

Many Failed Returns

Employing a deeply personal lexicon, Diana Shpungin combines memories and historical accounts with conceptual rigor, minimalist sensibility and exquisite craftsmanship in drawings, videos, sculptures and installations that shift between portraiture and memento. *(Untitled) Portrait of Dad* follows a decade-long artistic collaboration that explored themes of ego-affected cooperation, collaboration, collusion and authorship. The exhibition distinguishes the artist's solo debut not only as a process of artistic individuation, but as a deeply personal examination of the self under the influence of grief.

The theme of death represents a long tradition of artistic expression. From Egyptian mummification to depictions of Christ's crucifixion, from Jacques-Louis David's *The Death of Marat* to Pablo Picasso's *The Death of Casagemas* to more contemporary explorations by such artists as Sophie Calle, Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Andres Serrano, art has been a main arena for the discourse of death, bereavement and memorialization. Shpungin's works remind us of our mortality, poetically engaging non-representational formal concerns (e.g., serialism and process) with profoundly personal content that speaks to a universal human experience.

The exhibition is anchored by *Until it No Longer*, a series of small drawings based on a post-mortem photograph that Shpungin took of her father. In an effort to defeat the pain of loss, the artist repeatedly drew this single image, a feat of emotional endurance that resulted in 49 individual matted, unframed drawings that are displayed in no particular order, stacked and leaning unceremoniously against the wall on rows of ledges. Referencing photography, the archive, document and memento, the installation draws attention to the details.

Until it No Longer evokes John Baldessari's *Goodbye to Boats (Sailing In)* of 1972-73, in which a series of photographs show the artist waving to a boat. Based on a photograph that he found of his father waving goodbye to his mother on a ship bound for Europe, Baldessari replicated the action explaining that "the pain and anxiety of the act is counterbalanced by repeating it endlessly, perhaps obliterating sadness." While Shpungin's initial intent may have been to "obliterate sadness" -- to eradicate the visual and psychical impact of the original photograph -- her hand-drawn representations result in revisionist visual manifestations. Appropriating from her own archives, she transforms the photograph into a sequence of reproductions that capitalize on small technical differences to articulate ambivalence, recalling Roland Barthes's description of the simulacrum as a reconstruction of its subject through a process of selection and recombination that reveals itself anew.

In the video counterpart to *Until it No Longer*, Shpungin propels the photograph into action. Constructed from her drawings, the work explores not only the possibilities of time-based narrative, but also confers a sense of movement, and even life, in death. The nuanced differences in each drawing -- shifts in line, shading, tonality and composition -- are heightened when shown together in an animation and combined with the video's spasmodic quality, inject the post-mortem scene with an unnerving sense of anticipation and a newfound aura in reproduction.

Shpungin channels an otherworldly sensibility throughout *(Untitled) Portrait of Dad*. Approaching meaning through the examination of absence and the meditation involved in remembering, she offers a nuanced access to the past through what her works reveal in the present. The details culminate in relational objects that serve as surrogates for emotional, spiritual and physical contact.

In I Especially Love You When You are Sleeping (a phrase her father repeated to her when she was a child), two stacks of censored obituaries from the *New York Times* lend their physical support to a citrus tree sapling. The installation tells an enigmatic story. The tree evokes a reclining body as well as the artist's annual birthday gift to her father, the last of which failed to be planted due to her father's passing. The tree's entire entity -- roots, trunk, branches and leaves -- have been encased in hand-coated graphite. The sapling is bandaged at its most vulnerable point and nearly all of its leaves have fallen to the ground.

A superstitious man, Shpungin's father invited his favored guests to sit in a chair before leaving believing that this would assure the sitter's return visit, an act poignantly expressed in *A Fixed Space Reserved for the Haunting*, in which Shpungin has reserved a seat for her father's spirit: A chair is painstakingly hand-coated in graphite, its broken leg hovering precariously above another pile of obituaries. The details of the lives commemorated within have been attentively censored and bound together with plaster and gauze.

Implementing the healing ethos that her father brought into the domestic sphere (a medical doctor, he repaired everything with medical tape, plaster and gauze), Shpungin gives new meaning to his resuscitative methods, integrating his do-it-yourself technique with her own painstaking drawing process. This is especially pronounced in the works *Apprentice Progression Methodology* and *Under Taken*, which infuse personal symbolism with cunning revisionism. The former depicts silhouettes of a bandaged human leg, tree trunk and leg chair respectively, that

resemble protective amulets. *Under Taken* is drawn after a photograph that shows the artist as a teenager posing uncomfortably with her father, and rests atop a ledge constructed of Magic Rub erasers that bifurcate the composition into two scenes: the drawing of daughter and father above, and an inverted drawing of her father directly on the wall below. Incorporating the very materials of erasure, Shpungin's phantom "re-presentations" evince the depth of the divide between emotional distance (symbolic death) and absence ad infinitum (real death).

The spirit of Felix Gonzalez-Torres permeates the exhibition, the title of which is adapted from the late artist's "*Untitled*" (*Portrait of Dad*) from 1991, a pile of white candies whose total weight approximates that of his father. Viewers are invited to take from the pile, in turn, participating in the metamorphosis of the work. Summoning this beloved work of Gonzalez-Torres, Shpungin's *1664 Sundays* presents a ton of potatoes piled on the floor of the gallery's cellar in an interpretation of her father's story of how he acquired his first car with potatoes on the Soviet black market in the 1950s. Visitors are invited to take enough potatoes to fill a limited-edition bag imprinted with her father's "Sunday Potatoes" recipe in her own handwriting. The title of the installation refers to the number of Sundays that the two lived in common. The story is recounted in his own voice in the hand-drawn video animation *You Will Remember This*, where the ambient sound of hospital staff and fidgeting movement of the hand-held video camera lend both urgency and composure to the scene.

Suggesting what her father might "see" in a technique that again bestows a certain kind of "life in death," the hand-drawn video animation *His View* (after video stills captured by the artist) takes a distinctive and unique narrative turn, using as its point of departure the view as seen from her father's grave. From this vantage point, we see sunlight streaming through a tree, a woman placing flowers on the grave and, perplexingly, the same woman taking the flowers away. Accompanied by the ambient sound of wind, the video shows a peaceful site of mourning from a decidedly untraditional angle, interrupted by a seemingly rebellious act that speaks to the complexities of grief.

Drawing is Shpungin's "medium" in more than one way -- it is her means of artistic expression as well as her connection to the world of the dead. Her form of expression is sublimated by a compulsion to remember and through the act of drawing she produces stories in a range of concealed and carefully controlled representations. From featureless silhouettes to detailed likenesses, from rubbings of inscriptions and texture to pre-visualizing motion and hand-drawn animation, from covered surfaces to encased forms, her methodology preserves memory to varied effect.

Somber in palette yet never ominous, Shpungin's work possesses grace, frankness and at times, a disarmingly earnest sense of humor. Take, for example, the hand-drawn video animation *Endless Ocean*, based on a photograph of her father on the beach. Showing him wearing a Speedo and holding a seagull in the air by its leg, the image is at once confounding and absurd. In an endless loop, it is unclear if we are witnessing a futile attempt to capture or a futile attempt to escape.

Weaving biographical symbolism and superstition into a comprehensive oeuvre, Shpungin's work takes memory into custody, honoring her father by reshaping their relationship in her own terms: her various portraits of her father may very well be portraits *for* her father. Taken together, the works in (*Untitled*) *Portrait of Dad* can be seen as individual acts that make up the artist's grieving process. However, Shpungin takes great care not to circumvent pain and anxiety in the process. From the hyperactive motions and heavenward gaze of her animations to the changing representations of her serial drawings to the gifting of potatoes (which are in fact living tubers), Shpungin's meditations on death never quite abandon the age-old promise of resurrection.

--Rachel Gugelberger

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