

## *INTRODUCTION: ALWAYS BEGIN AT THE END*

By Rachel Vera Steinberg

Diana Shpungin's work is about everything. At the very least, her oeuvre stands as an attempt to encapsulate things in their entirety: time, stories, and materials. Her solo exhibition, *Always Begin At The End*, on view at Smack Mellon in the early months of 2022, extends the legacy of this locally beloved nonprofit art institution that has supported projects by emerging and mid-career artists for over twenty-five years. Located in a converted nineteenth-century boiler building on the waterfront of Dumbo, Brooklyn, Smack Mellon specializes in ambitiously-scaled installations and serves as the perfect container for Shpungin's newest body of work, which fills the gallery's cavernous space with a vast array of common and meticulously chosen objects and ideas. Around a marble-tiled arena, Shpungin has staged an array of sculptures covering a significant portion of the gallery floor: a felled chandelier, a record player, seashells, chairs, chain link fencing, cast body parts, doors, cardboard boxes, a reconfigured U.S. flag, and loose change. Each object is a symbol connecting the artist's personal history to the political realm.

Although this exhibition continues threads that were visible throughout Shpungin's artistic career, the production of this body of work bookends a tumultuous time in United States and global history, starting around the 2016 presidential election cycle, and continuing through multiple COVID-19 lockdowns. These multivalent paradigm shifts encompass different ways to experience an end—of an era, a way of life, hope, or complacency. Amongst these ends, the artist was able to complete unfinished projects, using this strange time to close some ongoing loops and start others.

In her work, Shpungin bravely takes on the ubiquity of common symbols, such as the U.S. flag, Amazon boxes, skeletons, and pencils. Her works draw from memories that are both personal and collective, and formed through careful intersections of familiar objects and materials such as paper, graphite, concrete, and wood. While her use of objects at this breadth and scale would typically signal a blanket universalism, Shpungin remains sensitive and specific to the unique ways that each object communes with the next. The resulting works embody literal metaphors, tell stories, are at times optimistic, tragic, hopeful, and cool; and in some cases, their meanings are embedded in the actions that caused their creation. In *A Light From Below* (2018), a papier-mache chandelier lies on the ground, still tethered to the ceiling, but emitting no light. Shpungin also plays with light and darkness in the range and depth of grayscale, as well as through objects that are alternately luminous and illuminated. The installation *To*

*Extinguish The Sun (Reprise)* (2020/2022), takes form as a hand-drawn video animation of various skies on a flatscreen monitor lying face-up. Fragments of black snowflake obsidian and howlite sit on the screen, having smashed its surface right at the apex of light within the animation.

Many of Shpungin's works can also be understood as "drawings." They map out a trajectory, outlining possible future incarnations of a thing, and they are often literally covered in drawing's most ubiquitous medium: graphite pencil. This material marks, delineates, coats, and covers the surfaces and crevices of her objects, transforming them into solid shadows. Shpungin uses the medium to its full potential, covering each object without obscuring it, in a process that both masks and gives depth. In an artmaking practice, drawing often represents a beginning—the moment that shapes the ideas and plans that will be executed. Within this exhibition and the texts that follow in this catalog, Shpungin builds a personal and historical journey, delineating and dissolving the boundaries between the beginning and the end.

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**Rachel Vera Steinberg** is a curator and writer. She is the Curator and Director of Exhibitions at Smack Mellon in Brooklyn, NY. She is the co-founder of Blade Study, an online platform launched in 2021 that supports the production of web-based projects by emerging and mid-career artists. Her work focuses on science fiction as well as political, historical, and cultural distinctions between facts and fictions. She is committed to the presentation of time-based media and examining the roles of alternative art spaces and artistic agency. Her research on science fiction as an exhibition-making modality culminated in the group exhibition *A faint hum* at the Hessel Museum at Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, where she completed her master's degree. She was the 2019-2020 fellow at the Curatorial & Research Residency Program at the Julia Stoschek Collection in Düsseldorf, Germany, where she curated the exhibition *JSC ON VIEW: MYTHOLOGISTS* (2021). She was Director of SOHO20 Artists Inc. (2015-2018) and Assistant Director of NURTUREart Non-Profit Inc. (2010-2015) where she founded exhibition and event-based programs promoting time-based media and gender equity. She is the co-founder of Custom Program (2017-2019), a micro-gallery in Brooklyn focusing on humor, irreverence, and site-specificity. As an independent curator, she has curated exhibitions locally and internationally and spoken at universities throughout the United States.

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