

moniquemeloche

451 N Paulina Street, Chicago 60622

312 243 2129 moniquemeloche.com

# Los Angeles Times

## Genevieve Gagnard tackles race, class and identity at the California African American Museum

By Deborah Vankins

November 17, 2016



Genevieve Gagnard's identity-bending "Extra Value (After Venus)" (2016). (Genevieve Gagnard / Shulamit Nazarian)

Growing up in the working-class mill town of Orange, Mass., Genevieve Gagnard wrestled with her identity. She was the fair-skinned daughter of a black father and white mother. She was the proverbial middle child. She struggled with body issues. Often, she says, she felt misunderstood, if not invisible.

Now 35 and living in Los Angeles, Gagnard has a strong sense of herself and her place in the world as a multidisciplinary artist. In "Smell the Roses," the

artist's first museum show in Los Angeles, Gaignard tackles the big issues of race, class and, especially, identity.

The exhibition at the California African American Museum includes photography, video and assemblage works, but the nine large photographs, all richly colored performative self-portraits, are standouts. Like the artist Carrie Mae Weems, Gaignard uses the medium to explore the contemporary African American experience; like Cindy Sherman, she dons wigs and heavy makeup to create female caricatures that humorously embody societal stereotypes. The women she portrays are both anonymous and familiar — individuals steeped in aesthetics from pop culture, drag queen hyper-femininity, the working class, '70s chic à la Netflix's "The Get Down," TV news and street fashion, among other influences.

In one image, a woman in a cropped "Thug Life" T-shirt and a bandanna across her forehead poses in front of a mural of the American flag, clutching McDonald's takeout. In another, a small-town housewife, eyeglasses perched atop her blond bob, waits beside a thrift-store bridal salon, cradling a bag of groceries in one arm and a loose watermelon in the other. Another photograph depicts an older woman in her Sunday best, clutching a Bible in front of a New Orleans row home.

"My work now is kind of speaking to the things I had issues with and couldn't express when I was younger," Gaignard says. "I often pair things that are stereotypically white with things that are stereotypically black and put them together to create a language that, hopefully, expresses what it's like from my experience to be mixed race."

In the wake of a presidential election that left America divided, and with issues of race, class, gender and sexuality top of mind for so many, Gaignard's photographs feel particularly timely.

"But the work is open enough to speak to other times and to talk to each viewer, individually, so that they can connect," she says. "Maybe it can help them be more open and understanding to lifestyles, different people's existence and upbringings, class and gender. I feel like that's what's being talked about right now."