

Diana Shpungin: “that accident which pricks me”¹

© Lisa Freiman 2020

Bright Light / Darkest Shadow is the first exhibition to assemble the hand-drawn video animations that Diana Shpungin has been making for nearly a decade. Installed within several galleries painted black, the works animate the spaces, introducing flickering images that, when taken together as a single installation, appear to function like neurological synapses sparking diverse sensorial, psychological, and dreamlike experiences from different times and places, both real and imagined. The animations of graphite drawings, which provide glimpses of both mundane and mysterious situations, offer emotive vignettes that originate from old color family photographs and video footage, fractured memories, newly filmed situations, and stream-of-consciousness thoughts. Beginning in graduate school at the School of Visual Arts and in between 2000 and 2009, Shpungin worked only in collaboration with another artist making performance-based video. But her father’s death in 2007 ignited an “inexplicable urge” to start drawing with pencil, perhaps because it was “permanent, but still erasable” and a perfect way to connote “memory and loss.”² Shpungin still made several other video works independently before turning almost exclusively to drawing – and more specifically – to graphite. The animated drawings that followed are deeply personal yet universal portraits of the poignancy and fleeting nature of memory and the past.

¹ Barthes, Roland, and Richard Howard. *Camera Lucida Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, 27.

² Email with the Diana Shpungin, December 12, 2019. All subsequent quotations stem from this discussion unless otherwise noted.

An initial touch point for this body of animated drawings corresponded with Shpungin's re-reading of French cultural theorist Roland Barthes' last published work Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography. Barthes' text famously chronicles his grief over his mother's death as he sifts through old photographs trying to find a photo that justly captures her essence, her "radiant core" – the *punctum* – the wounding, poignant details that he believed would register only for him. Starting with the most recent photographs going back to the oldest, Barthes continued to come up empty-handed. None of them were "quite right." He only recognized his mother "in fragments" until he finally discovered a faded sepia photograph of her at five years old, standing with her brother on a wooden bridge inside a glassed "Winter Garden."³ Barthes refused to reproduce the photograph in his book because, he argued, "It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture."⁴ Shpungin remembers being "obsessed" with Barthes' search to find a photograph that somehow captured his mother's essence, and was also fascinated by his refusal to reproduce it once discovered. She explained: "It got me thinking about the personal in contemporary art and why the personal is often overlooked or thought of as 'too personal.'" Shpungin concluded that what makes something "palatable" for a broad public audience depended on what was "revealed and concealed." How could she take the personal to the public so that "the radiant core" could be felt beyond the individual?

The first work that Shpungin made after her father's death, which didn't begin as a project at all, was *Until It No Longer* (2007-2011), a poignant record of the relentlessness, unpredictability, and numbness of mourning. It began, unexpectedly, with a color photograph

³ Barthes, p. 65.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

she took of her father in his casket just before it was closed. It shows him close up wearing a white shirt, patterned tie, and jacket. Shpungin kept this image on her computer, but rarely looked at it because she found it too painful. Whenever she came across it, she “would click away time and time again.” About a year after her father’s death, she forced herself to look at the photograph and decided to draw it “again and again” to “take the power away from the pain of the image.” She said: I “had an impulse to draw using pencil. It was an inexplicable urge. Perhaps the basic nature of it, the idea that pencils are permanent and also erasable, lent well to the idea of memory and loss.” The purpose of this repetitive process was to displace her focus from the image itself to the movement of her hand, to the forms and patterns of the marks made in real time – her time – using a predetermined system (the picture of her father) that defined the limits of the drawing. Shpungin continued to re-draw the portrait over many years until she “became somewhat anesthetized” to it.

The patterns of lines over the course of 49 drawings eventually became wholly abstract to her. When she finished the last drawing, she decided to animate all of them without adding any sound. Devoid of color, the figure remains still in uncomfortable silence while the slight variations in marks create a flickering effect that somehow only exaggerates the finality and stillness of death. Nothing happens. Shpungin describes the decision to animate the drawings as a “conceptual gesture of longing and failure.” The image is recognizable, but anonymous, numbing not just because it is a picture of a deceased father (although not everyone will know this), but because the image ultimately is *not* her (or any) father. Even to a stranger, the image contains nothing of a man’s essence even though it represents his features, the details of his

clothes, and his physical location – all things Barthes would have described as the *studium*. The video projects a palpable emptiness and even an uncanny boredom that results from the fact that the animated drawings keep repeating in an endless loop.

Until It No Longer kindled Shpungin's love for graphite as well as her belief that drawing has the conceptual potential to "capture memory, the elusiveness of it, the feeling of it, better than a photograph does." After her father's death, while going through his estate, Shpungin found a trove of photos that she hadn't seen in years. Looking through them was "partly necessity, part mourning, part remembrance."⁵ It reminded her of Barthes' search for his mother in his photos after her death. Shpungin based her next work *Endless Ocean* (2011) (fig) on a specific old color photo found in her family's archive that contained what Barthes would have described as the "justice and accuracy – *justesse*" of her father's person.⁶ Explaining her selection of this picture, Shpungin said: "The photo had everything. Beauty, nature, humor, arrogance, and a bit of unintended sadism, I think. It summed up the complexity of his being in one image compared to many others."⁷

Like the original photograph, the re-drawings of the picture show her father on a beach wearing a Speedo and holding onto the leg of a seagull struggling to escape. Unlike the figure in *Until It No Longer*, the father's defining features have been erased, filled in with dark graphite that anonymizes and abstracts the figure. The details that spark the memory of her are not

⁵ Email with the artist, January 8, 2020.

⁶ Barthes., p. 70.

⁷ Email with the artist, January 8, 2020.

located in the face or the specifics of the body, but in the white Speedo and outstretched arm that holds the gull's leg. In focusing on these two details and adding the sound of the waves and fluttering, screeching birds (recorded at the actual beach where the photograph was taken decades before), she consciously signified the mysterious feelings and memories associated with that lost moment pregnant with her father's essence. *Endless Ocean* explores the interplay of precise details as well as their omission to suggest how memory lapses leave us with gaps that make it impossible to recover events and experiences as completely as they occurred in real time. The work is the beginning of an ongoing investigation into how drawing and animation can conjure indescribable experiences in personal and communal terms.

His View (2011) is Shpungin's first video that depicts a complete action: a person (the artist) places roses at a gravesite (her father's), removes them, and disappears from the frame. The relatively straightforward sequence, which runs in a continuous loop, is shot from the perspective of the buried person; as such, it places the viewer in the position of looking up at the silhouette, the tree canopy, and the flickering sun in the sky. Shpungin filmed the scene on site, selected stills from the film, drew the stills, photographed the drawings, and then edited the photographs into a video that lasts less than two minutes. The work is more abstract than either of the previous two that take her father as their subject. It begins with quickly scribbled graphite marks that fill most of the frame, pulsating in synch with the sun's bright light shining just to the right of center with the familiar sounds of rustling leaves and birds.

The image and sounds linger for fifty seconds, nearly one-third of the video's length.

Immediately afterwards, the black silhouette moves into the frame from the right and bends

down towards the gravesite, leaving a bouquet of roses. Several seconds later the silhouette takes over most of the right side of the frame, introducing a major black shape that dominates the composition.

From left to right we see several roses sketched with longer, more continuous lines that define the petals and leaves. They press up against the glistening tree canopy comprised of hundreds of varied short pencil marks that abut the dark silhouette. Immediately after this frame, the figure recedes from the frame and only the roses, tree, and sun-filled sky remain until near the end of the action when the dark figure returns, removes the flowers, and exits screen right. The remaining seconds of the video return to the original flickering frames depicting the sun filtering through the leaves of the tree canopy. Unlike, *Until It No Longer*, the animation, especially the flickering light and air moving through the branches, does not short circuit; instead, the repeated activity connotes the coexistence of life and death and longing and loss that are experienced differently from person to person. Shpungin creates this effect not through verisimilitude, but through the poetic elaboration of the *mise en scène* where the multisensory experiences of seeing and hearing the trees, breeze, and birds, as well as the movement of the body to and from the grave, *do* send messages to the viewer that trigger associations that inevitably will differ from person to person. The fact that the video plays in a continuous loop forces the viewer to watch the same action – placing and removing flowers from a grave -- over and over in an unending confrontation that suggests the cycling of experience and memory.

Disappearing Act (2012), which is also presented in a continuous loop, is comprised of fifty distinct drawings that depict the repeated action of an anonymous person (a white silhouette outlined in continuous black contour lines) on the left part of the composition who is shaking out a striped blanket in the wind against the backdrop of the ocean and sky.

Like *Endless Ocean*, the video is based on a family photograph from her childhood, but the actual animation was sourced from a re-creation of the picture that she staged on the same Long Island beach where it was originally taken. Going back to that beach to restage the photo was a way to collapse time and spark past memories: child and adult, past and present, what is retained and what is forgotten. Shpungin selected stills from the film that she drew and then animated. Although numerous things briefly transpire in the video – a person shakes out a blanket, a plane flies across the sky, and a figure walks along the shoreline – the protagonist is the bold and beautiful striped blanket itself, which fills most of the frames and oscillates like a wave or the sound of the surf incorporated in the video. The power of this work lies not in the portrayal of an action anyone could have witnessed, but in the mesmerizing ebb and flow of the dancing striped blanket that moves the viewer into an almost hypnotic state of calm. The title of the work suggests the way the blanket obscures the view of the ocean, beach, and sky, but it also suggests the fact that the silhouetted figure in the work is increasingly immaterial, receding from the foreground and allowing abstraction to take over as the primary means of connotation. It is worth noting that ever since her first drawings of her father in his casket, Shpungin has never depicted a person with defining facial features again. While *Endless Ocean* includes the triggering details of the struggling seagull and her father's swimsuit, subsequent

works only include anonymous silhouettes that enable a viewer to fill in the contours with thoughts of themselves or others. It is the hypnotic blanket now that sets into motion a host of moving recollections and associations unique to each viewer that hover “ambiguously between remembering and forgetting.”⁸

Subsequent animations also located at the sea, such as *Figure And Ground* (2012) (fig.), continue to deploy abstraction as a means of creating a metaphor for memory and loss. The title refers to Gestalt psychology and the cognitive ability to distinguish two contrasting elements, such as dark and light or black and white. During the first ten seconds of *Figure and Ground* the screen is comprised entirely of thickly-worked layers of graphite accompanied only by the sound of crashing surf. The black monochrome recalls repeated experiments with black monochrome paintings going back to Kasimir Malevich’s first iconic black square painting in 1915. Art critic Peter Schjeldahl once described the black painted form as “more like thoughts than images.” He explained: “You don’t look at the picture so much as launch yourself into its trackless empyrean.”⁹

While this frame obviously shares only superficial similarities with Malevich’s black square or any of the numerous monochromes with which subsequent artists have experimented, Shpungin’s black frame does provide a moment for the viewer’s own meditative immersion in

⁸ <https://dianashpungin.com/2013/05/13/disappearing-act/>

⁹ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/03/14/shapes-of-things>. Accessed 2/1/2020.

the darkness until the camera slowly moves away from the black field, revealing lighter contours around it that gradually displace the black to become the ground.

Meanwhile the monochromatic blackness transforms into a figure -- in this case a Surrealist-inspired biomorphic shape that actually is a hole in the sand being filled with a black shovel that we see from above. As the camera continues to zoom out and the hole is filled in, the black form disappears, yielding to a new lighter ground, another allover drawing that now consists of looping, scribbled, entangled lines of different densities and lengths that recall the abstract gray drawings of artists like Cy Twombly and others who emulated his graffiti-like marks.

The camera continues to zoom into the linear web and the closer it moves, the lighter the lines become until they have faded to the point of invisibility.

All that remains is a vacant white screen (yes, there is a history of white monochromes, too, beginning with Malevich) until the camera gradually zooms out. As it does, the faint swirling lines begin to reappear, getting darker the farther the camera retreats until we begin to see the black hole and shovel reappear in the upper right corner, reversing the direction of the film until it works its way back to the original black void. The temporal trajectory of the film, which moves forward and backwards in a continuous loop, approximates the way our own focus and perspective shift in time.

This video animation is disorienting not just because of its temporal shuffle, but because it also is difficult to understand exactly what you are seeing. Much of it is purely abstract,

especially in the beginning, middle, and end. Even when the recognizable form of the shovel briefly appears, the amorphous black shape below it remains puzzling: Is it the shadow of the figure above? A puddle? The sound of shoveling sand and the ocean provides contextual clues about what the shape of the black form is. As the video progresses, the frames become increasingly abstract, almost as if the viewer is entering into the drawings themselves navigating through the swirling lines, the patches of dark, the frames of light. The heightened abstraction – like the bodily contours in the previous videos – allows the viewer to slip into the space of the work -- challenging Barthes' notion of "banality" by introducing connection, empathy, and "singularity."¹⁰

Reoccurring Tide (2016) likewise begins with a mostly abstract series of drawings that incorporate loosely-drawn, looping, expressive lines that surround a black biomorphic form.

The soundtrack of the ocean surf and several subsequent stills quickly make it apparent that ambiguous form is actually a person (again a black silhouette) floating against the ocean/ground. It is unclear whether or not the floating figure is alive or dead and that ultimately is the point. The waves carry the body back and forth in different directions over and over and over without resolution. Moving between life and death, sea and shore, past and present, the drawings along with the rhythmic crashing water evoke an amniotic state, generating a sense of calmness despite the uncertainty. *Reoccurring Tide*, like *Disappearing Act* and *Figure And Ground*, plays with the tension between figuration and abstraction to suggest the indescribable interrelatedness of experience and memory.

¹⁰ Barthes, 76.

The Light In The Dark (The Optimist) and *The Dust In The Light (The Pessimist)* (both 2015) are Shpungin's first purely abstract animations. Although they can be displayed separately, they are more powerful together when their opposite qualities of light and dark "contradict and complete" each other. *The Light In The Dark (The Optimist)* exposes the actual materiality of graphite, a crystalline form of carbon that occurs naturally under normal conditions and is an excellent conductor of heat and electricity.

Shpungin made the work by completely covering many pieces of drawing paper with thick, heavy pencil marks built up from the physical pressure of the hand dragging the pencil against the paper's surface until it was unable to absorb any more graphite. She then used a camera with a flash and photographed the drawings before filming and editing them and adding the manipulated sound recording of the pencil moving across the paper, a reference to its creation.

The work echoes Robert Morris' early literalist sculpture, *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961), a simple wooden cube accompanied by a recording of him making the object over three-and-a-half hours. Shpungin's video turns the dynamic silvery, sometimes wrinkled drawings into abstract protagonists that come to life and breathe like the shaken striped blanket in *Disappearing Act* and the tumultuous sea in *Recurring Tide*. The illuminating camera flash used in this work brings to life the opaque grayish-black drawings and seems to suggest something coming into being from nothingness. Although the light actually refracts from the dense graphite, it appears to intermittently peek through it, offering a metaphor for optimism in the midst of darkness.

The Dust In The Light (The Pessimist) presents as the opposite of its sister work. It consists of a white ground activated by numerous delicate, dancing graphite lines of different lengths and intensities. They flicker across the field like static across a television screen while a sound akin to a white noise machine or a blowing fan flattens out the work's overall affect, reinforcing the overall sense of monotony. Not unlike *Until It No Longer*, despite the variety of lines, their tedious repetition creates a sense of boredom. In this work, however, the addition of the monotonous sound makes it even darker. Together the lines and sound become suggest depression and hopelessness. As the video's title suggests, the lines (or dust) obscure clarity. They are an unrelenting visual nuisance that never yields to openness. So, ironically, despite the fact that this video is literally brighter than the other one comprised of dark, layered graphite, it actually *feels* much darker.

Placed together, the two complete each other, showing the coexistence of light and dark and pessimism and optimism.

The 2015 animated video *A Draft (For Felix)* is Shpungin's homage to an important aesthetic inspiration, the Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who was known for his minimal, haunting, and elegiac installations that often served as conceptual memorials and abstract portraits for deceased lovers, friends, and family. Shpungin's work, which cleverly references the parenthetical titling system that Gonzalez-Torres used for his "Untitled" works, can be seen as a memorial for the artist. *A Draft (For Felix)* presents a light curtain blowing in the breeze. The video is a conceptual portrait that takes as its point of departure Gonzalez-Torres' somber installation "*Untitled*" (*Loverboy*), made in 1989. That minimal, yet highly-

personal work is comprised of simple diaphanous light blue curtains that hang inside the windows of an empty room, gracefully registering the slightest breeze. It is a poignant portrait of Gonzalez-Torres' dying lover, Ross Laycock, who had been diagnosed with AIDS and eventually died in 1991. But it is also a universal portrait of absence and loss.

Shpungin's decision to use the word "Draft" in her title cleverly evokes the layered nature of her tribute, a nod to the metaphoric and conceptual play found throughout Torres' work. The title alludes to a draft of a drawing, something that hasn't been fully resolved or is incomplete. It also suggests a breath -- that draft of air we draw into our lungs to stay alive. And it even recognizes the importance of a draft in Gonzalez-Torres' work itself, which depends on the movement of air to evoke the overall sense of absence and loss.

A Draft (For Felix), which is predominantly abstract and conceptual, suggests a culmination of sorts, an example of Shpungin's increasing efforts to pare down a work so that it better conveys "time, process, memory, longing, anticipation, failure." The minimal poetry of this work and *The Light In The Dark (The Optimist)* and *The Dust In The Light (The Pessimist)* are the opposite pole from her first animation, *Until It No Longer*. The development of the work over time demonstrates Shpungin's understanding that we need not see everything. Some details need to be omitted, retained, added, or altered in order to convey "an intangible feeling . . . a feeling that is impossible to describe in words . . . a shared universality in an experience." Thus, subsequent works, such as *Endless Ocean*, *His View*, *Disappearing Act*, and *Reoccurring Tide*, introduce anonymous outlines and silhouettes in order to create "an openness and entrance" through which we can launch ourselves "into [their] trackless empyrean." These initial

abstract forms eventually overtake the compositions, pushing out anything that could be viewed as too closely associated with something specifically personal. By the last few works, although graphite remains foundational, Shpungin's abstraction gives form, gesture, and sound the powerful, indescribable *punctum* that "pricks" the viewer, giving them "a sentiment as certain as remembrance."¹¹

¹¹ Barthes, p.70.