

**Artspeak Postscript 66:
Supernatural Pamela | British Columbia**

**INGRID OLAUSON
on “What’s her Problem”**

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Countless now, the people I know working in film in Vancouver. Perhaps it indicates a certain professional trajectory for those my age, or somewhere close to it, whose part-time jobs tend to come and go. Or for those drawn to the current boom that hope to work as many hours as possible in order to save something for a rainy day. Whatever the reason, many in my circle have joined the gamut of editors, lamp operators, set builders and extras; each in their own separate way have helped form a nearly invisible crew that make a production run. As background actors, the roles have included that of snake handler, murder victim, school teacher and, my personal favourite, a rioting member of the Black Panthers enlisted to fight off the Japanese Imperial Army in a futuristic San Francisco. The least glamorous of these jobs may be the Production Assistant (PA): a lofty title for a glorified “garbage watcher.” Said watcher gets paid twenty dollars an hour, twelve hours a day (by her description) to watch a single garbage can, never to let it out of her sight lest she herself gets canned. It’s not surprising then, that whenever I picture this PA friend at work, something like a set from Sesame Street in all its wonderful urban, inner-city artifice, becomes her backdrop. In fact, the sister of this friend recently landed a gig styling Kristin Davis (the former blue-blooded art dealer “Charlotte” from Sex and the City is now a type-cast staple in Hallmark productions). Her job consists of running in and out of the seven or eight

malls from here, to West Vancouver and Richmond and back for, yes, about ten hours a day.

In Vancouver, with its proximity to Los Angeles and beneficial provincial tax credits, working on film sets has become a staple way of supplementing one’s income, while simultaneously extending one’s post-graduate limbo. It may be too tempting for me to describe the job landscape as a northern land of misfit toys ready to exchange their arts degrees for cash; but along with overtime and union benefits, every day is kind of like Christmas when traveling north down Granville Street. More often than not, holiday wreaths and snow machines are present in Downtown Vancouver. Last week, my running route was obstructed by a series of sandwich boards upon which a creepy disclaimer was posted: “Your entrance into this area and your presence, gives unqualified consent to [whatever company was shooting] and its agents and licensees to record, use and publicize your voice, action, likeness and appearance, in any manner and media, worldwide in perpetuity.” “Worldwide in perpetuity?” I thought: the permanence of this unspoken agreement was binding. At which point, I consciously sped up and attempted to appear as fluid and graceful as possible until I passed the lurking cameras.

Every day is also like Valentine’s day when that bleak cafe on the corner you were sure was a front

for something far more nefarious than sandwiches is transformed into an upscale restaurant (insert fake french bistro name here). It's positively Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan! And, yes, sometimes it can even be New Year's Eve with Julia Roberts prancing around town on those delicious sun-dried legs of hers like one of the ponies on her New Mexican ranch. Not to boast on this last one, but I did have the privilege, not too long ago, of serving her infused water at my place of employment. She enjoyed the water very much, commenting on the freshness and aesthetics of the cup it came in. Ms. Roberts praised the qualities of the water to such a degree that I now consider her to be the most gracious and greatest lovers of water I've ever talked to. And when she handed me the cup—emptied of its inspired contents—her hand brushed mine causing a major case of butterflies that I endured long after she had disappeared with her daughter into a black Cadillac Escalade, whisked away by an errant bodyguard.

I can see myself applying for some film work. I've been trying, despite the exigencies of being single, to pay off my credit card debt, meanwhile attempting to give off a "curated impression" which, in reality, translates to paying too much for baggy clothing and getting sloppy in bars. (I've been brooding over the widening gap in my various personal and professional landmarks and taking it out on my wallet). I guess the most discernible difference between Vancouver and the mother ship to the south is that no one here

is really trying to make it big. One can move up in the industry with little to no skills, but few are using that upward mobility to kick start their own projects. Perhaps they're trying to get famous in other ways: a means toward an end. Is it enough to make money to live comfortably, or should one put that money towards the making of their art on top daily living? Michele O'Marah's exhibition, "What's Her Problem?" could be a kind of talent agency for these folks. The show, curated by Jamillah James, has a reception-like feel, where an out of work actor (artist?) might go to get a job. "Welcome to O'Marah and Associates, she's just finishing up with a client; take a seat and Michele will be right with you. Can I get you something to drink while you wait?" This is where "you", the aforementioned talentless bottom-feeder (only kidding, you keep doing you), take a seat on the red floral couch, in front of which, O'Marah's film, "Valley Girl" (2002) plays. O'Marah's scene-by-scene remake of the 1983 romantic comedy, which stars a young Nicholas Cage in his breakout role as an affectless punk from Hollywood High—overacted to delightfully campy effect—showcases non-actors and artists in the roles of the original. They too could be clients of the talent agency.

Whether her methods of appropriation, both of Hollywood and repurposed again from her own work give off the impression of a Warholian scam—a "Factory"-style casting agency for the early 2000s—O'Marah's gimmick is rather innocent and

cheerful. The installation contains seemingly arbitrary details from her videos: a hand-coloured stop sign made of foam core that appears in the bedroom of one of Valley Girl's minor characters, is an example. True, the ebullient blue wallpaper is exposed in sections to reveal bare, gallery wall. This makes me think of a rather rambunctious but endearing moment from "Valley Girl." The scene is filmed inside a punk venue—or what O'Marah has staged to look like the same venue that appears in the original Valley Girl. I assume it's her garage, where the punk protagonist, who's recently been dumped—his love interest having replaced him with her former "valley" boyfriend in order to maintain her status as a popular girl of the high school—stumbles drunkenly into his own ex, whom he has sex with in the bathroom of the club. What's different about O'Marah's version is, as the couple makes out against the papered wall, it's being torn to strips with their ludicrous love-making. By the end of the scene, their uncoordinated bodies that smash and tumble into Black Flag posters, effectively tearing down the set. As non-actors, the couple can barely suppress giggling as they do so.

But the film stills from "It's Just Me"—a prom portrait, some ghoulish-looking kids posed in front of a haunted house, and a wonderfully glamorous matriarch completely clad in emerald green—all seem real enough. I was pleased to learn that the actors were indeed artist friends from around LA.

Not only did O'Marah seek people from within the talent pool already accessible to her, she also turned to Craigslist to find hopeful actors. The Pamela Anderson look-a-like featured in one of a trio of videos that remakes scenes from the 1996 film "Barb Wire," starring Anderson as a nightclub owner and bounty hunter-radical, is uncanny in the strip club scene. A stripper herself, the craigslist-find gyrates topless under a steady stream of water, and her authenticity is matched right down to her French tip acrylic nails. She's a trooper for the craft to be sprayed by a cold garden hose for the duration of the scene. Indeed, the transition from the cheery main space of the gallery to the chaos of breasts, bombs, and bass in "A Girl's Gotta Do What a Girl's Gotta Do" (2010) is jarring, to put it mildly. Now, the hand-coloured stop sign serves as a warning for shifting content.

Divine, buoyant, Pamela Anderson! After watching O'Marah's homage to the former Baywatch star, I was suddenly struck by a vague high school memory (who doesn't love the latent shock of adolescent flashbacks?) I remember a boy who went around school telling anyone who would listen that Pamela Anderson was his cousin. It must have been after Thanksgiving or some other holiday because he claimed she attended the family dinner. A truly insignificant anecdote considering my memory most likely invented it—conjured it out of a thin mass of associations I had made between the celebrity and encounters with female

ideation in the school cafeteria. I must have made it up because after some fact-checking, not a single one of my friends from school remembered such a person. And if he was, in fact, going around bragging about his relation to Anderson with the relevant incestuous intentions illustrated (cue adolescent male fantasy), then it was sure to become common knowledge, or at the very least be perpetuated into an urban student myth. I even thought of following this Pamela train closer to the source: the one island transplant to my home town who moved from Ladysmith, Anderson's hometown, in the middle of 10th grade. Physically, she had similar attributes; Madison was tall and blonde, blonde, blonde. She had a strapping body. Not big, but not a stick with breasts either. I met her on her first day and made it my mission to befriend her. Honestly, I didn't have a lot of friends in high school, so when someone new entered the mix, I was quick to jump at the opportunity. In hindsight, I may have come across a little strong, because the next day, I had fallen out of favour and been replaced by the uber-Christian wing of the class, Crystal. Last that I heard, they're still best friends. They were each other's bridesmaids and both have young children now. Crystal ended up marrying Madison's older brother, while Madison got hitched to an Abercrombie and Fitch model-cum-ball player from San Diego.

I decided to end my search there, recalling some of the hateful, homophobic rhetoric of the Madison-

Crystal Prayer Group that met regularly in art class. Having no reason to reconnect with the duo, it feels as though I've come to an impasse. But as unremarkable as the Pamela association is, something about it seems worthy of digression. Maybe it has something to do with Anderson's own humble beginnings. Sometimes daughters of Finnish immigrants get scouted on a Jumbo-tron at a football game, as she did, and the celebrity takes off from there. Most often, however, they don't and are fated to live their lives out in the small towns they were born in. I've been thinking about a line that re-occurs in O'Marah's screenplay for "It's Just Me." The line: "no more tragedies" appears again and again in the work. It re-configures each time as if it was a line from a chorus, imparting a tone of melodrama that O'Marah wields almost retroactively. Every unbelievable thing that can happen to a person happens as only one in a series of revelations that structures the life of a character. Of the incidents that occur throughout the script—a mass shooting, an unwanted pregnancy, a family member's coming out, and the general drama of aging—the repetition of the line, "no more tragedies" in turn renders these events as unremarkable, as a reason to hold out for something better.

If I had to make a lot of cash *and* I had the motivation to work the hours required on set, I might, for the first time ever, experience a kind of financial security, and therefore a more secure existence.

Would this phrase, then, hold the same meaning? I also wonder, as I'm sure many of my peers wonder, if making things, producing work, alleviates the incidence of tragedy. It usually involves a degree of faking it until certain dreams are realized through art; there's an aspect of unrelenting chance in the line as well, like struggling in a state of "perpetuity"—to quote the legal jargon of production companies. Probably, "no more tragedies" means that, with luck, we get all the details as close to right as we possibly can, so that they, and we, can pass for the real thing.

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