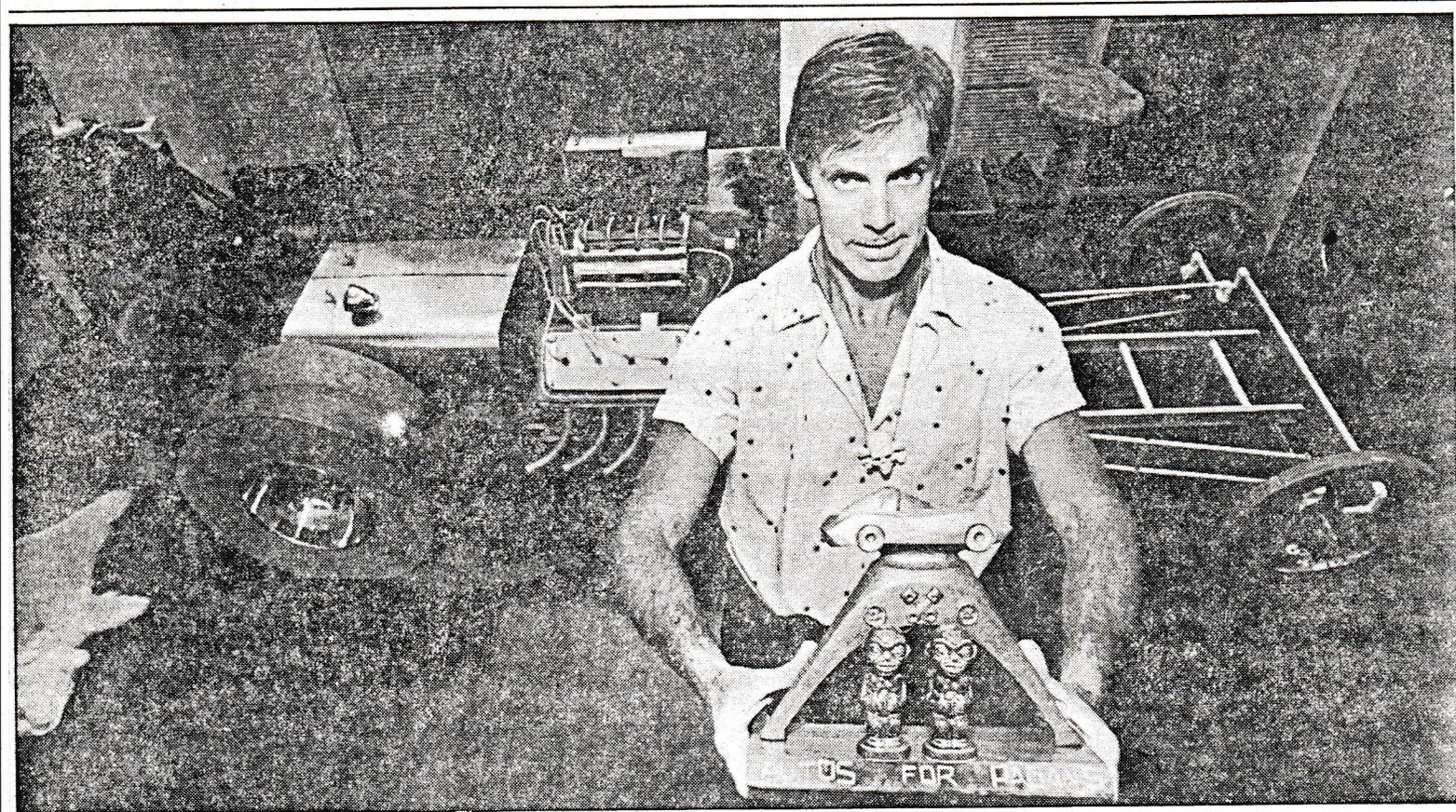


“One thing about being an artist, you don't always know what you're doing”



Philip Garner, 42, is the author of "The Better Living Catalog," the Spiegel's of mad, useless and usually non-existent inventions such as "Shower in a Can"; a clear plastic backpack full of juices for runners called "Jog and Blend"; an improbable combination utensil called a "Forkomb"; and the "Blaster Bra," with strategically placed speakers to wake the neighborhood in more ways than one.

Garner is actually an artist, one of the few to have landed appearances on practically every talk show but David Letterman's. (They told the artist that his humor could be competition.)

His first book sold so well — some 80,000 copies internationally — that the artist has followed it with "Utopia . . . or Bust." He lives in the landmark Los Altos building in the Wilshire district, former digs of

Marion Davies, Peter Finch and John Barrymore.

The only painting on the walls is by his wife, artist Nancy Reese. Floor-to-ceiling shelves in the breakfast nook are laden with stuffed animals and toy cars. Garner's art/inventions — such as a yellow stool fringed at the base, made from an old motor scooter and titled "Haute S'Couture" — are scattered around the apartment. Until a few days ago, the living room was entirely filled with a drag racer made of plywood, aluminum roasting pans, muffin and cake pans, tin cans, old crutches and a plunger. It will be included in the Museum of Contemporary Art's next exhibition, "The Automobile and Culture," which opens Saturday.

Hunter Drohojowska: Have you been exhibiting a lot since your books came out?

Philip Garner: I've made very

Photo by Chris Gulker

MY STYLE

*Philip Garner
in conversation
with Hunter
Drohojowska*

little attempt to be visible in the art community. If someone is having a show and they say, "This is the theme," it's kind of exciting to work around a word. That context of being an artist exhibiting is not as important to me as the chance of doing something.

H.D.: Have you separated yourself from art?

P.G.: As opposed to design?
H.D.: Or as opposed to being an inventor.

P.G.: I'm not an inventor, I don't have the knowledge to be an inventor. None of the things that I invent are based on any technical knowledge other than a simple hammer and saw. What I do is sort of pseudo-invention or folk

invention, because it's going through the process without producing anything useful.

H.D.: Give me a little background. How did you happen to come to the work you're doing now?

P.G.: I went to Art Center in 1961, when I first came to L.A.

H.D.: From where?

P.G.: At that time from Detroit. We hadn't lived there that long. I finished my last semester in high school there but we had lived in Cleveland for six years before that and in a small town in Illinois (Naperville) until I was 13. I went from a very rural environment abruptly to the city suburbs. It was a kind of alienating experience.

Anyway, I had developed an interest in machinery, partially from my father.

H.D.: In what way did he

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PHOTO BY CHRIS GULKER

Philip Garner: 'I'm a semi-qualified folk artist'

My Style / Continued from C-1

encourage you?

P.G.: He took me through factories that made farm machinery, or whatever. When we were on a family vacation — I don't know why, I've never heard of anyone else doing this with their families — we toured plants all the time. He'd know that there was a soybean processing plant in Urbana, Illinois, so as we drove through there on our way to Lima, Ohio, to visit my grandmother, we'd stop and visit the damn thing. So I got to love that whole mass-production process.

The other side of the coin was that I had very little ambition in terms of the educational process. I was unable to realize that the subjects I was studying in school — history, geography, math and whatever else — could have any relation to anything I was interested in. Consequently, I barely made it through, though I read quite a bit for my own interest.

So I had this miserable record and wondered what I was going to do with myself. Being sort of a car nut, I thought, well, maybe I could design cars. Somehow my father found out about Art Center here, where they trained car designers and didn't require an academic record to get in. They based your entrance on a portfolio and I had tons of drawings. So I put this presentation together at age 18 and was accepted.

H.D.: So you came here to be a car designer?

P.G.: Yes, but I quickly found out that my romantic approach was *not* the attitude at Art Center. It was back to the academics. Plus, most of the people there were *true* car nuts. They didn't have my appreciation for the absurd. So I didn't last long, though I ended up going back on three different occasions. I went to a few other colleges, got kicked out, got drafted, went in the Army, ended up back at Art Center, and somehow convinced them to let me take a variety of courses: a little photography, filmmaking, painting, life drawing, car design, all mixed together, which to me was just incredible. I thought, well, why

can't I keep doing this?

I got kicked out for the last time, not for academic reasons, but for doing work they thought subversive in light of the fact they were supported by the automobile industry. I did something called "Half-car, Half-man," which was a car that graduated to the form of a man who happened to be lifting his leg on the map of Detroit. (Laughs.)

H.D.: So you needed to get a job?

P.G.: I met the art director of West magazine and started doing human interest photo assignments, and illustration. So, until the book came out, all these years I supported myself with free-lance magazine work.

H.D.: You weren't involved with the art scene here?

P.G.: No, I didn't know any artists. I didn't know anything about art history. It wasn't until I moved to San Francisco in the early '70s and met Mickey McGowan, who is a great neo-dadaist artist. He had books on dada and surrealism and it was a revelation. I started reading their biographies and seeing their work and it was like this magical world had opened up. I realized there was such a thing as art and that I was an artist, despite no knowledge of the art world. On the other hand, I don't like to commit myself to it. I just want to realize as many ideas as possible.

H.D.: After San Francisco, you had a spell in New York. Why did you move here?

P.G.: Part of it was that I couldn't find another subplot in New York. Also, it's easy for me to work in L.A. I find that it's awful, the way things get torn down and rebuilt, it's fragmented and disorienting. There's no central core. I'm acutely aware of it, I feel an observer here, never a part of it. In New York I felt a part of it in just 10 months. Here I feel like I'm only in touch with a few people and there's lots going on but I have no access to it. You're forced to be peripheral to it, an observer, which is the classic artist's point of view. I emphasize it by using a bicycle instead of a car.

H.D.: I wanted to ask you about that.

P.G.: It's actually pretty practical in a four- or five-mile radius. It gives you a supercharged view of L.A.: Everything people throw out in their trash, the details on the houses, you get to know all the different kinds of stucco.

H.D.: But you just got a car, didn't you, the famous Day-Glo green Gremlin?

P.G.: Yes, but that's sort of a toy.

H.D.: You and Nancy Reese are separated, but still married, right?

P.G.: That's right.

H.D.: But you are seen together a lot socially.

P.G.: We are together a lot. She has the apartment downstairs. But the whole Phil-and-Nancy thing got to be a bit much. We decided we wanted to have more separate lives than that. We have to have a lot of time to ourselves. These are things we understand as artists. Aside from anything else, she's probably

my closest friend. That's the most important thing, because it implies trust, and companionship.

H.D.: Was there competition between you as artists?

P.G.: No, we both encourage each other and help each other. She helped me edit the books. She'll help me with decisions.

H.D.: What kinds of decisions?

P.G.: One thing about being an artist, you don't always know what you're doing. You'll be working on something for three weeks and suddenly it will look like nothing. At that point you need someone else to come in and either confirm it, say "You're right, you've been wasting your time," or "It's great." It's really a strange isolated process.

H.D.: Tell me about the drag racer you built for MoCA. Did they commission you?

P.G.: No. They got onto me through the book and the picture my car-sofa, a '54 Chevrolet made into a sofa. They wanted to use that but I did that 10 years ago and wasn't interested in repeating myself.

Then, I thought about something with voodoo and cars — corporate voodoo. I think corporations are subject to anything an individual emotionally, and they go through periods where they are very conservative and through other periods where they're totally nut — corporate insanity. Looking back on it, how could those people in double-breasted suits and manicured hair in the '50s give approval to this huge chrome object with gigantic fins, this radical piece of sculpture? It's completely bizarre.

H.D.: You mean the Cadillac?

P.G.: Any of those cars. It's astonishing.

Anyway, I thought of doing "Autos for Pagans." I had this vision where I'd take all these red convertibles down to Bora Bora to some tribal chieftain. I wondered what would happen to them 20 years later. Would they be turned into altars and shrines, the fins cut off and set at angles? So I was going to try to set up something like that. A strange juxtaposition of things: voodoo and cars. But they didn't like that idea. (Laughs.)

So I thought of my period of the '50s and drag racing. I was never involved with it, never wanted to get all greasy. It was better to imagine it, to dream of myself in these idealistic situations behind the wheel with a particular person riding along some highway in Illinois, the corn blowing on the way to some amusement park.

So this is a big one for me, going back to a dragster but making it of found objects. It's folk art mixed with technology. Now, I'm a semi-qualified folk artist so doing the dragster seemed perfect. This crude thing that was born out of wild kids wanting to go fast. Back that time, you could buy a \$25 can of soup it up and go out and kill yourself in it. I don't think anyone else in the world ever did that. They didn't think in terms of getting out the old Ford and driving to Des Moines and back. It was an American vision. I wondered what sort of response would get from an Olympic audience.