

Diana Shpungin: Bright Light/Darkest Shadow

Artist Diana Shpungin is perhaps best known for her ubiquitous use of graphite—so much so that she even has an American Hairless Terrier named “Pencil.” Shpungin has dedicated her career to exploring the myriad ways this everyday yet extraordinarily foreign object can be elevated beyond the realm of simple drawing. True, lines are created, but they are also tested and destroyed, boundaries and expectations expanded. The idea of mark-making is something most artists understand keenly—the physical act of putting pencil to paper and creating something from nothing, and the underlying analogy of trying to make your lasting mark on the world is the existential battle most artists must face.

The title for this show—*Bright Light/Darkest Shadow*—itself points to the many gradients that are possible to obtain with just a single pencil. In this expansive museum exhibition, Shpungin shows us not just the typical outcome of when paper meets pencil, but instead rather animated (literally) drawings. Neither completely narrative nor abstract, these haunting images flicker somewhere in-between, a limbo where the viewer is thrust between nostalgia and alienation, consciousness and imagination.

These dichotomies are a common theme throughout Shpungin’s work over the past decade—the fight for hope in a world full of despair or the constant strive for empathy in times where apathy reigns supreme. It is no surprise that through the medium of graphite, Shpungin seeks to push the limits with this simple tool, to perhaps naively recall a subject that she only remembers from a flickering memory. To animate the inanimate, these “failed animations” as Shpungin refers to them are successful because quite simply, they are not.

In Shpungin’s newest work, *To Extinguish the Sun*, this laborious 4 minute, 25 second video comprised of hundreds of drawings shows us the artist’s hand, process, and the care put into every single stop motion animation frame. This is a rare opportunity for the viewer to experience the medium of animation presented in a contemporary art museum, a medium all too frequently relegated to design. However, Shpungin proves all those critics wrong, as surely nothing has ever been so decisively mesmerizing.

Within a few moments of the video’s start, we subtly acknowledge the sound, like a quiet wind through the trees, filtered through memory and time. I keep checking my speakers to see if the reverberations are real or just in my mind, and it is only later I come to learn that these are the first sounds recorded on Mars in November 2019. In fact, meteorites from Mars are found to contain specks of graphite in them, with many speculating that this carbon-based allotrope may be an indication of life on Mars.

Watching closely, we observe that the paper is not all pristine and neat. It is crumpled, folded, erased, torn, hewn together—the sun trying hard to break through the rain and clouds. Its almost the sensation of being on a boat, with an undulating yet indeterminate object on the horizon. We deeply feel how many ways the medium of paper can evoke an emotion—love, patience, anticipation, or terror. The materiality of the image waxes and wanes, and I find

myself once again sitting under that weeping willow on the water's edge of the bluffs below my grandparents' house 35 years ago. All that with just paper and pencil. And when you think you've seen it all, the paper itself ignites and self-destructs, the sun burning too close to the surface. Each frame is itself a beautiful masterpiece, and part of a larger cautionary tale of death and rebirth. If you stay through to the end, you even get a reward—the artist's hand trying in vain to capture the sun. The irony is that Shpungin herself is the creator of the sun, and her creation is now beyond her control. Assuming the role of divine architect, Shpungin ultimately defines future worlds.

In contrast to this singular work, Shpungin also presents *To Get Out of the Way*, a dark and subtle piece with a vaguely diabolical atonal score. At the open of the video, we see a man walking through a desert landscape until he himself becomes the landscape. The video pans up to the sky, then the figure returns only to once again obliterate our view. Similar sequences repeat themselves with various people and landscapes—a desert, a forest, the sea. We as viewers feel exceptionally alone, like the figures themselves. Stars and wind and leaves all become graphite. Like *To Extinguish the Sun*, this piece feels familiar, yet foreign. Humans evolve from and eventually return to nature in a subtle ballet mirroring the classic figure-ground relationship. Forwards and backwards, like the video, like the music, like humankind's eventual devolution and exodus.

While we may never know if there was life on Mars, we do know that there is life, and love, in this body of work. One can only surmise how difficult it must have been for Shpungin to painstakingly recreate her father's death portrait over and over again in *Until It No Longer*, or render her father's burial site in *His View*. Through the act of recreating these deeply personal spaces and memories over and over, the artist flattens not only the image for the viewer, but the memory for herself. It no longer hurts, it no longer is even a memory that belongs to her. It now belongs to the viewer, like all the work in the exhibition. Ultimately, *Bright Light/Darkest Shadow* is a reflection of what is inside all of us—the capacity to create and nurture beauty, and the ability to enact that which is unspeakable.

- Ginger Shulick Porcella