

GAVLAK

BUNNY YEAGER

How I Photograph Myself

July 25 – August 29, 2015

Gavlak Los Angeles proudly presents a solo show of photographs by artist-model Bunny Yeager, including hand-painted photographs of Bunny with Bettie Page, numerous self-portraits, and images that reveal behind the scene secrets to how she created her work. Born Eleanor Linnea Yeager in Pittsburgh, PA in 1929, Bunny passed away in 2014 in Miami, Florida. The ironic innocence of Bunny Yeager's pin-up format compositions is palpable in the current pop-historical climate in which pornography is an explosive international industry, with a panoramic range between entertaining and damaging. In such a climate today, Yeager's work, and even her pseudonym "Bunny," operate like time capsules from a softer, less harsh, more voluptuous day. Both she and her subjects embrace the performance of a sticky-sweet, hyper-gendered sexuality along with a highly studied, poolside elegance where everyone plays along with full disclosure. What sets Yeager apart is her intentional authorship as a woman photographer in a man's world of looking at women. The multiplicity of identities she assumed for her herself and her "girls" is itself a lifelong conceptual act, as is the conscious presence of the camera as a second subject or muse. The apparatus is often revealed in her glamour shots, as if to reinforce her authorship as photographer.

Yeager was a model, beauty pageant queen, promoter, author, designer, scriptwriter, wife, mother of two, and a sought-after photographer and artist. Even though socially it was unheard of for a woman of her background to be an artist, she was on the cover of *U.S. Camera* in 1954, but the headline: "The World's Prettiest Photographer" points to the contradictory nature of what it meant then to be both model and photographer.

Yeager moved to Miami at 17 where she completed high school and studied photography at The Lindsay-Hopkins Technical College. It was then, in 1954, that she was asked by actress Bettie Page to photograph her. This led to the famous January 1955 *Playboy Magazine* centerfold of Page wearing nothing but a Santa hat, launching Yeager's career as a nationally recognized photographer. Soon after, Yeager began to write "How To Photograph" books, such as her 1957 *How to Photograph the Female Figure*, publishing thirty books in total.

One piece, which perfectly captures the artist in her practice, is the photograph of blonde bombshell Bunny with a lipstick red tripod, red shoes, and red sweater. Her exquisite left leg points in a pose that is so intentional it is practically contortionist. Her toes pull the camera's matching cherry red selfie-cord, revealing the subversive nature of the model and artist all at once. Given that fashion photographers were men and models were women only adds to the transgressive tone of this image and of Bunny's extensive oeuvre of photographs.

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Yeager's books in the 1960s such as *How to Photograph Nudes* and *How I Photograph Myself* influenced such artist-photographers as Diane Arbus and Cindy Sherman. Her work may be viewed within a longer history of subversive self-photographers, from the infamous Countess di Castiglione, known as "la divina contessa," who authored countless portraits of her face, body, costumes, and legs, over her entire lifetime and career as Italian consort to Emperor Napoleon. Also Vogue model-photographer Lee Miller comes to mind, photographing herself at times through the 1930s, with Man Ray as her muse and vice versa. We may even consider Bunny's work within the history of women and self-portraiture: Anguissola, Gentilleschi, Leyster, Cameron, and Kahlo. But the glamorous side of Bunny's projected self and others has masked these important associations. It is as if seduced for decades, we are unable to see past the beauty. We stop in our tracks at bombshell, bunny, and blonde. The discourse ends with pin-up girl. But this is perhaps just the blinding starting point for a conversation about how the human form can be both: mother and model, beautiful and meaningful, innocent and intelligent, experienced and engaging. The many faces and figurative hats (hairdos) of Bunny Yeager are revealed for the first time in Los Angeles.

Bunny Yeager's work was featured in 2010 at The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh in the exhibition *Bunny Yeager: The Legendary Queen of the Pin-Up*, curated by Eric Shiner. In 2012 she exhibited in Miami, Dallas, Berlin, and Bulgaria and published her retrospective book *Bunny Yeager's Darkroom: The Golden Age of Pin-up* with Rizzoli New York. In 2013 she had her first retrospective at the Museum of Art Ft. Lauderdale, curated by Peter Boswell. Her work was featured at Gavlak Gallery in Palm Beach in 2014 and her work is represented in Europe by Galerie Schuster Berlin, in Miami by The Center for Visual Communication and Harold Golen Gallery, in Dallas by PDNB Gallery, and in Los Angeles and Palm Beach by Gavlak Gallery.

-Lisa Jaye Young, Ph.D.

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