

Caryn Coleman | *Essay on a House*

on Diana Shpungin's Drawing Of A House (Triptych)

If we return to the old home as to a nest, it is because memories are dreams, because the home of other days has become a great image of lost intimacy.

- Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

Diana Shpungin's *Drawing Of A House (Triptych)* for SiTE:LAB's "Rumsey Street Project" has re-animated a vacant house into a living space once again. Covering the entire facade in graphite and projecting animations out of the windows, 333 Rumsey Street has become a transformative space that exists within a series of paradoxes: domestic and communal, drawing and sculpture, light and dark, interior and exterior. These opposing characteristics are not an aggressive disjuncture but poetically co-exist in a harmonic state. As they play off and respond to one another, they establish a uniquely new existence for the former rectory in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Drawing Of A House (Triptych) is certainly Shpungin's most ambitious work to date (involving one hundred people, taking eight months from conception to completion and the sacrifice of countless pieces of graphite) but it easily belongs in her longtime exploration of memory, failure, longing and loss. It is a drawing of a house, as the title clearly states, and Shpungin's practice is certainly invested in the act of mark making; the hand is omniscient throughout. For *Drawing Of A House (Triptych)*, Shpungin manages to take the history of gestural drawing as a reference and, through a performative act, transcend it into its own entity. This recalls Tracey Emin's position that drawings are what things are rather than what things look like; a representation of a memory or an experience or an emotion. Most in line with the meticulous, calculated, and impermanent wall drawings by Sol LeWitt, *Drawing Of A House (Triptych)* temporarily lives on an architectural plane and, although it has been created with the utmost care and attention to detail, it is completely approachable and non-precious. In fact, the skin given to 333 Rumsey Street is precisely what makes it incredibly seductive.

Like Doris Salcedo's reparative wrapping of objects and the haunting exchanges within the installations by Felix Gonzales-Torres (to whom she dedicates a video work in this project), Shpungin has a history of injecting the profoundly personal into her smaller-scale sculptural, drawing and video work. See her *Without Legs No One Is Leaving* (2012) and *Above And Below* (2013). For the first time however, Shpungin uses an object that has already existed in a very public site with *Drawing Of A House (Triptych)*. A house is not as anonymous an object like a chair or a book, although it is as ubiquitous, and it imbues its previous lives. In addressing the very personal architectural space of the home and its relationship to the social themes that often surround it, Shpungin doesn't attack it in the ways that Gordon Matta Clark's *Splitting* (1974) and *Window Blow Out* (1976) expose the guts of a home through a performative intervention. She also doesn't memorialize it like Rachel Whiteread did in casting an East End London Victorian home in concrete with *House* (1993). Instead, Shpungin takes the political and, in this case, spiritual implications associated with 333 Rumsey Street on board to create a multi-media art object that doesn't seal itself off from the audience or acquire an entirely

separate existence but, rather, establishes a bonding relationship between viewer and object. The incorporation of an actual house into her practice that often uses chairs, books, and shelves is a natural progression because there is nothing more familiar or more personal than the home. And what better site to concretize her interests than in the space of an abandoned home, a site already entrenched in domesticity, intimacy, and history? It's where the past, present, and future collide into potential.

333 Rumsey Street began as the rectory to St. Joseph's church founded in 1888 by Father Henry Frenken as the only Dutch Catholic Church in the area. Throughout the years it has, as you can imagine, experienced many lives: it has been the home to priests, the homeless, and families. Now, faced with an upcoming redevelopment in 2017 by Habitat for Humanity, it represents the economics of space as both a temporary project where art and community meet. It has become a site of possibility. With its recent resurrection as Shpungin's *Drawing Of A House (Triptych)*, 333 Rumsey Street now exists as a durational space (in a Deleuzian/Bergsonian sense) where there is a collapse of past and present, interior and exterior, memories and current events. It is where these elements butt up against and stimulate each other, creating an evolved space that doesn't dictate what it demands from the viewer. In a phenomenological understanding, it is a proposition for every person who encounters it to insert his/her individual perspective and since the home is an incredibly personal site, this piece stands to have countless meanings. It is precisely this relationship between the house, the artist, the viewer and the experience that grants this work such potency.

This conflated "moment" of personal time exists throughout Shpungin's body of work. *Ghost Retransplantation* (2007) is a life-size video installation featuring a projection of a former London Whitechapel pub known for being the last drinking spot of two Jack the Ripper victims and an Uxoricide. The space Shpungin created gives new life to these women by giving their ghosts a portal to move beyond this realm. Similarly, *A Fixed Space Reserved For The Haunting* (2011) stems from Shpungin's own family superstition of sitting in a chair before departing a home so the guest will surely return again. Covered in graphite with one leg broken and sitting atop censored newspaper obituaries wrapped like a cast, this piece was part the exhibition about her deceased father, *(Untitled) Portrait Of Dad*. Now she has elevated this conflation of personal history to a universality by laboriously re-animating 333 Rumsey Street. Eschewing the more literal gothic narrative of a haunting as she has done previously, *Drawing Of A House (Triptych)* isn't a site where the supernatural live....it is a site that is *itself alive*.

Drawing Of A House (Triptych) breathes this new life into 333 Rumsey in two ways: by covering the exterior with graphite and through the projection of hand-drawn animations in the windows from the interior. The act of turning 333 Rumsey into a sculptural object by encasing it in graphite is a truly impressive gesture. There is no way to hide that the house has now become something else, something more, and it seems to enjoy its new skin. With the help of over one hundred people, Shpungin has succeeded in covering the house entirely in graphite; a material that can be both temporary or long-lasting depending upon treatment and the environmental elements. For now though, the house is nearly black, its previous facade blacked out, and the presence of the human hand is formidable. It is seductive now, luring in viewers to wonder what it is, what it was, and what it might be. We aren't, however, invited to explore what is inside. Unlike the haunted house, we are not privy to its interior space that relays something we can immediately access: claustrophobia, discovery, artifacts, a journey. None of that is available to us in *Drawing Of A House (Triptych)* as our experience lies only in our relationship to what the exterior conveys and what we bring to this conversation about home and memory.

While the graphite marks a new beginning for the house, the nine window projections quite literally animate the space. These hand-drawn animations are born from a meticulous and labor intensive process involving over a thousand drawings and sound components; no single frame is repeated and each video was created with the particular corresponding part of the house in mind. A merger of a delicate hand with conceptual references to the past and present moments of 333 Rumsey Street, they represent the return of life to the abandoned home.

The videos are strategically placed three rear-projections in the front, three on the side, and three in the back in an overt reference to the home's address as well as to the good associations the number "333" generally signifies: think Holy Trinity (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit). But Shpungin's projections and blackened facade give it a little bit more of a devilish "666" vibe, again juxtaposing themes of light and dark and playing with ideas of the uncanny, redemption, and rebirth.

The front of the house shows three varied repetitive actions within the movement of window blinds that represent "the return" as they subtly reveal and conceal themselves. In the upper right hand corner, *Chronicle Of A Now Empty Space* details the different possibilities that a dwelling can experience in its lifetime. Here a candle flickers in the window getting blown out only to flame up once again. A jarring sound occurs as the window gets boarded up and then becomes undone again. Next window over, *Knowing How To Break Glass Quietly (The Ascetic)* is still until a mysterious eye peeks out and recedes through the blinds while a pane of glass suddenly fractures without apparent reason. Perhaps the best representational term for *Drawing Of A House (Triptych)* lies in this video's subtitle: *The Ascetic* means "characterized by or suggesting the practice of severe self-discipline and abstention from all forms of indulgence, typically for religious reasons." *A Severed Limb Persuaded To Return* lives in the lower left corner and, in the most overt reference to the life/death/rebirth spectrum, shows a rotating houseplant turned zombie when all of its limbs get violently pruned and it immediately regrows its branches.

The side of the house greets visitors with three dreamlike videos that evoke a more superstitious approach to the space. Dust, a draft, a smudge; these videos convey the age of the home and the subsequent wears of time giving a powerful meditational thought on the elusiveness of time and space with their faint impressions. At the top is a diamond shape window with *The Dust In The Light (The Pessimist)* which projects an abstract composition made of delicate mark making by the artist. Mimicking dancing dust particles in the air, one can sense a real ethereal quality to the space. Below *A Draft (For Felix)* shows a curtain gently blowing in the breeze recalling a lazy afternoon visit from a friend who's passed on. To the lower left, *A Smudge May Well Be An Apparition* features hazy stain-like drawings that play with the phenomenon of "pareidolia" or the human tendency to create forms and figures in a composition that aren't actually there. Like the other two side projections it lives with, it's ambiguous but suggestive.

The final three videos lay at the back of the house. Though a bit darker in tone than the other sections, they retain a fair amount of the humor and playfulness established throughout. *The Vanishing Point* features a female figure who jump cuts from the door to the window, black hair blowing upwards chaotically before she recedes again. What may at first look like a nod to the Japanese horror genre is actually quite benign: it's simply the air conditioning unit blowing on her. The next window *The Light In The Dark (The Optimist)* displays the counterpart to *The Dust In The Light (The Pessimist)*. Here a dark void exists, created by covering the drawing paper so completely with graphite that it was unable to absorb any more. These drawings were then photographed with a flash and set into motion with the reverberating sound of pencil on paper thus giving life to what may initially seem as expansive nothingness. Lastly, beneath the porch and projecting outwards from

the basement area, is *A Million To One (For Blue Velvet)* where innumerable ants loudly crunching through the space represents the diminutive position of humans within the living world. Dedicating this video to David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) also reminds us that tainted, spoiled, and evil marks exist within the everyday normal environments we live in.

As with the house itself, Shpungin's animated videos fuse together a duality of light and dark, sinister and playful, a closeness and a distance. Always there, their presence is faint during the day and grows into prominence as darkness falls; they are elusive and provocative. Most importantly, the projections are the sole occupants of the house and, since they dwell in a place where the viewer cannot go, they are what makes the house come alive...again.

It's a remarkable achievement that Diana Shpungin has utilized the typical associations of meaning towards the home as a way to move beyond them. The house as both a vessel and a living being is a rare beast and *Drawing Of A House (Triptych)* tackles all of the inherent complications that evolve in a simple, quiet, and beautiful way. 333 Rumsey Street is now a localized memory or, more to the point, is in an image of that memory, a conflation of the house's past and each individual visitor, as it lives in our present moment. Within its own paradoxical landscape, this vision of a house now also includes being a sculpture, a drawing, a cinema, and a community destination. And while the new life Shpungin has given 333 Rumsey Street may only be temporary, it may also be its most memorable.

- **Caryn Coleman** is a New York-based independent curator and writer whose curatorial practice explores the intersection of cinema and visual art with a focus on horror film's influence on contemporary artists. She is the Senior Film Programmer at Nitehawk Cinema and a recipient of the 2012 Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation Arts Writers grant for her blog *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*.