

TO MAKE BARE THE SHADOW:  
ON DIANA SHPUNGIN'S ALWAYS BEGIN AT THE END

By Darla Migan

Diana Shpungin's *Always Begin At The End* opens a mode of attention asking us to contemplate the end. Upon initial encounter, this might seem a daunting task. But imagine if the world we live in were to end right now, what might we imagine ending first? What if the end meant never having to be afraid of whether we can drink the water? What if the end of all this meant the abolition of prisons-for-profit or simply the cancellation of student loan debt? What if by imagining 'the end,' we meant working to overcome a convenient nihilism that condemns political transformation to the dustbin of history? In *ABATE* we are invited to slow down the hastening of doom as a foregone conclusion through provocations to consider, rather than to avoid, various states of disrepair.

*ABATE* continues the ongoing exposition of fundamentals in the artist's own, admittedly obsessive, practice through the laborious, meditative manual application of nuanced tones and textures in graphite—scrawled, scratched and rubbed all over. Titular riddles draw us into Shpungin's cosmology, where rearrangements of everyday objects revel in their misuse. In an active confrontation with her own weariness—at times pressed to the point of a refreshingly angry goth-kid mockery—the artist contemplates the nature of time and diminishing democratic political values: deflated or disregarded although not yet entirely defeated.

In *To Abate Empty Offerings (Still Life 2)*, graphite pencil is manually applied to chain-link fencing and the fake leaves of several bunches of mass-produced artificial grapes. Salvaged from the artist's old barn house in upstate New York, the rusted fencing was prepared with an iron-based primer to create a smooth surface able to accept graphite shading. The gross gloss of the embedded grapes left unmarked by graphite emphasizes the range—from false fruit to forced death—of a promised American abundance that is continuously deferred. The updated fake grapes—a traditional still life subject suggesting harvest, mercantilism, wealth—are caught and hung high. Accentuating the plant's own leafy appendages by coating them in a carbon-based mineral (from which all life originates) links perennial questions on referentiality between art and nature to the unflinchingly lethal proclivities of America's past and present. By chemically weaving together the possibility for enjoining minerals already touched by time and manipulated by labor, Shpungin draws on a hybrid divination, her own cynical take on nature worship boldly taking hold of the aesthetic pleasures of artifice.

Shpungin's minimalist sculptural field, influenced by the anti-monumental sculpture of Robert Gober and the grid-making obsessions of early Conceptual artists, is torqued by emotion which attempts to stay present with grief in protest against our fleeting collective memory. In the spirit of Paul Thek's *Technological Reliquaries* series, violations against the body are invoked across Shpungin's anti-objects. *To Abate Empty Offerings (Still Life 1)* lingers at the securitized borders and cages of detention centers where arrival to the United States still means arriving in linked chains. Stuck in a holding pattern, fences continue to mark out who belongs where and to which violent schematics of the nation-state. Situating a no-place where dreams of crossing over to a better life are denied, the graphite coated fabric flowers, fallen tree branches, and plastic cornucopia turn withheld bounty into strange fruit.

Are we Friedrich Nietzsche's clever beasts, just spinning out on a tiny chunk of stardust condemned to die? As escapist attitudes are pumped up by political fearmongering and our genuine confusion is abetted by capitalist expansion (happily feeding off the idea of an end to humankind), the hope of assimilating smoothly into a fantasy of American life increasingly feels much more like cruel satire. Shpungin points out that graphite was first used to mark ownership of grazing sheep under the feudal system of enclosures. A fetishistic or formalist call to experiment in naturally occurring grays—metals and minerals—is intertwined with the artist's philosophical impulse to understand the violent potential humans possess for organizing and ordering through artifice. Where does the earth end and human worlding begin?

A performance of intentional redundancy doubles down on artificializing objects already decaying or badly mimicking nature—brittle bouquets, kitchen sponges, seashells either rendered or washed ashore—are all sacrificed to the graphite's shadowy effect. This process of obscuring gives form to recognizing 'ends' across many registers either by putting distance between intended representations or by creating situations of intimacy that uniquely juxtapose various kinds of illusions. Thus, the intentionality in the effort to cover objects with graphite also produces new ways to endure. A test of and testament to the artist's hand, what emerges are powerful meditations on temporality as Shpungin considers the folly of believing that we are superior to nature. For example, if left untouched, graphite would slowly (in about a billion years) turn into diamonds. But by recalibrating the flow of pressure from the comparatively meager (and mighty!) graphite pencil, Shpungin uses her own haptic pressure to intervene on the violent terms of extraction, hopefully encouraging reflections on the past.

Many of the works on view for the first time in this exhibition started over the last five years in a state of despair over POTUS 45, but the temporality of the exhibition crisscrosses reverberations of the distant and near past. The polished marble floor of *Stage To Build A Chronicle* (the only artwork untouched by graphite) doubles as both the artist's altar and archival-archeological site. At one edge of the stage stands *A Line On The Earth Forges Holes In The Sky*. The disassembled American flag with the right wing of its eagle finial flipped upside-down, is completely saturated in a silvery graphite-black to expose the grand dissimulation while also attempting to unravel a symbol of America's white supremacist foundations. During the height of private citizens and public officials' calls for American fascism during the Trump campaign and presidency, Shpungin said, "My brain was filled with shit."

Directly, I contemplate the complexity of belonging as someone who is also the daughter of immigrants. Slicing into and mimicking the flag with a roughhewn symbol of a broken Americana also parallels how we only learn in snippets about the place where our immigrant parents came from before they arrived to the United States. In the obscuring function that maintains the shape and space of symbolic objects to expose their duplicitous functions, catharsis feels far from the necessity of simply learning to withstand the incompleteness of origin stories. Here, we are instead attending to the constant desire to unstitch ourselves from the unrelenting dispatch of fear. And yet, are we the daughters of an American revolution yet to come?

When did it all begin? How do the cruel games that children play in classrooms before or after reciting the pledge of allegiance to this or that nation become the sadistic roles adults are trained to abide? In *Origin Story*, the artist's cast and mounted hand with bandaged fingers has a pencil stuck into the wall between its digits. Where did the game 'Russian roulette' come from? Did it have an origin in the "five finger fillet" game? I ask about the artist's past to find out if we have a sort of late twentieth century first-generation immigrant daughter's sensibility in common. Shpungin asks me: "Remember when George 'Dubyah' Bush told us to go shopping after 9/11?" I vaguely remember but memory and yearning work differently when experience is inherited by way of our parents' particular ways of surviving and thriving. If American consumer capitalism is all that western freedom means, and yearning for communism is untenable as a survivor of the Soviet state, then what? Just as my granny said to her children, we make do. In *The Soul Leaving The Body*, a crumpled handmade graphite paper balloon attached to raffia ribbon appears to be floating above a wooden sickle/scythe. That is, until one approaches and sees upon closer inspection that the balloon is nearly flush with the gallery wall. Despite invoking fragility from every angle, the presence, scale, and configuration of the composition—each individual element modest in comparison with the exhibition space—stave off hopelessness. We remain witnesses for the past and present, we are here, and things still could be otherwise.

And what happens now that we are making a life as the never-quite-American children of immigrants who made it to this wealth-extracting nation? *Poem: A Damn Haze To Obey* is an anagrammatic title built up from the names of major corporations: Amazon, eBay, and Home Depot. A wall of graphite matching the dimensions of the gleaming marble stage

below shows pencil-scratched cutup boxes, repurposed shipping cardboard mounted on roofing paper. Screwed to the wall, plastic grocery bags (now outlawed in New York state) are jammed deep into open-faced cubbyholes, boxes now rendered useless to circulating more commodities. As the grammar of the title symbolically restructures these seemingly unconquerable corporations, can we also take charge of the remainder and somehow subvert those “naturally” occurring public sculptures of crisp cardboard in their clear plastic bags? Out of sight and hauled away in time for the next week’s new mounds, are these the last of the last totems? On the left side of *Poem* is a lonely sentinel, *Sisyphian Symbiotic Overachievement*, that only serves to protect the ghost of pencils past with its transparent box of sheltered shavings underneath. And at the far-right edge of *Poem*, a lit cigarette threatens to give into the destructive urge, both animating the work and threatening to burn down the whole damn thing.

The objects that comprise *ABATE* performatively rehearse the contradictions between the unstoppable march of time and our capacity to reorient the arrangements of life from whatever remains available for ongoing manipulation. Reeling in or spinning out from various failures of so-called “progress,” this teetering between urgent criticism and slowed-down contemplation is felt in Shpungin’s buoying acts of repetition. The video animation *To Extinguish The Sun (Reprise)*, composed of drawings destroyed yet looping endlessly from below, is reminiscent of Vija Celmins labor-intensive and meticulous paintings that allude to nature’s only seeming endlessness as well as our shared finitude. Small instruments—the faithful pencil, worn medical tape, stray concrete blocks, the shiny penny—find their range by being able to structure this complex world even as we are reminded of how insubstantial it all may be.

For example, graphite—a stable and permanent material, yet easily erasable—may mimic the rise and fall of the art star: In *Paper Weight (Win)*, a graphite-coated piece of drawing paper is crushed by a jagged graphite-coated half-brick. Once embossed with some forgotten company name, the repurposed detritus now self-deprecatingly spells out the word ‘win’ from its lowly pedestal. Graphite is a stain always holding itself open as a material inevitably fading—to establish a mark opens up a questionable position requiring repeated experiments in coaching stains that ultimately fail to sustain themselves. As the graphite eventually fades into a residue, obsession continually curbs finality. The obsessive uptake of a residual substance now opens up the possibility for world-making without monument. That is, the other side of the duality of this messy obsession is that it drives the productive awareness of impermanence. As she gaily defaces the surface of everything, every mark remains a marring to register the artist’s doubt on the stability of various states of being.

Origin stories, claims to purity, and the politics of secularized liberal guilt are all bound up. But how and for whom? In *Pure Clean Power Deflation Ruminaton*, graphite pencil is hand-applied to the entire surface of a prayer stand. A deflated football sits below, as a cast of a human leg and foot bones become the offering. The left side of the exposed interior of the prayer stand holds a tiny mountain made of unwrapped bars of Ivory soap. The position of the sparkling mirror—inspired by experiments in empathy for patients of phantom limb syndrome—slices the devotional furniture in two, and only reflects back my legs from torso to knees. Both mocking false idols and provoking viewers to kneel down next to the deflated black football, this cosmology suggests a particular sacrifice made for a particular cause. Remember how when Colin Kaepernick knelt in defense of Black lives how he was praised or booed, and later how easily the story slipped away from collective memory like soap down the drain?

We speak earnestly of astrology or make mini altars of devotion (see *Perhaps Not The Model Sentiment Of Devotion*) insisting on the right to sooth ourselves however unscientifically or idiosyncratically. (I for one am not ashamed to be stoked by ever more luxurious possibilities for our outdoor seating temples, which could also easily double as shelter for the unhoused). Furnishing useless to domestication but good enough for domicile—chair legs bound with medical tape, window blinds crushed by calming crystals, a crest-fallen chandelier, useless coinage—all feel like an anti-apocalyptic homage to carrying on as we can. Inspired by Joseph Cornell’s capacity to scale the cosmos down to a childhood

memory, Shpungin reveals how simple instruments can build up to and collectively stand-in for makeshift and down-to-earth reliquaries.

To register what might constitute the beginning of this or that end means asking what we take to be foundational or grounding. The natural 'ends' of humankind understood as an (northwestern euro) Enlightenment-era philosophical question attempted to reconfigure dogmatic religious beliefs into a rational explanation of drives or purposes for our species. But now, after repeatedly losing faith in the promise of freedom in liberal democracies, what remains is the question of how we will seek out our own values—especially and enthusiastically dislodged from an *au courant* fascination with a total destruction of the planet.

As Dionysian energies flow through the repetition of hand-applied graphite, moments of tense embrace emerge. Shpungin's minor-chord meditations on ethical demands recruit impermanence at the risk of exposing a certain kind of sublimity from within decay. That is, rather than relinquishing memory to erasure and succumbing to despair, a task arises. The all-over technique taking up graphite's gray makes for a felt tonal shift whereby the process of obscuring suggests a disenchantment with reality, held in an encounter of disappointment with an untenable situation, but one which also urges a reckoning with a concrete disgrace.

When I first encountered Diana Shpungin's art it was in an exhibition installed in the early winter months of 2020, in a doctor's office on Manhattan's upper west side. In my review of that exhibition, I wrote the following about the artist: "[Shpungin] controls Medusa's magic as she 'carves' layers out of pulp, seemingly turning paper to stone in the aptly titled Good Bad ...." Like a Beuysian good-bad shaman, moving against the writing on the wall, Shpungin's work cast spells to celebrate the end of false hope deflating the empty promises of a purity. Working through graphite tonalities, across smooth and rough edges, in matte or luminescent planes, new surfaces suggest reevaluation of the historical matters and materials that lie just beneath. Conjuring a lingering empathy, *ALWAYS BEGIN AT THE END* is an exhibition in which personal narrative and material moments connect time, loss, and labor. How are we entangled, disproportionately considered, yet also always in a position to encourage resistance against accepting this or that end as purely inevitable?

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