

Genevieve Gaignard's Ecosystem of Collecting



My Funny Valentine | The Magician, mixed media on panel, 40 x 30 x 1.5 in, 2023.
Image courtesy of Genevieve Gaignard and Vielmetter Los Angeles.

“This magician fighter character holds a candle burning at both ends, alluding to the labor of being an artist—one must simultaneously create, sell work, run a business, and often help support family members.”

The artwork featured on cover of [Space On Space Issue #3-Collect](#), *My Funny Valentine | The Magician*, is part of a new series of collages by Genevieve Gaignard. Gaignard is a multi-disciplinary artist who uses self-portraiture, collage, sculpture, and installation to elicit dialogue around the intricacies of race, beauty, and cultural identity. As a rising star in the contemporary art world, her work has been published in media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Cultured*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Hyperallergic*, among many others. What's more, she has cultivated an ecosystem of collectors who display and care for her work with love and intention.

My Funny Valentine will journey with five of Gaignard's other large collage artworks to the Frist Art Museum in Nashville, TN, for the first leg of a traveling group show titled [Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary American Collage](#). *Multiplicity* presents 80 major collage and collage-informed works reflecting the breadth and complexity of Black identity. Set to open September 15, 2023, this is the first major museum exhibition devoted to the subject. Among this intergenerational ensemble of artists are Lauren Halsey, Sanford Biggers, Mark Bradford, Lorna Simpson, and Kara Walker.

“The work is kind of spinning into a new space. It’s not shifting what I’m interested in so much, but, how can I approach things with a more loving and soulful perspective?” said Gagnard during our conversation. Based roughly off of the design of the Rider–Waite tarot deck, her new collage series derives from a more emotional place than the activist-leaning messages she’s known for.

My Funny Valentine’s central figure is a sparkly, gemstone-studded luchador, reminiscent of Doja Cat’s iconic 2023 Fashion Week look where she covered her body in 30,000 Swarovski crystals. This magician fighter character holds a candle burning at both ends, alluding to the labor of being an artist—one must simultaneously create, sell work, run a business, and often help support family members. A white Jesus is revealed inside the figure’s velvety cape. Gagnard uses religious symbols throughout her work: “More as a pop culture reference. Christianity is specifically complicated when I think about Black folks that are praying to this symbol of a white Jesus.” LIFE is tattooed on the abdomen of the masked body, and an infinity symbol hovers above their head, like the plumbob from *The Sims* infamous video game. Hidden throughout the piece are mysterious, seemingly unrelated objects: a postage stamp of the Mirabal sisters, a yellow sign depicting a person being abducted by a spaceship, a vintage photobooth image of two people kissing. “There are a lot of facades that we have to grapple with.”

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Roses, a common theme within her work, appear as floral appliques across the top border. The blooms are in reference to her niece’s passing (whose middle name was Rose); roses are her way of keeping her spirit alive in the work. This collage series is a love reading of sorts, juxtaposed with the universal feeling of loss. The title is in reference to the Miles Davis instrumental rendition of the classic jazz song and is partially about someone that holds a special place in Genevieve’s heart. All the collages in this series are anchored onto vintage wallpaper that have been stained with coffee and tea. In combining these images and themes, *My Funny Valentine* stirs up a rich story of boundless potential, creativity, intention, and love.

Collecting plays a meaningful part in Gagnard’s practice as a whole. Having grown up in a home with parents who tended toward accumulation, much of her work is a visual organization of clutter. She too holds onto things. Similar to her collage work, when making installations, she gathers objects she’s collected and rearranges them. Most known for her self portrait photographs, Gagnard has captured many invented, mythological versions of herself. To her, collage comes from a different mindset than her photography practice. “The photographs are getting harder to make,” she says. She’s able to explore more nuanced subjects with collage. Where her photography practice is more strategic—taking hours of planning, plotting characters, crafting costumes, and performing in front of the camera—her collage works are “a little bit more unknown and experimental.” She takes cues from the materials and examines archive images in magazines until something hits.

As far as who collects her work, she’s felt blessed to have been connected to some of the people that want to live with her work—specifically a group of Black collectors from the Los Angeles area. The collectors often host a small group of artists in their homes to facilitate community. Dr. Joy Simmons, the mother of Naima J. Keith, is an avid art collector. Keith, currently the Vice President of Education and Public Programs at LACMA, curated Genevieve’s first museum show *Smell the Roses* at the California African American Museum in 2016. Arthur Lewis and Hau Nguyen have been crucial relationships for guidance, support, and consistently investing in her practice. Outside of Los Angeles, a few other collectors in her metron include renowned writer and professor Roxane Gay, Atlanta-based collector Kent Kelley, and American actor and author Hill Harper. “It is so trippy to be part of this and be in it at this moment,” Gagnard expressed, on seeing her work on walls next to some of her art idols, like Jennie C. Jones and Toyin Ojih Odutola. “There are moments where I pinch myself, like, ‘How did I get here?’”



Sell to Black Collectors (Blossom), Mixed media on panel, 20.5 x 24 in, 2021. (left)
Black Is Excellence (Thrive), Mixed media on panel, 41.5 x 48 in, 2021. (right)

Sell to Black Collectors (Blossom), a mixed media work Gaignard made in 2021, was born out of sitting around the house with collectors as they talked about the challenges they faced getting access to preview work before a show opening. It's an unfortunate reality that sometimes a collector may inquire about an artwork in a gallery and the gallery will act with unconscious bias. The gallery will say the work is unavailable, and then proceed to sell that same artwork to a collector the gallery already knows. A lot of galleries do their homework to ensure art goes to a good home and that the work isn't flipped, but the process of buying and selling is surely not without hierarchy.

According to Gaignard, there was an assumption that *Sell to Black Collectors* was an artwork only for Black collectors. "I love the idea of a non-Black collector supporting that belief system that everyone could have equal access to art," she said. The statement "sell to Black collectors" is a friendly reminder that all collectors should have equal access, or at least more egalitarian access, within the niche community that is the contemporary art world.

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Black Is Excellence (Thrive) is more of a social critique on the pressure that Black folks often feel in public spaces where they're only celebrated if they are excellent. By saying "Black is excellent," she's saying, "You just showing up—just existing—is actually your excellence." She goes on to say, "Were there any white collectors drawn to buy that piece? Not necessarily. White collectors think it's not for them. You're collecting all these young Black artists. You must think Black is excellent, so can you support these statements? Black collectors are friends with white collectors and collectors of other races. So if a white collector bought my piece that said, 'Sell to Black Collectors,' they're saying, 'We're willing to lose a little bit of our privilege to not be the only ones to see the preview before everyone else.'"

Gaignard is also a bit of an art collector, buying from shows she's curated or artists she's met through Instagram. Her collection includes work from Abe Odedina, Michon Sanders, and Adrian Armstrong, to name a few. "Sometimes artists don't fully understand that they can have a say in where the work is going," she says. There isn't a rule book, and the ways of the game can vary. From what she's learned, Gaignard tries her best to educate other artists about their power in selling their work and suggests it's important to know the people you are doing business with.

Collecting plays a significant role in the lives of many artists. Collectors are the power brokers of the art world who can make or break an artist's career. They sit on boards, impact exhibitions, and partner with artists to make their lives possible. And yet, collecting is an incredibly subjective and personal experience. It starts with the eyes, but often becomes an emotional decision. Perhaps it's similar to making a collage in that way: Collecting is a type of curation, an arrangement of a home, gallery, or museum exhibition. As an artist, you want people to take care of your work and be strategic about how it is presented. Art collecting is an ecosystem. And like any ecosystem, if we want it to flourish, it requires protection, care, and intentionality.