

FORT GANSEVOORT

AFROPUNK



THE MAGICAL, CITIZEN ART OF VANESSA GERMAN

By Piotr Orlov

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Technically speaking, [Vanessa German](#) is a sculptor, a collagist, a poet, singer, and performer. But the fact that German chooses to identify herself a “citizen artist” is beyond instructive.

In the literal sense, that self-proclamation may be speaking to a living, breathing project that German is cultivating in her hometown of Pittsburgh. The ARTHouse in the predominantly Black and poor Homewood neighborhood is a haven that welcomes local children to walk in and make their own art. No sign-ups, no classes, some oversight, lots of healing and safety, with only a basic form of citizenship required to come in out of the world’s cold.

FORT GANSEVOORT



Vanessa German, "Boxer/Fighter/We Always Believed" (2019)



Vanessa German, "untitled"

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In the context of “TRAMPOLINE: Resilience & Black Body & Soul,” German’s exhibit of recent work at Manhattan’s Fort Gansevoort Gallery, citizenry means that the sculptures, altars, and collages on display are her versions of contemporary stories of warning and protection. These are spun directly from the gaze of her own living experiences, past and present, and constructed out of familiar discards. The art engages the emotional, often violent tones of the world she exists in, but also the radiance, grace and spiritual reflection that can be found within it.

TRAMPOLINE, which takes up all three floors of Fort Gansevoort’s small brownstone frame and is the biggest solo survey of German’s work to date in New York City, is split up into three types of pieces. There are the small, mixed-media collages on paper, that utilize a variety of materials — paint, beads, sequins, glitter, Black women’s hair and other elements of artful decoration and beauty — to extend magazine covers featuring Serena and Venus Williams into the rarified air of icons, figures of strength and femininity.

Then, there are the multi-faceted sculptures that German calls “power figures,” the creative output that she is primarily known for. These are junked dolls reconfigured and recontextualized as characters (everyday children, deity-like figures) amidst assembled discards from people’s lives (furniture, toys, musical instruments), and shiny, gleaming neon words, which she brings together to construct tales of Blackness. Like many such tales, its historic narratives (a girl in a white dress jumping over out-stretched white hands in a piece called “The Runner/Run and fight/Don’t let your white friend’s father touch your panties/Circle Running/Rape Proof or Un-Rape-able?”) intertwine naturally with the mythical (two African figures, wrapped in colorful cloth with pheasants for heads, entitled “Can I Love You Without Capitalism? How?”) The same way the personal stories and the social constructs do — just like the wonder and the horror of the world does.

FORT GANSEVOORT



Vanessa German, "The Runner/Run and fight/Don't let your white friend's father touch your panties/Circle Running/Rape Proof or Un-Rape-able?" (2019)

FORT GANSEVOORT



Vanessa German, "Can I Love You Without Capitalism? How?" (2019)

Lastly, there are German's performances, which combine poetry, song, and seance, and which the artist improvises fluidly for individual attendees. The process is simple: an "audience member" relays their unique information (astrological sign, favorite color) to German, who then proceeds to compose an indelible, intimate song of self for that one person, often holding their hands and gazing into their eyes. It is a plugging-into the inter-personal connection of what German calls "human technology," a set of deep, wordless relations within our primal natures that unifies and potentially elevates us all into the types of citizens she makes art for and with. (Vanessa German will be staging these performances at Fort Gansevoort next Tuesday, December 10th, 7-8:30p, followed by a discussion with the Harlem-based curator, Monique Long.)

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Vanessa German, "It's the real thing" (2019)

Watching Vanessa German conjure this sort of work is proof of both magic (Black girl and otherwise) afoot in our world, and that this enchantment's contingency on labor, knowledge, and experience. All qualities that the work encompassing "TRAMPOLINE: Resilience & Black Body & Soul" has in abundance.

Vanessa German's "TRAMPOLINE: Resilience & Black Body & Soul" is at Fort Gansevoort, New York through December 21st.

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Vanessa German, "Joy Machine #3/Kick Push/Ring The Alarm/Fly" (2019)



Vanessa German, "untitled" (2019)

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Vanessa German, "Hammer Head/Rage Machine/Agony Machine/Baptism" (2019)



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Vanessa German, “the seven serpents/machine of spiritual protection (activation of physical self & conscious soul)./An Anger Reckoning against the terror of dimensional weathering./Misery Resistance.” (2019)



Vanessa German, “You Will Have to do Your Best to Fly Away From Them Hands That Come to Take You Outta Your Own/Soul” (2019)

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Vanessa German, "HEAVY/(the heart and the love to carry in the body)/and, Kiese Laymon's Heavy, in reflection on Love and Responsibility; Responsible Loving./HEAVY on Black Girls and the systemic torture of their innocence./HEAVY. The Perceived living/responsible to a lack of, or dearth of a Innocence./The Cost Of it." (2019)

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Vanessa German, "Venus in Butterflies" (2019)

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Vanessa German, "Hyper sensitive/Feeling
Machine/Body.Soul.Emotion./Volume Control" (2019)

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Vanessa German, "Big Smile" (2019)