

moniquemeloche

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F L A U N T

## Q&A | GENEVIEVE GAIGNARD

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Genevieve Gagnard, *Black Swan*, 2019. Vintage wallpaper, vintage magazine cutouts, doilies, clear acrylic, on panel, with metal cat figurine and earrings, 46 x 30 x 2 in. Photo by RCH Photography. Courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

Early this April, Chicago welcomed artist [Genevieve Gagnard](#) for a solo exhibition with [Monique Meloche gallery](#). The exhibition entitled “*Black White and Red All Over*” features Gagnard’s newest body of mixed media works on panel as well as a domestic installation.

The Los Angeles-based artist received an MFA in Photography from Yale University. However, Gagnard’s work spans across several mediums including mixed-media, sculpture, and installations. Her work has been showcased across the nation and has found permanent homes at such places as the Studio Museum in Harlem, the California African American Museum, the FLAG Art Foundation, New York, and the San Jose Museum of Art. Gagnard’s work examines issues of race, class, femininity and their various intersections. As the daughter of an interracial couple, identity has informed a large part of Gagnard’s work, in which she invites the viewer to examine their own assumptions on identity.

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I walked through the doors of Monique Meloche gallery and immediately I was transported in time through Gagnard's domestic space installation. I was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of vintage items, which Gagnard sourced from antique shops and other resale locations. The inspiration for this 'kitsch' aesthetic is due in part to the objects that surrounded Gagnard herself when she grew up.

Standing at the center of this staged living room, I felt a sense of familiarity while something more ominous lingered at the precipice of my mind. Most of the room had been painted red, and the abundance of red objects in the room gave me pause. "Someone could pass by and think, 'Oh, this feels like home.' The red is a signal to stop and look deeper," Gagnard said. "There is a spectrum of meaning to the color red. It can symbolize love, roses, romance - but it could also be more sinister, implying fear, blood, or trauma."



Genevieve Gagnard, *Black White and Red All Over*, 2019. Mixed media installation with vintage found objects and furniture, vintage wallpaper, and red paint, dimensions variable. Photo by RCH Photography. Courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

One of the focal points of this installation was the black and white wallpaper. At a passing glance, the wallpaper might seem innocuous, but upon closer look, I could see a more horrible scene. The wallpaper depicted a plantation where a steamboat chugged through a nearby river as a family rode in a carriage. Beside them, their slaves tilled the land. This choice drew attention to the cognitive dissonance within American culture that overlooks this dark, haunting past. When compiling an installation, Gagnard said, "It usually [starts] with the wallpaper, especially for this particular installation." Wallpaper was the through-line of the exhibition, even in the mixed media panels. They gave off the feeling of nostalgia while also presenting social critique. "It transports you to another era," Gagnard said.

Persona-play is another element working through Gaignard's exhibition. She wants the viewer to bring their baggage with them as they view her work and to also identify the universality of that baggage. In this sense, each panel and domestic space acts as a mirror reflecting upon the viewer.

"I create psychological environments," she said. "I'm critiquing what we surround ourselves with in our homes – questioning what makes us feel comfortable and safe." For example, when Gaignard chose the wallpaper depicting an antebellum scene, she thought, "Who would live with this wallpaper?"

What was more unsettling was that Gaignard had found that the wallpaper wasn't as vintage as the normal fare she works with – typically originating from the '40s and '50s. This wallpaper in the current show was created in the 1970s. "People still wanted to live with this imagery, even in the 70s."

Gaignard's work begs the viewer to take a deeper look not only into the objects that we surround ourselves with, but to see how our culture has normalized this imagery. The entire top layer of the installation might seem to be an innocent depiction of white middle-class America. There was a portrait of Marilyn Monroe in a red dress, cheerleading and bowling trophies, and a BB gun casually leaned up against a red wall... What could be more American? Then I turned the corner to see a white, cloaked figure lurking behind the couch, almost hidden from sight.

"[This installation] is breaking down the assumption that we've come so far," Gaignard said. Furthering this message was the bookcase filled with crimson bindings. As I skimmed the titles, I found *Catching Fire*, *The Skin Collector*, *Do or Die*... "The color red in its abundance hits the viewer over the head but also it's a nod to growing up in the particular house that I grew up in, and my mom having a lot of books... I might not know what this book may be about but reading a certain title can give you an idea," Gaignard explained.

"There is always this kind of critique I'm engaging in, while at the same time pushing it to the absurd," Gaignard said. "It's a bit more over the top. It's heightening the viewer's response and pushing that person to see the surroundings in a grotesque, gaudy way."

Gaignard and I then discussed her mixed media panels. Many of the images were cultivated from magazines such as *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Life*, some even from her mother's personal archive which she also collected over the years. Gaignard has also drawn inspiration from director John Waters whose most notable works are *Hairspray* and *Pink Flamingos*. Ironically, Gaignard's mother had a connection to the environment of these films.

"She would share stories about her time living in Baltimore. She lived upstairs from Edith Massey, who was the 'egg-lady' in *Pink Flamingos*. So [my mom] was connected to that world. She told us these stories when we were growing up, and in a way, I'm reimagining them...Kitsch is the kind of stuff that I grew up around. It's instinctual for me," Gaignard said.