

REGEN PROJECTS

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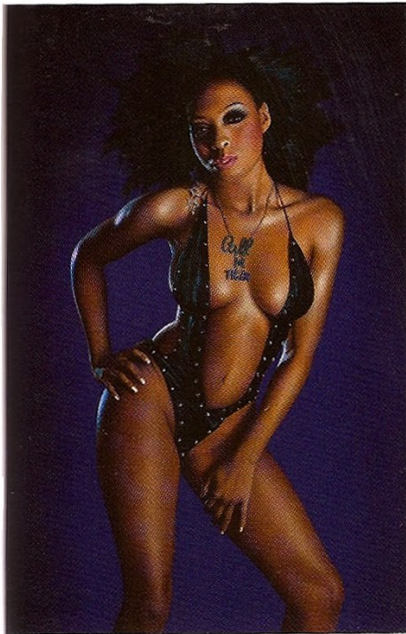
ARTFORUM

LOS ANGELES

Gillian Wearing

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A self-described "couch potato" in her youth, Gillian Wearing assimilates television's vernacular into her videos and photographic projects. She tracks the ways in which the medium's representations of reality transform our popular imagination and identity formation. Shown concurrently at Regen Projects, Wearing's video installation *Family History*, 2006, and painting series "Pin-Ups," 2008–, draw on the genres and narratives of contemporary television (so-called reality TV, talk shows, make-over documentaries) in an examination



Gillian Wearing,
Laura (detail), 2008,
acrylic on Masonite,
color photograph,
ink on paper,
39 1/4 x 27 x 2".

of today's media-saturated culture, where fame, celebrity, desire, and viewership simultaneously inform personal psychology and the collective unconscious.

Family History considers the personal and cultural significance of the pioneering 1974 British series *The Family* (a cross-Atlantic complement to the previous year's *An American Family*), which launched the era of reality television by broadcasting a working-class family's everyday life in Reading, England. As mentioned in the catalogue, the series, which premiered when Wearing was ten years old, made a lasting impression on the artist and fostered in her a close identification with the show's then-teenaged daughter, Heather Wilkins. A small monitor shows grainy footage of a young girl, acting the part of Wearing as a child, viewing and commenting on an episode of *The Family*. A video projected in an adjacent room features a talk-show-style interview, scripted by the artist, between present-day British television host Trisha Goddard and Wilkins, who speaks about her experience growing up in front of cameras, gaining sudden fame, and grappling with the public consumption and criticisms of her family's private interactions.

Probing our popular fascination with the media's conversion of banality into celebrity, Wearing's "Pin-Ups" look at the makeover as a trope of reinvention, self-betterment, progress, optimism, and redemption. For these works, Wearing posted an online advertisement offering a professionally styled glamour photo shoot; from the group of respondents, she selected five women and two men and photographed them in provocative poses and various states of undress. Aiming for the idealized airbrushed aesthetics of pinups, Wearing then digitally enhanced each would-be-sexpot's photo and had the resultant image rendered as a Photorealist painting by the British science-fiction and fantasy artist Jim Burns. The seductiveness of the seven paintings on view stems as much from the slick illusionistic virtuosity of their execution as from the hypersexualized and digitally manipulated bodies they depict.

Set in a hinged wooden frame, each painting opens onto a shallow box containing several amateur snapshots of the applicant, pre-transformation, and a handwritten letter confessing his or her insecurities and dreams of becoming a pinup model. Wearing's "Pin-Ups" are easily anthropomorphized as objects with a tender interiority,

throbbing with the desire to be desired. To open them up is to expose the emotional and psychological vulnerability of the project's real-life participants. There are obstacles, however, to getting inside: Only a gallery assistant wearing gloves has the authority to open the works.

Wearing offers the makeover as an affirmation of the transformative power of pictorial representation. The disparity between the "before" and "after" images is gratifyingly dramatic; so much so that the subjecthood of the participants, who appear virtually unrecognizable in their latter forms, is thrown into question. Despite, or because of, the drearily conventional standard of beauty upheld by "Pin-Ups," it is easy to imagine Wearing's soft-core creations hidden in underwear drawers and pinned to bedroom walls. Their sexual provocation stimulates the gallery's pleasurable function and suggests the possibility that art is at its best when it turns the viewer on.

—Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer