Artifacts | Gaga’s Vivid Gifts

By LINDA YABLONSKY

There’s no reason to look a gift horse in the mouth this season — not when you can walk right into it. And what a mouth it is: a giant, heart-shaped orifice framed by garish striped, starred, polka-dotted and flaming tentacles, courtesy of the art collective known as Assume Vivid Astro Focus, “avaf” for short.

Throughout the holidays, the artists’ monster mouth will swallow all shoppers flinging themselves through Barneys’ 60th Street door and up to Gaga’s Workshop, an immersive experience in merchandising created in the image of Lady Gaga.

Fans reaching for the chocolate McQueen shoes, plush Little Monsters, Gaga-branded motorcycle jackets and Gaga tree ornaments on offer may not give much thought to the avaf sculptures surrounding them. Still it’s hard to miss the enormous red and purple Gaga-as-mermaid figure reclining on a bed of shiny black-paillette discs at the center of the shop.

“She was in a mermaid phase when we did the drawings,” said Eli Sudbrack, the Brazilian-born artist who heads the avaf team with his chief collaborator, Christophe Hamaide Pierson, a Frenchman. The two were commissioned by Dennis Freedman, Barneys’ creative director, to design an environment that would meet Lady Gaga’s exacting standards for extravagance. “Who else could I have asked?” Freedman said on Monday, as the store braced for Lady Gaga’s appearance at the shop’s midnight opening that evening.
He had a point. For Sudbrack and Hamaide, as for Lady Gaga, restraint is not a virtue. In galleries, their densely patterned, hot-color vinyl wallpaper — sold to collectors by the foot — obliterates the walls, floors and ceiling of a room with a psychedelic flair for overstimulation. An avaf installation is basically a signal to party.

At Barneys, an ebullient, fun-house atmosphere prevails over the fifth floor. Formerly the men’s store and soon to be the new shoe department, it is sectioned into avaf-conceived “stations,” or boutiques, for toys, candy, books, tree trimmings, cosmetics, T-shirts and pricier Lady Gaga collectibles made under the supervision of Nicola Formichetti, creative director for Thierry Mugler and the pop star’s stylist.

It’s mostly a storm of riotous cartoon colors and objects celebrating the marketing of a celebrity. (To be fair, 25 percent of sales will go to Lady Gaga’s weeks-old Born This Way Foundation for bullied youth.) But the job gave Sudbrack and Hamaide a chance to exercise their considerable gifts for visual overkill.

The shop’s walls and columns zig and zag with black and white stripes that go in several directions at once. A monumental pink, blue and yellow, igloo-like wig sculpture houses nothing but hair bows. The cars of a brightly painted choo-choo train carry stuffed-animal freight. An imposing, military-hatted spider that might horrify (or perhaps amuse) Louise Bourgeois drips with Gaga-inspired trinkets. A black and red Astroturf “topiary” hedge, for the tree ornaments, spells out the name “Gaga,” while snow globes are couched in the upturned hands of long, vari-colored arms hanging from the ceiling like striped Christmas stockings. (Lady Gaga stockings, on the other hand, come in the shape of black platform stiletto boots.)

“The hands are my favorite,” Sudbrack said, turning to the Workshop’s “Library” to open a copy of “AVAF,” a recent monograph that binds his drawings, installations, performances and masks into one volume. Naturally, it’s oversized. (The Library otherwise houses Lady Gaga’s favorite childhood books, selected with help from her mother.)

This is hardly the first time that artists, or avaf, have been asked to supply holiday décor for stores, or that art has commixed with commerce. Last year, avaf wallpaper was all over the ground floor of Comme des Garçons’ Dover Street Market in London. Hardly a week passes anymore when there isn’t some kind of crossover between art and fashion. But when art functions as product promotion it tends to lose its identity as art. That is the situation for the avaf sculptures at Barneys, where each functions as display apparatus or set design. That doesn’t bother Sudbrack. “All of our art is partly decoration,” he said. “We don’t really separate one from the other.”

With both of their former New York galleries, John Connolly Presents and Deitch Projects, now closed, avaf has been absent from the local scene. But on Tuesday night, while Lady Gaga repaired to the New Museum for a book signing with the photographer Terry Richardson, Sudbrack and Hamaide were attending the opening of “Cyclops Trannies,” an exhibition of 50 collaged drawings at the Suzanne Geiss Company in SoHo.

The show, in the old Deitch Projects space on Grand Street, marks the first time Sudbrack has ever exhibited drawings. Each is an eye-popping swirl of color and pattern forming a wildly costumed female figure named for Sudbrack and Hamaide’s transvestite alter egos. Painted on pages torn from the avaf book, and drawn from sources as varied as Old Master paintings and pinup magazines, they amount to formidable grotesques that are as terrific as they are terrifying — kind of like Lady Gaga.

How did she like her own ballooning caricature as a gold-studded mermaid? Sudbrack said she loved it. “I want it!” she told Formichetti. “Can we have it?” Perhaps after Christmas, Sudbrack said. Till then, refreshingly, it’s not for sale.