hangover from her childhood home, Gagnard uses household objects, thrift shop items, and cultural artifacts that reference an unclear and problematic history of blackness in the United States.

Throughout her work, Gagnard offers opportunities for young black women to feel celebrated and to see themselves in an expanded inclusive context. In 'Black Is Beautiful' a poster depicts female empowerment, and Cabbage Patch dolls in a variety of shades sit on the bed acknowledging the spectrum of blackness. A reimagining of the artist's own childhood bedroom, and that of her 8 1/2-year-old niece who died tragically in a house fire, the installation also offers space for Gagnard to honor those who have suffered loss, while processing her own.

In contrast, 'Be More' depicts a bathroom featuring rows of black hair care, beauty products, and other cultural and socio-economic signifiers commenting on aspirational beauty and the complicated relationship between self-image, self-care, consumerism, and widely accepted yet potentially harmful beauty ideals.

Outside, the house is surrounded by a kaleidoscope of characters, all of them Gagnard in costume. Inhabiting a variety of personas, she questions the plasticity of identity, exploring societal ideals



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both imposed and self-generated. According to Gaignard, her photographs are strongest when the fear of not knowing how to read them falls away, so that tension and uncertainty give way to uncanny humor: another approach to the complex territory of her work. The titles of her works are often witty, referring to slices of culture that contribute to her astute character development.

Gaignard's titles also incite deeper reflection, challenging the viewer to investigate established norms that are called into question within the work. A mirrored altar in the Norton Gallery, entitled 'Whatcha See Is Whatcha Get' sits in front of two lone church pews. A space for quiet consideration, the mirrors reflect the viewers' self-image inviting them to question their own sense of belonging and place. The opposite wall behind the pews features a collage, 'Goddamn--Refreshing,' floating atop a background of delicate flowers: a familiar and horrifying image depicting black civil rights demonstrators attacked with a high-pressure water hose, proximal to 1960's images of entitlement and denial.

Throughout the exhibition, Gaignard urges viewers to consider the ways in which we all engage in the construction of personal identities as a means of expression and adaptation. As her characters and installations examine the shape-shifting and often precarious nature of belonging, the viewer is invited to witness the intricacies of operating at the intersectional crossroads of contemporary American culture.

This exhibition is curated by Alexandra Terry, Associate Curator.