

Genevieve Gaignard at MCASB

'Outside Looking In' Exhibition Inspires Broad Range of Emotional Responses



Genevieve Gaignard's "Black is Beautiful" | Credit: Alex Blair

By **Charles Donelan**

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For four months, the staff at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara has been waiting patiently for the day when they are again able to welcome visitors to *Outside Looking In*, the spectacular new Genevieve Gaignard exhibition that opened there on March 5. Over that time, Gaignard, whose works in multiple media reflect on the current state of race relations, has become one of the most in-demand artists in the world. At Frieze L.A. in February, Jennifer Lopez snapped up two of her pieces from the Vielmetter gallery booth. The international tidal wave of reckoning that followed on the murder of George Floyd has only heightened interest in her dazzling articulation of 21st century double consciousness. As it inspires a broad range of emotional responses — from desperate sadness to wry humor and joyful hope — *Outside Looking In* could not come at a better time, for Santa Barbara or for these oh-so-divided United States.

When you are able to go (which could be as soon as July 23 — check mcasantabarbara.org for updates) what exactly will you see? There's no way to miss the central work, which is a life-sized pink cottage in the center of the main gallery. From the outside, it's startling.

Exhibition curator Alexandra Terry compares the abruptness with which it occupies the space to the cabin crash that lands Dorothy and Toto in Oz.

Two heart-wrenching installations divide the interior. "Be More," which occupies the left side of the room as you enter, reproduces the crowded but well-organized cabinets and fixtures of a black woman's private bath. The products, accessories, and beauty magazines come from some indeterminate time in the past. Gagnard, who grew up the child of a black man and a white woman in small town New England, clearly revels in a collector's passion for authenticity, yet there's nothing sentimental about the experience of entering this space. Even in the theoretically neutral context of the gallery's white cube, it's hard not to feel that one is invading. It's not just that "Be More" is highly personal; it's also saturated with intense self-consciousness.

Across the room, there's "Black Is Beautiful," an even more elaborate interior re-creation. This time, the subject is a double exposure of two similar bedrooms — the one Gagnard grew up in, and the one that her 8 ½ year-old niece Rose occupied when she died in a house fire. Again, the painstaking arrangement of things like toys, such as a collection of Cabbage Patch kids in a variety of shades of color, betrays an attention to period detail that feels somehow more poignant than ironic. Gagnard, breathtakingly fluent in the idiom of kitsch installation associated with earlier artists such as Ed Kienholz, Mike Kelley, and Paul McCarthy, nevertheless has something quite different to say in that aesthetic language.

On the gallery walls, the exhibition features many of the photographic self-portraits for which Gagnard is best known. These large



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format

Chromogenic color prints owe something to Cindy Sherman, but as with her approach to installation, Gaignard has found a way to shift the paradigm. Costumed in the sort of extravagantly coordinated ensembles and flamboyant hats that conjure the phrase “Sunday best,” Gaignard poses in front of vernacular domestic architecture in non-descript Los Angeles neighborhoods. With titles such as “Smell the Roses,” these images, all made within the past five years, are initially confusing. “Who is this woman, and what does she want?” we may want to know. Over time, however, those same ambiguities begin to provoke comic delight. It’s the artist, and she wants us to wonder what’s going on.

Two other installations center on mirrors, and one of them is called “Whatcha See Is Whatcha Get.” Sitting in the church pews that face that reflective altar, visitors can see themselves and their society from a new and compelling perspective.

411: Alexandra Terry and Genevieve Gaignard will be holding public zoom conversations about the making of the [Outside Looking In](#) on consecutive Wednesdays, July 8 and 15, at 2 p.m. Click [here](#) to register.

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