

## Still Life (Triptych)

Diana Shpungin makes hand-drawn animations based on video she has recorded, and her contribution to the exhibition *Twenty Twenty* for The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art is *Still Life (Triptych)*, a three-screen video animation composed of two hundred and eighty individual pencil drawings. Shpungin's gestural style stands apart from the photorealism that one usually associates with photographically derived drawing, as the motion and character of her hand are very much in evidence. Shpungin has chosen not to utilize overtly political subject matter for this exhibition that focuses on the tumultuous events of the year 2020, but rather to tackle the anxiety of this troubled moment through a contemporary take on vanitas, the still-life painting genre that was popular in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Vanitas commonly used symbols of life's transience, including skulls, hourglasses, and flowers, and each of the screens in Shpungin's reinvention features one of these symbols, rendered in pencil from video shot in her studio. These objects hover over other drawn video imagery. For instance, in the second screen of the triptych, titled *Still Life (Forwards And Backwards)*, an hourglass endlessly tumbles over the image of an abstracted crowd of protesters, the source of which was video footage shot by the artist during a recent march in Washington, DC. It should be noted that Shpungin conceived of the triptych prior to both the pandemic and 2020's racial justice revolution, but her approach has proven to be prescient. "I chose the form of a contemporary memento mori," Shpungin has written, "as a keen reminder to remember to live, to fight, and to remember this moment, perhaps as not to repeat it again."<sup>i</sup> Each screen has a separate audio track, including the sound of rain, the reverberating murmur of a meditation bell, and white noise, allowing in the words of the artist "both contemplation and escape."

Shpungin's primary medium of choice is the humble graphite pencil and her work with this simplest of drawing tools reflects her deep-seated belief in removing as much as possible the mediation of her ego from the act of creation. Unlike other more complicated mediums, the directness of the hand moving a pencil is more akin to performance than craft, and Shpungin's works are both physical and mental meditations on the artist's chosen subject matter. It should be noted that Shpungin rarely erases or throws away a drawing, an approach that reinforces her attitude towards both art and life. In a sense the marks in the artist's drawings act as intermediaries—counting off each moment by playing the ephemeral nature of gesture against the timelessness of image and narrative.

-Richard Klein

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<sup>i</sup> From a statement by the artist sent to the author on July 17, 2020.

Richard Klein is a curator, artist, and writer. Since 1999 he has been exhibitions director of The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, CT. In his two decade long career as a curator of contemporary art he has organized over 90 exhibitions, including solo shows of the work of Janine Antoni, Sol LeWitt, Mark Dion, Michael Joo, Hank Willis Thomas, Brad Kahlhamer, Roy McMakin, Kay Rosen, Jack Whitten, Jessica Stockholder, Tom Sachs, and Elana Herzog. Major curatorial projects at The Aldrich have included *Fred Wilson: Black Like Me* (2006), *No Reservations: Native American History and Culture in Contemporary Art* (2006), *Elizabeth Peyton: Portrait of an Artist* (2008), *Shimon Attie: MetroPAL.IS.* (2011), *Michael Joo: Drift* (2014), *Penelope Umbrico: Shallow Sun* (2015), and *Weather Report* (2019). As an artist, he has exhibited widely, including the Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase, Caren Golden Fine Art, New York, the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI, Hales Gallery, London, Gavlak Gallery, Palm Beach, FL, Schoolhouse Gallery, Provincetown, MA, and the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art, Portland, OR. His essays on art and culture have appeared in *Cabinet* Magazine and have been included in books published by Hatje Cantz, Damiani, Picturebox, Ridinghouse, and the University of Chicago Press, among others.