

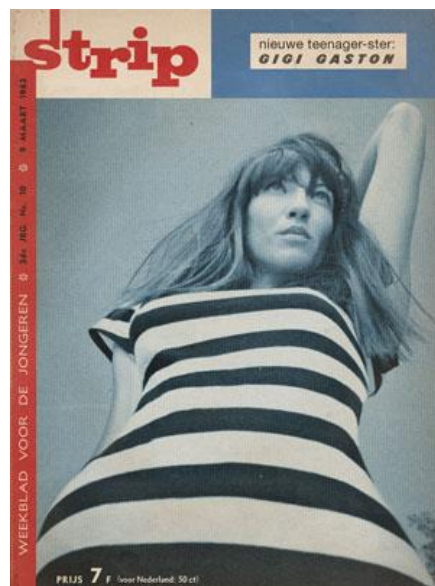
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December 4, 2009

How To Create a Pop Star in Photoshop

By Holly Stuart Hughes



This fall, Steven Kasher Gallery in New York exhibited Josh Gosfield's collection of memorabilia relating to Gigi Gaston, the French singer/songwriter of the 1960s. His reproductions of album covers, posters, tabloid newspaper articles, fan magazines and scandal sheets tell the story of Gaston's rise to pop stardom, the car crash that killed her stepbrother and briefly halted her career, her 1969 world tour, her scandalous love affair with an Italian film star, and all the triumphs and tragedies that kept Gaston in the public eye for more than a decade.

But Gaston didn't exist. Her life is a fiction created by Gosfield. A photographer/illustrator/set designer, he shot all the photos, designed all the layouts and used Photoshop to replicate 1960s

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printing techniques and apply signs of wear and tear to the images so successfully that many gallery visitors believe Gaston is real.

"A gentleman had looked around the exhibition and as he was leaving, he said, 'I've always been such a fan of Gigi,'" notes gallery owner Steven Kasher. "Someone might say, 'I forgot all about Gigi.' " Gosfield's art, Kasher says, "plays tricks on people's memories."

Gosfield says the project, which took more than a year to complete, grew out of his curiosity about how a star's public persona is created and disseminated. "What I'm creating is an archive as it would have been created by the media machinery," he explains. "It's a record of the way we, the public, experience stars. We don't live next door to Angelina Jolie. We experience her in the supermarket line." Gosfield decided to tell the story of one celebrity's life entirely through images fed to the public, "with no behind-the-scenes information that the media didn't have."

Rather than having Gigi Gaston be a one-hit wonder, he wanted to show how her portrayal in the media evolved over the years. He imagined "a combination of tragedy and bad behavior" that kept her on the cover of magazines and in newspapers from the mid-Sixties through 1972, when she does a *Rolling Stone* interview looking back on her time in the limelight. Says Gosfield, "Depending on where her public persona was at the time, I would make a decision: In what media is she being portrayed, how is she being photographed, and then what is the design going to be like."

He roughed out a story about a singer / songwriter on the ye-ye scene, a now obscure French music genre of the 1960s, loosely basing her life on the actual careers of ye-ye stars Françoise Hardy and Sylvie Vartan. Sometimes his inspiration for plot twists came from the models he cast. For example, once he chose Bulgarian-born model Elisaveta Stoilova to portray Gaston, he decided she was a Roma who had escaped from Bulgaria to Greece as a girl and was adopted into a French convent. He originally planned to make her second boyfriend, Giorgio, a fashion photographer modeled on the David Hemmings character in *Blow Up*. Then, Gosfield says, "When the guy who played Giorgio came in, he was such an actor with a beautiful vanity about him, he didn't feel like a photographer." Instead, he made Giorgio, played by model Gerald Keyser, an Italian film star whose extramarital affair with Gaston becomes tabloid fodder.

While creating a persona for his imaginary star, Gosfield himself took on different characters. "I

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would be saying to myself, 'I'm a paparazzi photographer in Paris in 1964,' or 'I'm laying out a scandal magazine in Italy in 1968,'" he says. "I loved being able to wear all those hats."

Overnight, Gaston is transformed from a romantic heroine into a home wrecker after a paparazzo catches her in the arms of the married actor on a beach in Capri. Gosfield shot the paparazzi photos in a studio with his Nikon D300; using Photoshop, he added his own landscape photos as backdrops. To make them look like they had been shot with a long lens and then enlarged in a tabloid, he converted his image files to black and white, reduced their size and resolution, then blew them up to 300 percent, "so the amount of detail left was miniscule."

After Gaston and her film star lover have a baby, Gosfield figured he would need "the glamour baby shot," a classic image for celebrity magazines then and now. Gosfield says, "There's usually some attempt at making them look casual, but the parents are so styled out it's essentially like a studio shot." (Gosfield, a parent himself, says these are the kind of celebrity images that make any ordinary person who is coping with a newborn feel bad about themselves.) The headline "C'est Un Garçon!" ("It's a Boy!") appears over photos Gosfield staged in a bed and breakfast he chose for its brass bed frame.

Gosfield also created an ad for Gitanes cigarettes and a Harper's Bazaar story using Gaston as a model. "I said, I want to shoot a photo like she was shot by Avedon. At first, I thought, that's a pretty audacious thing," he admits. He intensively researched the work of the great fashion photographers of the mid-Sixties. "I was shocked to learn they used basically one light. These beautiful covers are amazingly simple to shoot, though they're not simple to style. They took tremendous creativity, but the technical aspect was simple."

Once he had designed layouts, Gosfield worked meticulously to recreate half-tone, two-color and other printing techniques using filters in Photoshop. He explains, "I spent a lot of time with a loupe studying old publications," noting how ink sits on the surface of different kinds of paper, or how color would sometimes print slightly off register. The most common printing techniques of the time, he explains, involved cutting masks to create areas where color would have been added to halftone images. Gosfield mimicked the technique in Photoshop. "I might use different techniques to cut a mask in Photoshop that would represent that physical mask, and be transferred to one of the CYM layers as if it was a printing plate."

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He also looked at vintage memorabilia to see how each item ages. "Slick magazines tend to have more cracking in it," he observes, "but a scandal magazine printed on cheap paper would turn brown and have more scuffing and scraping of the ink." He created each effect in Photoshop, adding nicks, scratches, white spots on photos and, on album cover art, "the classic circular scuffing that occurs around the curve of the lp."

Kasher heard about Gosfield's project last summer through a mutual friend. "I immediately fell in love with Gigi," Kasher says. He was impressed by Gosfield's concept, and by his attention to detail. "It made my head spin around. I thought: How do I know Britney Spears is real? All I know is what I see in the tabloids and on album covers."

Kasher felt the Gaston material would work well at his gallery, which this year is exhibiting several shows from the 1960s, including a Warhol exhibition planned for March. He and Gosfield agreed that the Gaston images should be displayed chronologically, and that the prints should be slightly oversized, as if the memorabilia had been reproduced and then enlarged. The 50 prints selected for the exhibition range from about 21 x 21 inches (for the cover of a 45 rpm single) up to 42 x 54 (for a poster promoting a magazine cover story). They also decided to show the work unframed with clear plastic corners; the effect, Kasher says, made the walls of the gallery look like giant scrapbook pages. Gosfield also created a music video "directed by Jean-Luc Godard," and shot a trailer for a documentary that doesn't exist (and will never exist, Gosfield says: "Making the trailer nearly killed me.)

Gosfield's "Gigi Gaston, The Black Flower" was on display at Steven Kasher Gallery in New York from October 22 to November 25 and, according to Kasher, will be traveling to other venues. Gosfield is already working on his next project about a new artist, with more art work and memorabilia to be revealed.

But like a novelist who has labored long over his characters, Gosfield does not seem quite ready to let Gigi Gaston go. And, on occasion, he sounds as though he too believes she is real – or wishes she were. Looking back on the life story he created for his character, Gosfield says wistfully. "When I think of Gigi's story, it's a search for family that always ends badly."