

Carla Gannis

C.A.R.L.A.

February 7 - March 14, 2019

Flecker Gallery
Suffolk County Community College
Ammerman Campus, Selden, NY

DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

Flecker Gallery is delighted to host this fun and exciting solo exhibition of recent works by master digital artist Carla Gannis. The exhibition includes various multimedia incarnations that could all be considered alter egos of the artist herself: 3D-printed sculpture, videos, digital drawings, digital paintings with interactive augmented reality (AR), and even a virtual reality (VR) version of the gallery itself, viewable via VR headsets, allowing for a layered multidimensional experience of an exhibition within an exhibition.

It seems appropriate that I first “met” Carla Gannis on social media nearly 10 years ago when we became “virtual” friends on Facebook. At that time she was already using digital avatars of herself to exhibit and perform across multiple internet platforms. She intriguingly and humorously integrated her own real life into rendered versions of herself, eponymously called C.A.R.L.A. (Crossplatform Avatar for Recursive Life Action), playfully referencing art history, cinema, speculative fiction, feminism, and pop culture.

Since that time, Carla’s digital characters have proliferated, evolved, and manifested into artworks performing in virtual and real spaces around the world. Recently, these have included AVA, an A.I. assistant giving interactive tours on the The Whitney Museum of American Art’s website, an award-winning augmented reality (AR) book of selfie drawings of her alter ego C.A.R.L.A., and last year a takeover of a dozen building-size screens at Times Square in New York City where her goddess-like, emoji-laden avatars flamboyantly enacted and mirrored the favorite actions of the tourists down below—shooting selfies on their cellphones.

A fascinating hypothesis among leading thinkers and technologists of our day is that we are living in a simulated universe. Stephen Hawking, Neil de Grasse Tyson, and Elon Musk are just a few of many high profile proponents having espoused the probability that what humans call “reality” is actually a “virtual reality” or a mathematically based computer simulation. Simulation Theory has become the new nomenclature, perhaps even the new belief system, for a classic conjecture of antiquity—for the Greeks it was “Plato’s Cave,” in ancient China it was Zhuangzi’s story of the “Butterfly Dream,” and in the Indian Vedic texts this world of illusion was known as Maya.

Even assuming our reality is simply “real,” contemporary String Theory physicists have found convincing mathematical evidence for multiple realities, or alternate universes existing simultaneously. Others are convinced that new developments in Quantum Computing will actually be able to contact these previously inaccessible dimensions.

And then there is increasingly sophisticated Artificial Intelligence (AI) existing in our lives, racing toward the inevitable totality of success known as the “singularity,” when computer intelligence surpasses that of humans. Ray Kurzweil and other transhumanists gleefully predict this eventuality by the year 2045, though familiar prototypes like Siri, Alexa, and Echo have already been seamlessly integrated with our human lives.

Virtual realities, multilayered dimensions and Artificial Intelligence are the futurist’s focus, and they are also the domains in which Carla Gannis the artist brilliantly operates. Her computer-generated creations are relatable because they playfully integrate and synthesize computer pop culture, but they also operate allegorically, layered with art history and social activism. Her cartoonish avatars carefully avoid the lifelike trope of the “Uncanny Valley” and reside more in what I would term an “Enchanting Vale.”

In this age we see such precipitous change as the advent of sex robots, of AI “bots” gaining citizenship in countries where women are still marginalized, making Carla Gannis’s work increasingly important. I am enthused to introduce her innovative works to our audience at Flecker Gallery. Finally, I’m struck by a line of conversation with the artist in which we discussed the future of technology and feminism where she presciently predicted, “The future is female...” pausing with a smile, “but it might not be human.”

Jeffrey Allen Price
Director

A WORLD OF ONE’S OWN

I was looking for new worlds to live in and to conquer.
—Weegee, *Weegee by Weegee* (1961)

I

“If you can tickle yourself, you can laugh when you please,” as the Russian proverb has it. What Carla Gannis has done with her most recent work is just such an act of mirth by self-tickling. This is most obvious in her Lucille Trackball figure, whose punning name points to a double inheritance: TV comedienne Lucille Ball on the one hand, and human-computer interaction on the other. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their jokes without exception deal with disks, chips, mainframes, and RAM.* The figure is manifest on a number of platforms—in digital prints and videos, augmented and virtual reality (VR)—and is itself a 3D model with several skins to clothe the parts. Exposed flesh is made out of layered “laugh” emojis, the blouse from theatrical Sock and Buskin masks, the pleated jumpsuit with collar from a garden salad pattern. The head is done up in the style of Arcimboldo (1526?-1593), whose multistable portraits once amused the Habsburg court: hair of broccoli, cheeks of brain, a nose that is formed from the end of a chicken drumstick. Joystick and trackball poke out of the green florets. All this detritus of popular culture, plus the halting delivery of synthesized vocals, somehow produce a distinct and likable character; much as our own clichés of expression make each of us distinct and some of us likable. We rely more and more on this LOL-idiom in what Gannis has called our “new nature” paradigm; we use it to cue apt emotions in others; and indeed we might envy the innocence of Lucille who lives in a world where their jokes always land. The jokes, at any rate, amuse their creator, whose avatar C.A.R.L.A. can be seen taking selfies in the gallery with Lucille in the VR view of same. While many complain of shrinking horizons as social media platforms filter much of life out, few have the nerve to people the virtual with figures whose voices they actually want to hear.

II

A utopic gesture, this, and one with a lengthy history among women artists. Three and a half centuries separate Gannis from the writer Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673); yet the same aspirations, even like devices, crop up in their works of fiction and fancy. Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, was ambitious and prolific and not at all taken seriously. Even Virginia Woolf confirmed the wisdom of ages when she described this lady author as like “some giant cucumber,” which “spread itself over all the roses and carnations.”¹ As a woman of the Stuart period she had just the rudiments of a formal education. Hence her grammar was bad, her logic often worse; and though she might hobnob with Hobbes and dine with Descartes, she never did gain entry to the male world of science.² Still with the aid of her husband the Duke she wrote a dozen tomes on all kinds of topics. The best known is *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666), originally appended to a book on cosmology. It devotes many pages to the notion of worlds, for “although I have neither power, time nor occasion to conquer the world as *Alexander* and *Caesar* did; yet rather than not to be mistress of one ... I have made a world of my own.” She adds: “it is in every one’s power to do the like.”³

* According to Gannis, Lucille is nonbinary and uses they/them pronouns.



“C.A.R.L.A. in the Studio” (detail), 2017-2019,
archival digital print



"C.A.R.L.A. in the Studio," 11ft x 3.5ft, 2017-2019, archival digital print

The narrative, slim as it is, concerns "a young Lady" of a nondescript region who is kidnapped by a merchant entranced by her beauty. The boat they sail out on is rerouted by God; it loses its way in the northernmost climes. Captain and crew freeze to death (this is all in the first paragraph). The Lady, on the other hand, is kept alive by inner fire as her vessel drifts beyond the pole—and into the Blazing World, so called for its blazing stars. She soon becomes Empress and spends her days talking with the empire's many scholars, who are all of different species. The bear-men, "her experimental philosophers," trot out their telescopes to satisfy queries on the heavenly spheres. Then come the microscopes "by the means of which they could enlarge the shapes of little bodies, and make a louse appear as big as an elephant."⁴ Though Cavendish has her Empress reject such apparatus for plain sight instead, the space of her book is completely deformed by the play of perspective these optics produce. What is far appears close, and what is small, big, in a world that never really seems to settle into worldhood. It is both vast and airy, without proper physics. Its entirety from sky to earth and sea is canvassed in dialogue with bird- and worm- and fish-men, without the Empress ever leaving the imperial palace. And her friend the Duchess Margaret "advised her to make such another world in her own mind." For at this point Margaret Cavendish has entered her story to sum up the process by which its world was made.

III

Just as the Empress fetches the Duchess to write and converse and revel in soul-union, so too does Gannis in the guise of C.A.R.L.A. join up with Lucille in a world of her own design. And not only Lucille, but Oliver and Moira too, and Victoria, and Ava, and all her other 3D figures. They surround her in an image called *C.A.R.L.A. in the Studio*, in fact a suite of images laid out in a grid. Its large central panel gives a high angle view on her virtual studio, like a stage seen from the balcony; and in it a bed, a couch, a 3D printer and a tiger complete the *mise-en-scène*. Yet it all appears to lack any density whatever. Its floor is not a floor but a weightless support, which tilts up so sharply as to be nearly flat. And the longer we stare at its flat, vacant center, the more its wooden planks seem to belie the software: that underlying gridspace which, like language, is practically infinitely manipulable by the creative artist. The image says as much when we note the C.A.R.L.A. figure seated to our left at her desk with computer. Though small and decentered within a total space, her relationship to it is a privileged one regardless. The display on her screen is the scene now before us: the studio in miniature. From this we infer that a change in the one would be followed at once by a change in the other.

And judging by the figure, some change is forthcoming; for her gaze is directed at an unseen point in space. It is the gaze of contemplation. Not contemplation of an external world or object, rather of an inner world filled with inner objects; which in turn will be manifest as future virtual objects. To lord it over this world is in some ways more pleasing than to govern a real one, since even an empress, wrote Cavendish, enjoys the smallest part of the kingdom she rules; "whenas by creating a world within yourself, you may enjoy all both in whole and in parts, without control or opposition, and may make what world you please, and alter it when you please."⁵ It must be a world in which one can sit and also look in on from the outside. Otherwise it partakes of those same limitations to which one is subject in the outer world: the world that presses in through the four facing windows that face onto the masthead of the *New York Times*. A three-seater couch stretched across the frame at bottom helps to further seal off this brazen blue space—leaving us to eavesdrop on a "room of one's own" that is also the prelude to worlds of one's own. Here, for Gannis, what is big becomes small; what is small, big; the outside is inside; the inside is imaginary. Even the frame around her picture is not a real frame, but a *trompe l'oeil* on the surface of a digital print.



"C.A.R.L.A. in the Studio" (detail), 2017-2019, archival digital print

We needn't read this gesture as escapism only. Fantasy is always historically conditioned, as the "Nasty Woman" t-shirt in some panels implies; and fantasy is always historically necessary if one is to move beyond a refresh of the present. Hence if Margaret Cavendish were reborn today, she might compose for her amusement a *Tale or Life of C.A.R.L.A.*—Crossplatform Avatar for Recursive Life Action. Her Empress revives as a clown with hair of broccoli and her Blazing World ends in the light of a tablet screen.

Seth Barry Watter is a film and media historian. His work has appeared in *Grey Room*, *JCMS*, *Camera Obscura*, *Millennium Film Journal*, and *NECSUS*. He lives and teaches in New York.

Notes

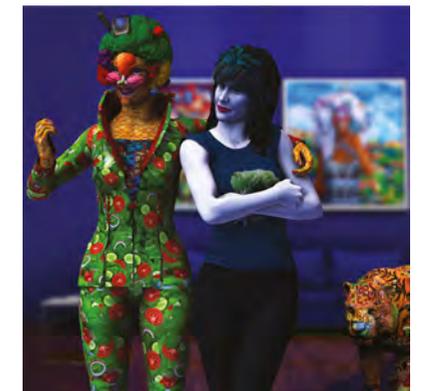
¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929; New York: Harvest, 1989), 62; see also Woolf, "The Duchess of Newcastle," in *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth, 1925), 98-109.

² Lisa T. Sarasohn, "A Science Turned Upside Down: Feminism and the Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (1984): 289-307.

³ Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World and Other Writings*, ed. Kate Lilley (New York: Penguin, 1992), 124; emphasis in original.

⁴ Cavendish, 142.

⁵ Cavendish, 186.



Top row, left to right: "Inside/Outside" (detail), 2017, 14.5 x 8 inches; "Working" (detail), 2018, 14.5 x 8 inches; "President's Day/ Pattern Recognition" (detail), 2018, 14.5 x 8 inches | Bottom row, left to right: "They Told Me there were No Strings Attached," 14.5 X 14.5 inches; "Avatar with Avatar Mentor," 2019, 14.5 x 14.5 inches; "Snow Day in Spring," 2018, 14.5 x 14.5 inches | All "C.A.R.L.A. in the Studio" panels are archival digital prints.

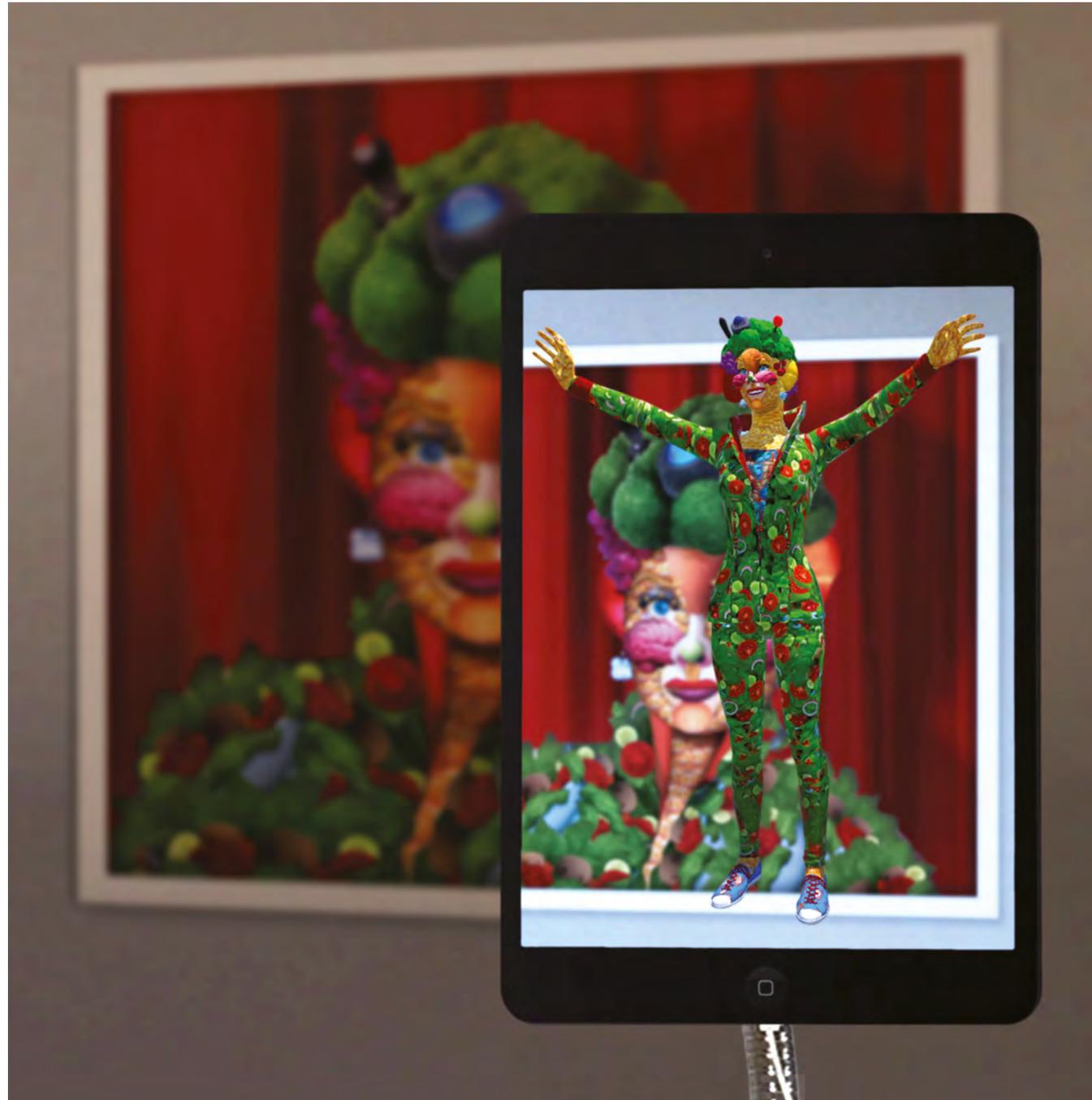
Top row, left to right: "Nasty Woman" (detail), 2017, 14.5 x 8 inches; "Vampire Deer and Vulcan," 2018, 14.5 x 14.5 inches; "Out of Body Experience," 2018, 14.5 x 8 inches | Bottom row, left to right: "C.A.R.L.A. with AVA," 14.5 x 14.5 inches; "BlackHole," 2019, 14.5 x 14.5 inches; "C.A.R.L.A. and LUCILLE," 2019, 14.5 x 14.5 inches | All "C.A.R.L.A. in the Studio" panels are archival digital prints.



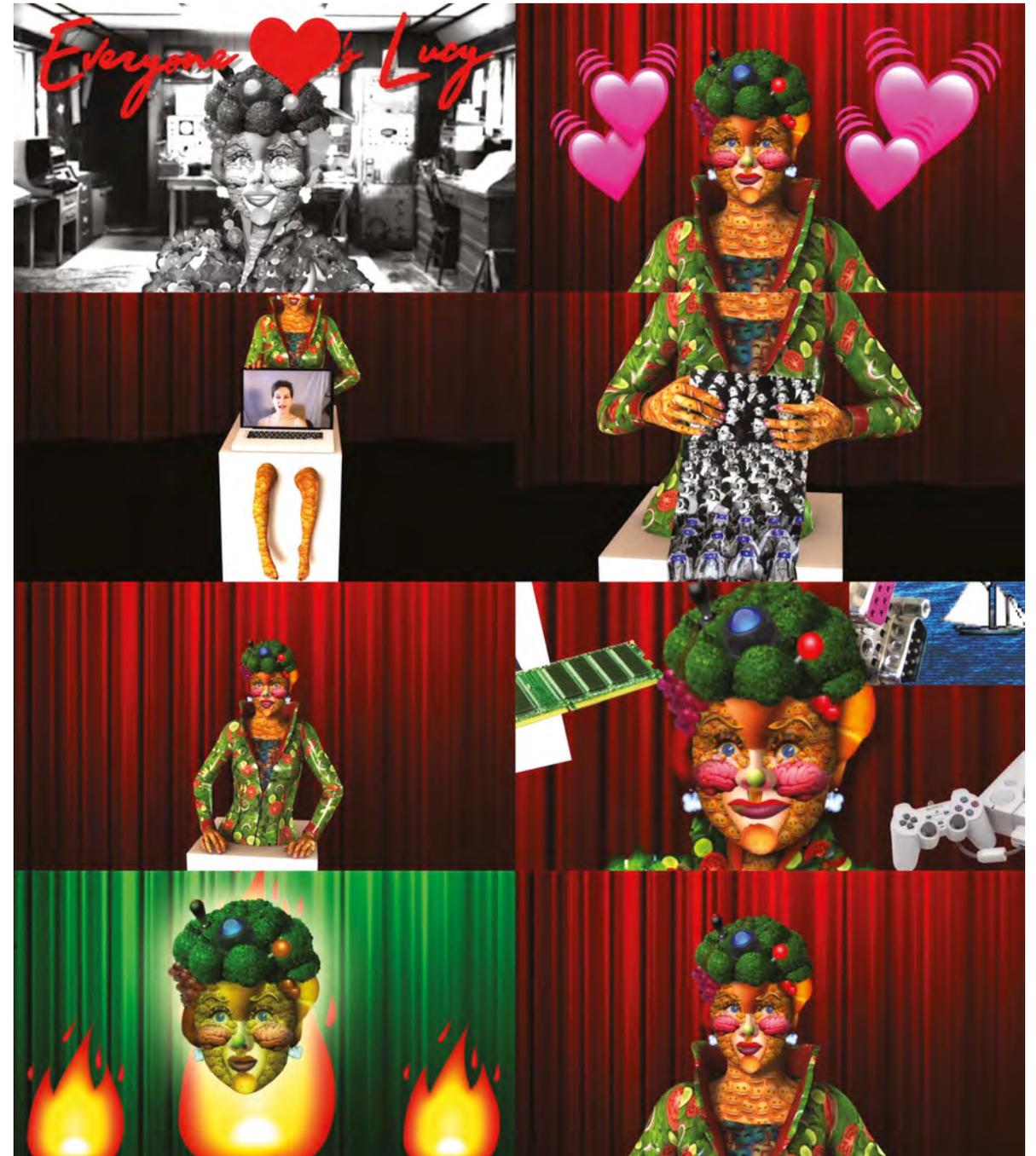
PROCESS IMAGES: Carla Gannis + Arcimboldo + Lucille Ball + Emoji = Lucille Trackball



"LUCILLE TRACKBALL," 42 x 42 inches, 2017-2018, archival digital print



"LUCILLE TRACKBALL," Custom Augmented Reality, 2019



"LUCILLE TRACKBALL," 1920 x 1080 pixels, 5 min 45 sec, 2018, animated video/comedy trailer



"OLIVER," 42 x 42 inches, 2017-2018, archival digital print



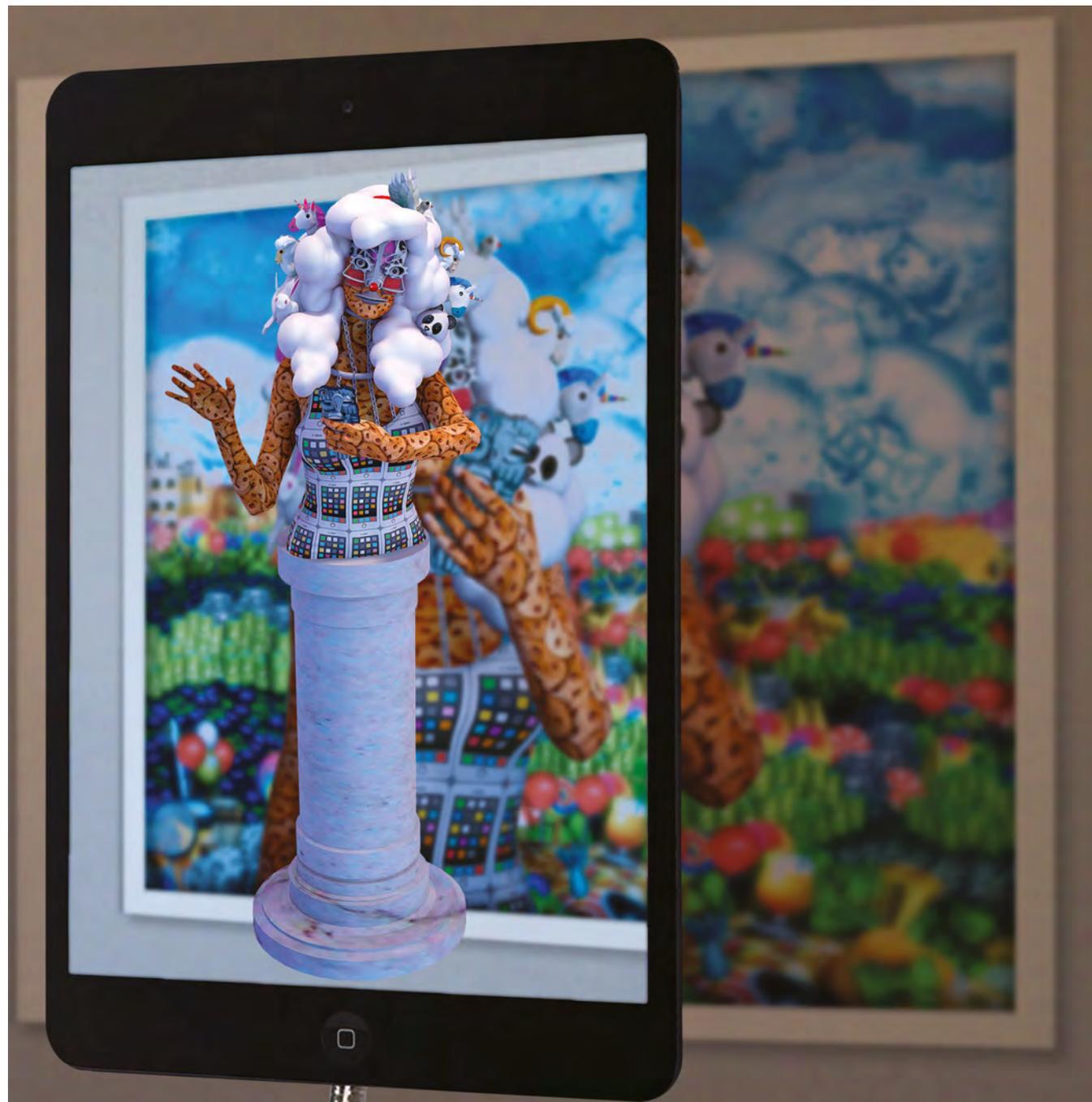
"VICTORIA," 42 x 42 inches, 2017-2018, archival digital print



"MOIRA," 42 x 42 inches, 2017-2018, archival digital print



"LADY AVA INTERFACE," 42 x 42 inches, 2017-2018, archival digital print



"LADY AVA INTERFACE," Custom Augmented Reality, 2019



"ORIGINS OF THE UNIVERSE," No. 2, 2017-2018, 3D printed polyamide with copper plating, smart phone, and video
5 x 10 x 13.4 inches, sculpture | 54.75 x 14 x 17.5 inches, overall, Photo: Emile Askey



"C.A.R.L.A. in the Studio" (detail), 11 ft x 3.5ft, 2017-2019, archival digital print



"C.A.R.L.A. in the Studio" (detail), 11 ft x 3.5ft, 2017-2019, archival digital print



"A WORLD OF ONE'S OWN," Custom Web VR experience, 2019

CARLA GANNIS

(lives and works in Brooklyn, NY)

SOLO EXHIBITIONS AND SPECIAL PROJECTS

- 2018 *Midnight Moment*, presented by Times Square Arts, Harvestworks & The Streaming Museum, Times Square, New York, NY
Portraits in Landscape, presented by DAM Gallery, Sony Center, Berlin, Germany
Lady Ava Interface, Sunrise/Sunset, Whitney Museum of American Art, Artport Commission by Christiane Paul, New York, NY
- 2017 *Until the End of the World*, DAM Gallery, Berlin, Germany
The Selfie Drawings : An Augmented Reality Artist Book and Installation, Pratt Institute Libraries, Brooklyn, NY
Augmented Gardens and Other Emoji Delights, New Media Artspace, Baruch College curated by Katherine Behar, New York, NY,
- 2016 *A Subject Self-Defined*, NY Media Center in Cojunction with Cyberfest 10, Brooklyn, NY
A Subject Self-Defined, TRANSFER Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
La Emoji Lujuria, Sedition Art, Online Exhibition
- 2015 *The Garden of Emoji Delights*, Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT
The Garden of Emoji Delights, EBK Gallery, Hartford, CT
The Garden of Emoji Delights, Pulse ArtFair, TRANSFER Gallery, NY, NY
Robbi Carni, Digital Sweat Gallery, Online Exhibition
The Garden of Emoji Delights, Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY
- 2014 *The Garden of Emoji Delights*, Kasia Kay Gallery, Chicago, IL
The Garden of Emoji Delights, (screening) TRANSFER Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
The Non-Facial Recognition Project, Center for the Digital Arts, Peekskill, New York
- 2013 *<legend> </legend> | Carla Gannis & Justin Petropoulos* (two-person collaboration), Transfer Gallery, Brooklyn, New York in conjunction with book publication by Jaded Ibis Press of Gannis/ Petropoulos collaboration
Close to Home: A Decade of Acquisitions, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, NC
- 2012 *The Multiversal Hippozoomadon & Prismenagerie*, Pablo's Birthday, New York, NY
The Non Facial Recognition, Edelman Gallery, New York, NY
Pop Noir: Carla Gannis & Sandra Bermudez (two-person exhibition), The George Gallery, Laguna Beach, CA
- 2010 *What is not on my mind*, Pablo's Birthday, New York, NY
- 2008 *Jezebel*, Kasia Kay Art Projects, Chicago, IL
Jezebel, Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Boulder, CO
Jezebel Inside, TZR Galerie, Dusseldorf, Germany



Photo: Tess Adams

- 2007 *Jezebel*, Claire Oliver Gallery, New York, NY
 2006 *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, Kasia Kay Art Projects, Chicago, IL
Jezebel, Loop, Claire Oliver Gallery, Barcelona, Spain
 2005 *I Dream of Jeannie Emerging From a Fresca Bottle*, Christa Schuebbe Galerie, Dusseldorf, Germany
 2004 *Travelogue*, Pablo's Birthday, New York, NY
 2003 *Travelogue*, Wax Gallery, New York, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS AND SCREENINGS (2019-2017)

- 2019 *Iconicity*, curated by Gretta Louw, Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY
Re-Figure Ground, curated by Kelani Nichole, Arebyte Gallery, London, UK
 2018 *Out of Body*, curated by Susan Silas and Claudia Hart, Bitforms Gallery, NY, NY
Para(site), Grounds for Sculpture, Trenton, NJ
The Art of Transformation, curated by Wolf Lieser, Kulturhaus des BASD Schwarzheide
Touching from a Distance: Transmediations in the Digital Age, curated by Tina Sauerlander and Peggy Schoenegge, Literaturhaus, Berlin, GE
Please, Express Yourself, curated by Filippo Lorenzin, Greencube Gallery, London, UK
Measures of Life, presented by the Lumen Prize, Humber Street Gallery, Hull, UK
TRANSFER Download, curated by Kelani Nichole, Participating Artists: AES+F, LaTurbo Avedon, Snow Yunxue Fu, Carla Gannis, Claudia Hart, Alex McLeod, Rollin Leonard, Lorna Mills, Harvey JMoon, Sabrina Ratte, Rick Silva Nicolas Sassoon, Daniel Temkin, Theo Triantafyllidis, and LuYang, Carl and Marilyn Thoma Foundation Art House, Santa Fe, NM
Homeostase - The Wrong New Digital Art Biennale, Centro Cultural São Paulo CCSP
Pendoran Vinci, curated by Tina Sauerlander and Peggy Schoenegge, NRW Forum, Dusseldorf, Germany
NOW YOU SEE IT...., Boston Cyberarts Gallery, Jamaica Plain, MA
Internet Yami-Ichi, NADA Art Fair, Rhizome Edition, New York, NY
Spring Break Art Show, curated by Maria Kozak and Jane LaFarge, New York, NY
Art of Tech, AFA Gallery, New York, NY
Personal Spaces, National Arts Club, New York, New York
Panorama Punjab, Qila Mubarak in Patiala, Punjab, India
 2017 *La Belle Vie Numérique*, curated by Fabrice Bousteau, Foundation EDF, Paris, France
Zeitgeist, curated by Jeffrey Allen Price, Space 776, Brooklyn, NY
Nasty Women : Architecture, Anise Gallery, London, UK
Identity Document, curated by Chris Bors, Gallery Bergen, Bergen, NJ
The Wrong — New Digital Art Biennale, curated by Guilherme Brandão and Julia Borges Araña, Centro Cultural São Paulo (CCSP)
Whole Grain : Experiments in Film & Video — Contemporary Experiments in Animation, Tang Museum, Saratoga Springs, NY
BUNKER, a pop up exhibition within Sotheby's, curated by Gabe Barcia- Colombo, New York, NY
Alien Nations, curated by Bartholomew F. Bland and Yuneikys Villalonga, Lehman College Art Gallery, Bronx, NY
Invisible Cities, curated by Page Benkowski, Georgia Horn, Taylor A. Fisch, The Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, New York, NY

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY (2018-2016)

- 2018 *Art Critical*, "Featured item from THE LIST: Carla Gannis in Times Square" by David Cohen, Aug 16
Broadway World, "Carla Gannis' Portraits In Landscape Comes to Times Square," by BWW News Desk, Aug 2
Artnet News, "What Will Art Look Like in 100 Years? We Asked 16 Contemporary Artists to Predict the Future" by artnet News editors, Jun 12
New York Times (print & online), "What's Right About The Wrong Biennale?" by Chris Hampton, Jan 23
Artnet News, "Editors' Picks: 16 Things to See in New York This Week" by Sarah Cascone Mar 19
GQ India, "Panorama Punjab is the festival to see and be seen at this March," by Nidhi Gupta, Feb 22
Vogue India "Why you'll see India's art set heading to Patiala this March" by Paul Bains, Jan 17
 2017 *New York Times* (print & online), "Where's Humanity in the Digital Fun House?" by Frank Rose, Jul 24
New York Times (online), "A Brief History of Emoji Art, All the Way to Hollywood" by Amanda Hess, Jul 28
Le Parisien, "Go out in Paris: La Belle vie numérique, we like it! By Valentine Rousseau, Nov 20
Up Magazine, "La Belle Vie Numérique : 30 artistes de Rembrandt à Xavier Veilhan" by Fabienne Marion, Nov 9
Watch this Space, by Francesca Gavin, Concentric Editions, Nov 8
El Pais (print & online), "Cuando la musa es un emoji" by Patricia Gosálvez, Aug 10
El Pais (print & online), "El problema no está en el móvil sino en la escuela" by Javier Rodríguez Marcos, Aug 12
Hyperallergic, "An Exhibition Celebrating the GIF's 30th Anniversary" by Benjamin Sutton, Jun 14
ArteFuse, "Hot on Digital Art's trail in Venice" by Tina Sauerlaender, May 22
BRONXTimes, "Lehman College Exhibits 'Alien Nations'" by Robert Wirsing, Mar 8
ArteFuse, "A Spoonful of Art makes the Patriarchy Go Down at WhiteBox NYC's Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious' Exhibition" Jan 15
 2016 *Elmundo*, "'The monsters of the machine', reflect on the fear of society to the Advances" by Patricia Del Gallo, Nov 24
Alphr, "Virtual cities and augmented selfies win 2016 Lumen Prize for digital art" Sep 30
Tohu Magazine, "Upon Emergent Occasions I Carla Gannis Gif Profile" June 17
El Pais, "El Bosco con boats (Doctor Martens)" by Estrella De Diego, May 30
ARTnews, JERRY SALTZ: HE'S JUST LIKE US! BY M.H. Miller (image by Carla Gannis), April 7
Tablet Magazine, Jerry Saltz (image by Carla Gannis), April 5 (print)
ARTREPORT, Contemporary Artist Carla Gannis Takes On The Selfie by Liz Von Klemperer, Apr 4
Wall Street Journal, "Apocalypse Now: The Living Legacy of Bosch" by Anna Russell, Jan 21

AWARDS (2017-2005)

- 2017 Distinguished Alumni Award, UNCG, College of Visual and Performing Arts, School of Art
 2016 Lumen Prize : Founder's Choice Award, London, UK
 2005 NYFA Grant in Computer Arts, New York, NY
 Emerge 7, Fellowship, Aljira Art Center, Newark, NJ
 Chashama AREA Visual Arts Studio Award, New York, NY

EDUCATION

- 1995 Master of Fine Arts, Painting, Boston University
 1992 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Painting, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Carla Gannis

C.A.R.L.A.

February 7 - March 13, 2019

Flecker Gallery

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<https://www.facebook.com/fleckergallery>

Gallery Director and Curator: Jeffrey Allen Price

Essay by Seth Barry Water

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Works of art by Carla Gannis © 2019 Carla Gannis

Photos of Gannis's artwork appear courtesy of the artist.

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