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Installation view of "Gigi Gaston, The Black Flower" at Steven Kasher Gallery



TV playing Gigi Gaston video at Steven Kasher Gallery



**Josh Gosfield**  
*Harper's Bazaar: The New Exotics,*  
September 1967  
2009  
Steven Kasher Gallery

## LOST IN TIME by Ben Davis

Josh Gosfield, "Gigi Gaston, The Black Flower," Oct. 22- Nov. 25, 2009, Steven Kasher Gallery, 521 West 23 Street, New York, N.Y. 10011

Ah Gigi. . . I remember her well!

Or maybe not. If you scan the various album covers, photos, posters and '60s gossip mags that line the walls of the Steven Kasher gallery, however, you can convince yourself that "Gigi Gaston" is someone you might remember, some obscure, forgotten figure from French pop music history. There is even a convincingly weird **music video** supposedly by Jean-Luc Godard playing on an old TV by the door. The woman working the gallery desk when I walked through the show told me that at least one visitor had taken in all this ephemera, then turned to her and declared, "I didn't know that Gigi was of gypsy origin!"

It is all fake, of course, every last strap of it, an exercise in genre mimicry by artist Josh Gosfield. Long the art director for *New York* magazine, Gosfield is a rather successful commercial artist. Thus, though this is first gallery solo outing, he already has a lot of creative work under his belt, including some more esoteric projects -- a few years ago, the *New York Times* published a profile of his "Saint of the Month Club," elaborate set-up photos he would take transforming normal New Yorkers into various invented saints, works he would email out to fans (His various works are viewable at [www.joshgosfield.com](http://www.joshgosfield.com).)

Gosfield's commercial works and his "Saints" have the sugar-coated sheen of **David LaChapelle**, but "Gigi Gaston, The Black Flower" has a more subdued character. If anything, it is show-offy about its fidelity to its source matter, lovingly nailing the style of '60s pop iconography. In an interview with WNYC, Gosfield said that the project began with an attempt to clone various album covers, but that he had become more and more obsessed with this genre in particular -- that would be "Yé-yé," the style of French girl pop associated with singers like Françoise Hardy and Sylvie Vartan (Vartan seems to provide the loose template for Gigi). Gosfield then expanded from fake "Gigi" album covers and zines to actually commission fake "Gigi" pop songs (some of which are pretty good). The whole enterprise, he says, took more than a year, and the effort shows in the razor-sharp details, from the period glamour of a phony *Bazaar* cover from "1967," to the pitch-perfect psychedelia of her "1969" tour poster, to a display of some cut out Gigi Gaston paper dolls.

There are a very few off notes that reveal the project's fundamentally joking nature -- a cackling private detective character in a trailer for a non-existent documentary about Gigi's life is particularly jarring. But that same film also does feature a deadpan interview with *Rolling Stone* music critic Anthony DeCurtis about Gigi's place in pop history, which is awesome.



**Josh Gosfield**  
*Gigi's World Tour*, 1969  
 2009  
 Steven Kasher Gallery



**Josh Gosfield**  
*Gigi Paper Dolls*, ca. 1965  
 2009  
 Steven Kasher Gallery



Private detective character in trailer for movie about the life of Gigi Gaston, at Steven Kasher Gallery



Wall texts studded throughout the space highlight quotes from various '60s personalities, offering made-up context for this made-up star. Gloria Steinem claims that Gigi set back the cause of feminism; Jean Genet lauds her as a saint; Serge Gainsbourg says that he wanted to write a song for her. "Unlike most women, Gigi wears her clothes. The clothes don't wear her," Yves Saint-Laurent purrs. John Lennon claims that he wrote *And Your Bird Can Sing* about Gigi, which is probably a bit OTT, while Keith Richards says that he wanted to "bang" her, which strikes me as anachronistic -- though it probably does capture the spirit of the times.

And Gigi's story? Born in Bulgaria of Roma stock; fled the Nazis; unexpectedly rose to fame on the strength of bittersweet street ballads; first boyfriend "Etienne" died in a car crash on the night of her first big show, 1964; depression; a love triangle with an Italian film star, "Georgio" ("Gigi vs. Rosanna," blares the cover of *Inside Story*, August 1966); a child ("She's Pregnant!" screams the cover of *TipOff*, above an image of the fainting chanteuse); then scandal after she shoots Georgio dead in a fit of fury over his infidelity; acquitted of the crime in 1972. And then, so the legend goes, Gigi disappeared. "Gigi a Disparu." No one knows where she is today. Almost as if she never existed. . . .

Sure, it's a bit extreme, though Gosfield does pull it off. Gigi's sad tale makes intuitive sense as a narrative because it follows the archetypal "Rock and Roll True Story" trajectory, through triumph and then tragedy, debauchery and romance, ending with a question mark about the future. These are elements that are as invariant in our modern fairytales as the elements Vladimir Propp famously broke down in his proto-structuralist *Morphology of the Folk Tale*. Gosfield hews close to the ur-story, using it as a mannequin on which to drape his fascination for genre details and period styles.

But is there a point to it all? "The Black Flower" is way-cool -- it's probably the most fun on offer in Chelsea right now -- but what does it all mean? The critical cliché closest to hand is that it "exposes the codes" of pop culture, which won't do -- '60s French pop iconography is not a "code" that particularly needs to be unmasked. And Gosfield's exercise has a certain commercial-art flatness -- it's in love with the codes for their own sake. There's no evidence of any particular symbolism that they have for him.

Nevertheless, the Steven Kasher show has an undoubted resonance; it feels right for its time. The existence of such an art gesture implies two things. The first is the pervasiveness of design culture (the show's early press has been in design publications), which, with its attention to surfaces, has an inherent affinity with genre pastiche. But in addition to its design identity, Gosfield's show also has a conceptual identity -- the act of imagining an entire life trajectory and musical oeuvre in a specific obscure style carries beyond graphic design, implying an art audience that gets an esthetic kick out of superfluous displays of knowledge.

I have a theory about this: The characteristic "indy" esthetic of ironically adopting some bit of retro culture, or overinvesting in a film or music or art genre, not because it is popular *but because it is obscure*, these tics correspond to the situation of a very specific audience -- an overeducated one. The social background for such a style is the mass of people who have been churned through liberal arts programs, and have emerged with lots of detailed knowledge of interesting cultural things, but quite limited real prospects, and consequently little to do with that knowledge.

This contemporary social reality, more than the historical "code" that Gosfield's faux pop archive appropriates, is what I see when I look at "Gigi Gaston." Thinking about the show this way gives the whole

**Josh Gosfield**

*NME: The Beatles Love Gigi, February*  
1964  
2009  
Steven Kasher Gallery



thing an emotional tone that is certainly a contrast to the era that the project pays homage to. In the early '60s in Europe and the U.S., "youth culture" was newly minted as a category, once-bohemian and working-class music styles were finding a mass audience, the art world was just gelling, the university system was furiously expanding, and in general educated young people could credibly believe the future held opportunities that the past did not. The difference between this moment and a more self-conscious present certainly gives Gigi's lachrymose songs a particular meaning. Her big hit, of course, is titled *Je Suis Perdu*.

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**Josh Gosfield**

*Tales of Her Tragic Youth*  
1953  
Steven Kasher Gallery



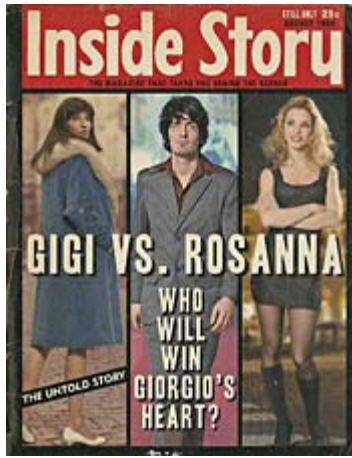
**Josh Gosfield**

*Je Suis Perdue*  
2009  
Steven Kasher Gallery



**Josh Gosfield**

*Du Triomphe à la Tragédie, May 1964*  
2009  
Steven Kasher Gallery



**Josh Gosfield**

*Inside Story: Gigi vs. Rosanna, August 1966*  
2009  
Steven Kasher Gallery



**Josh Gosfield**

*Daily Mirror: Not Guilty, December 1972*  
2009  
Steven Kasher Gallery



**Josh Gosfield**

*Gigi a Disparu, March 1972*  
2009  
Steven Kasher Gallery