

CONVERSATION LOOP

With Gabriel de Guzman and Diana Shpungin

Interview at Diana Shpungin's studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn on October 3, 2021 with follow-up email correspondence through the end of 2021

Gabriel de Guzman: I was first introduced to your work through the Bronx Museum's Artist in the Marketplace (AIM) program in 2012. I was one of the three co-curators who organized *Bronx Calling: The Second AIM Biennial* (2013), and you were one of the artists we selected for the program and culminating exhibition. I was deeply taken by the care with which you create your works, using medical tape to mend broken objects like furniture, and methodically coating them in graphite by hand. I find your work to be so moving—not in a cloying way, but in a subtly powerful way. I've followed your work since then and have been continually impressed—from the house in Grand Rapids, Michigan, that you and participants covered in graphite, to your hand-drawn video animations. When I was Curator & Director of Exhibitions at Smack Mellon (2017–2021), you submitted a proposal for a site-specific installation. Your work has become even more compelling over the years, and I decided to give you a solo show. I felt confident that you could take on the challenge of creating a project that could match the immense scale of Smack Mellon's industrial-era building. When I first met you 10 years ago, I was a curator at Wave Hill, and in February 2021, I came back to Wave Hill as Director of Arts. I love being back at Wave Hill; my only regret is that I don't get to work with the phenomenal artists, like you, who I selected to exhibit at Smack Mellon in 2021–22. Now you have this wonderful book being published in conjunction with your exhibition, and I'm thrilled that you asked me to contribute this interview. Thank you for inviting me to be involved in your project. It's bittersweet, too, because we're not only celebrating your creative achievement, but also marking the second year of a global pandemic. In this unprecedented, contentious and frightening time that we're living in, I find your work to be extremely relevant. First, I'd like to ask you to set the stage for us. Can you talk about the tone of your work and how people have perceived it?

Diana Shpungin: Firstly, I am so thrilled to have you be a part of this exhibition and so filled with gratitude for our decade- (gasp!) long relationship. Lovely to go down memory lane a bit, too. To answer your question, the literal tone of my work is generally gray from my obscene use of graphite pencil. Although in this exhibition there are subtle moments of color, which is a big thing for me, as I've often felt that too much color could cloud the sentiment—that intangible feeling that I am after. Words just can't describe in the same way that an object can; it's an entirely different language and way of thinking. But for a few works at least, it seemed to work well this time around to have some color as an

added focal point. My work's conceptual tone, however, has been perceived in numerous ways. I think that is up to the individual viewer and what they bring to the work when they view it. For some, my work might seem like a downer at face value, but it's actually optimistic, and sometimes even absurdly humorous, when you think about it for a moment and give the work a bit of time. People have responded to my work on an intellectual, philosophical and/or a personal level. Some might simply respond to it based on materiality, process and craft. And I find that that is the exciting part. I, of course, always have my reasons for making each piece, but when you actually exhibit the art, the shared and unique experiences dimensionalize the work further and get me thinking about my original ideas in new ways. It's really this beautiful give-and-take scenario that I am after with the viewer. It's like the work doesn't really exist until it is viewed and interacted with.

GdG: Given our divisive political moment, do you think it's possible for art to change minds or to signal something hopeful?

DS: Well, I often wonder how artists can make a difference with their work on whatever slew of issues we are grappling with. I wholeheartedly think it's possible, but not in a scientifically measurable way. My philosophy is that it's accumulative, more of planting a seed, providing an open space to contemplate, to view things from another perspective, to allow viewers to marinate in an idea and see where it takes them. And I think that in itself is hopeful. I think to be an artist you have to be hopeful. It takes a lot of energy and resilience to be an artist. We are creating an experience reflecting on how we see the world around us, or how we wish the world would be. All art is political. But what we choose to create and how we each decide to approach it is an individual determination. For me it's about metaphor and empathy and familiar iconography rather than a blunt, in-your-face proclamation, although some might disagree with that assessment. I've always loved the "bait-and-switch" methodology when dealing with political subjects. For example, one of my all-time favorite works is David Wojnarowicz's Untitled (One Day This Kid...) (1990). When you initially come to it you might think it's one thing and then it takes you on this journey before the message hits you. I think this could be effective at reaching biased audiences that need to hear the message. I often show this work to my students and no matter how many times I look at it, it leaves me gutted, but also hopeful, because initiating any emotion in a viewer is a powerful thing. At minimum art can give us hope in that we are not alone in our thinking, in our struggles, in our triumphs, and in the shared strangeness that is being alive. But if we change a few perspectives in the process that is a bonus.

GdG: It's hard to imagine what else there could be because we're so entrenched in this capitalist structure that pervades our culture and that dictates who controls the government, the market and the people. As an artist, how do you challenge those prevailing systems?

DS: In this exhibition, there's a bit of a poetic gesture of pointing to the (somewhat failed) American experiment. I am an immigrant and was born under Communism. The promise of America was such a hopeful one for my family coming here when I was a child. But now, at least a good portion of the country has been misinformed, misguided, and manipulated for political gain by a few at the top. We are living in a strange time, and I can't help but think of all the strife my family experienced in the USSR and how I see parallels in America now. It's really quite tragic. These last few years have clearly tested our democracy and I hope have taught some of our political leaders that laws need to be changed to prevent a complete collapse and more suffering. In preparing this exhibition, I've thought a lot about the complexities of power: who has power and how do those in power exercise their authority. Artists use their power in a very direct way. It's powerful to create something that never existed before. That's why I'm an artist. To me that's real power. Some might disagree. But most are so concerned with the short term, about who has more money and fame. People often put a lot of their energy into anger, but I'd rather channel that energy in another way—through my work and by recognizing that art has value. Perhaps to my detriment, I have been less concerned about the art market, and more concerned about what art can do to help us understand this human experience. Art as solely an investment ceases to be art if it's locked away for no one to see or engage with it.

GdG: What do you see as the value in art and in the work you're making?

DS: If you mean cultural value, I think art still has the power to change minds, especially politically driven works. You don't know who's going to come across your work. When I encounter art, it can shift my thinking and take me to a place I didn't expect to go. And I'm sure we've all had that experience. It doesn't have to be something as black and white as convincing someone who to vote for or which party to align with. It can be about having empathy. Empathy is so important. The cruelty that has come to the surface over the last several years is so jarring to me, like the children who are kept in cages at the Mexico-U.S. border. How can that be anything but cruel and unacceptable? I can't comprehend it, but I don't get numb to these atrocities. I can still feel and empathize. To me that's valuable.

GdG: So you still have a visceral response to what's happening in the world?

DS: Yes, I do. I think we have to, no matter how hard it is. I don't want to become anesthetized to it. That's when dangerous things happen, when we glaze over the atrocities. My work reflects the way I process what I see. I've had people come to me in tears over my work, but that's not the point. I'm not a sadist and don't aim to make the viewer cry. It's more about taking someone to an emotive place—to make them feel something, anything. I think we're all here to connect with each other and experience whatever this mysterious world is and try to have as little suffering as possible.

GdG: I agree that if an artwork can generate thought or spark emotion, then it really is powerful. It has the potential to get someone to think or feel differently or see something from a perspective that they haven't known or understood before.

DS: Or even to experience beauty. Some don't like to use that "b" word. But beauty can be many things. It doesn't have to be an aesthetic. It can be an idea. Words can be beautiful, like poetry, for example. Empathy is beautiful.

GdG: But why isn't aesthetic beauty okay? When I first saw the ancient Egyptian bust of Nefertiti in person, I got teary because I was so moved by its beauty and because it was created so long ago (c. 14th century BCE). We always think our current civilization is so advanced, but the culture that made that work of art, how can you not say that they were at the height of their achievements?

DS: Beauty can absolutely move us to act. Not superficial beauty, but beauty in the sublime sense like your Nefertiti experience. I had a similar experience when I saw the Diane Arbus exhibition at the Met years ago. I was astonished that in person I was moved to tears from the work. I had seen countless reproductions and did not have the same response. There was something about seeing the quality of the prints in person that tapped into an entirely different understanding. It somehow also makes me think about the Mayan calendar and the mystery of how that ancient society made it. This is why I make work by hand, why I like materiality. I don't think we are connected to nature or to each other anymore. I spent some time on the island of Hainan, China, years ago for a project. For two weeks, I watched the sunset from the same spot for an hour-and-a-half every day without distraction. I thought about the Mayan calendar and how essentially what the ancient Mayans did was stop and pay attention. They watched and noticed the difference and charted it, and they figured out various aspects of the natural world. It's scientific methodology. In just two weeks of sitting in the same spot, I noticed the changes in the tides, the position of the moon, the sounds, the smells, the

birds flying by each day—very distinct things occurring in nature. As humans, we don't stop and pay attention intently anymore. I believe that experiencing nature in a tactile, physical way helps connect to knowledge and the world. We have to stop staring at our screens if we want to remain human.

GdG: I definitely see that concept coming through in your work. When you make work, you connect with it through the materials you use, like meticulously coating an object with graphite pencil by hand. You could probably just use a machine to powder-coat an object in gray.

DS: Yes, but it wouldn't be the same. The thing with graphite is that it needs pressure to give it a sheen. And for me, coating an object in its entirety, is about meditating on the object. Every single inch of it has been touched by a human hand, encasing it. When I make work, I like to imagine what would happen if an object disintegrated and just the graphite would remain floating in space. Ha, I can't figure out how to do that! But that would be my ideal dream for the work. And with billions of years of pressure my work would also amount to a whole lot of diamonds. I guess that's one kind of investment value, long term. Maybe I need to do a residency with chemists and engineers.

GdG: Ha ha, or with physicists! Can you say more about the materials you use? These objects that you incorporate into your work and cover with graphite—where do you source them from?

DS: Aside from the purest drawing elements of pencil and paper, I source material from many places. As an artist, I always find myself in this middle-ground, kind of purgatory, of both hating things, but really loving sculpture. There is enough, or too much stuff, too much clutter in the world already, and so I try to repurpose some of it. For example, in the exhibition, the cast doors came from what was actually my old studio door. The prayer stand I acquired from a very handsome monk in New Hampshire who gave it away (there is a metaphor in there somewhere). The chain-link fencing came from the two-hundred-year-old dairy barn in the Catskills that my husband and I are renovating. The chairs were all used in my home or studio at some point. And what person born under Communism doesn't have a few sickles laying around the house? Ha! But in earnestness, I really think about sustainability and try to avoid purchasing more new things, and use what I have, or what I or others would be throwing out. There is something moving about immortalizing these objects and giving them a repurposed existence, rather than ending up in a landfill. It's like they served their practical function and now they transcend that and become a work of art. But that does not always work out, as sculpture sometimes needs what it needs. In the exhibition I kind of call myself

out with the large-scale wall work *Poem: A Damn Haze To Obey*. The work is a sizeable assortment of collected cardboard boxes that are hand-coated in graphite pencil and placed in an organized grid-like formation on a base of roof tar paper, with selected packaging and other material that was laying around the studio. The boxes were collected over time from materials used to produce the exhibition—mostly from three corporations: Amazon, Home Depot and eBay. The title, *Poem: A Damn Haze To Obey*, is an anagram that I came up with from the names of these three companies, which I felt eerily referred to our often forced or unintended commerce dependency. This was the last work I made for the show. I made all the other sculptures first, but in this work it's about where the sculptures came from, literally. It reveals what is normally hidden and signals a selfaccepting failure.

GdG: And in your sculptural work, you often repair “broken” objects. What is this process of transforming an object for you? Do you see this act as changing the item’s meaning or its iconography? Once an object is broken, can it ever really be restored?

DS: Yes, the notion of repair is super important to me. I think it stems from growing up in a very frugal immigrant household where every little thing was repaired over and over. I was embarrassed about it then, but now I think repair shows care, empathy, and responsibility, and certainly prevents wastefulness. However, I never properly repair anything in my work, it's more about the aesthetics of repair, it's more about elevating the repair to be the importance of the thing, the history of the life of that object and all that it holds, not about repairing an object so that it is useable. The repair in itself is enough. The objects are then still broken forever in that sense but now have a new kind value. Transforming each item usually balances out some formal and conceptual reasoning. It sounds ridiculous, but the objects speak to me, they tell me what they want. Sometimes it takes a long time, years even, of sitting and staring at a thing that I am hellbent at resolving. This transformative process can certainly change an item's meaning, redefine it, reveal it, or maybe even heighten it.

GdG: You've mentioned that when people see your work, they often conclude that it's about memory and loss, like the work you've made about your late father, for example. But thinking about memory and loss makes me wonder about a related, adjacent feeling, and that's nostalgia. How do you feel about nostalgia? Do you see it as something that's healthy and good, or is it something that can be dangerous?

DS: I think people confuse nostalgia and sentimentality as the same thing, but they're different. I don't like nostalgia because it connotes that you're looking back in a fake

way: “The good old days.” In the ‘50s, everything seemed pure and nice, but it really wasn’t. Nostalgia is usually rooted in a falsehood, I think, whereas sentimentality is more directly tied to meaningful impressions and memory. It’s more open, more nuanced and could denote something between joy and pain simultaneously. I always attempt to pay attention to what the work wants first, because sentimentality has the danger of being self-indulgent if you are not careful how you approach it. For the earlier work you refer to, I really didn’t want to make work about my father. I wanted to make work about loss, mortality and death, but also about everything surrounding those concepts. The work wasn’t about one person. I like dualities. One thing can have opposite meanings, or thoughts, or depictions. Light and dark, science and sentimentality. A curator a long time ago saw my early work and described it as very stoic. Yes, they thought it was personal, but in this clean and anesthetic way. But I like that tension. How do you process death and loss? If I just make personal mementos, it won’t resonate with people. It would fall into that self-indulgent gray zone. I’m very interested in the topic of the personal in contemporary art. For me it’s not about what you can reveal. It’s more about questioning where the line is between what’s personal and what’s public.

GdG: Or what’s private and what’s public.

DS: Yes, and private is often based on what’s considered salacious or embarrassing. I think it has to do with shame.

GdG: And that’s the line you’re not willing to cross?

DS: No, I’m willing to cross any line if there’s a good reason for it. Where it gets overly sentimental is when you don’t look at it with objective eyes. For example, it’s not about me, or my father, or any one person. It is about what it means to be a human living in our collective, created society. That’s what prompted that clinical comment from the curator who saw my early work. Even if I make something personal, you can’t look at it and know what I was experiencing in my life. You can only look at it and see it as a metaphor. On a daily basis I am always questioning the myriad of societal constructs we are all forced to live and function in. Art is my way around that. It’s extremely strange to be an artist and make these things that most of society doesn’t necessarily understand or value. But that’s okay, and more reason why we need more of it—“it” being art, that is.

GdG: But all that you experienced is still in the work. Then personal emotion you went through is referenced in the work, even if it’s not evident to the viewer.

DS: Yes, but can anything not be personal? As people, we are interested in things, experiencing things. It's not like we should tell everyone everything, but why are certain topics not discussable? People don't like to talk about death; it's too painful. People process it differently, and that's normal. Some might be fine with work that deals with death and others might shame you for revealing something deemed "too personal."

GdG: Can you talk more about how you address the political in your work?

DS: When someone tells me they are not political, I ask, "Do you breathe? Do you eat? Do you live? Do you have a job? Do you do anything?"

GdG: Do you take up space? I mean, that's political.

DS: Yes, and in my work, I think the political can be addressed in a more subversive way, like a subliminal build-up. Back to planting a seed and beginning to shift the narrative from there. Something I often say to students is "less clarity, more mystery," because most people want to come to their own conclusions. There are some objects in the show that certainly lean toward a more overt political metaphor, but I will allow each viewer to interpret that for themselves. Because, if you have to explain the punchline of a joke, then the joke failed.

GdG: In this project, you've also enlisted a few collaborators to help you explore new creative methods, like choreography, music, performance, and poetry. Tell us about these collaborations. What inspired you to approach uncharted territories in your work at this particular time and with this body of work?

DS: Yes, it's true. While I have often collaborated with artists, fabricators, curators and writers (like you!), I have been thinking a lot lately about why this new branching out into other fields came about. Looking back, like many of us, I think the pandemic years left me unconsciously lonely, isolated, a little bored and with more time on my hands. So, I think collaborating with others kept that at bay. I decided to expand outside my standard way of working solely within the visual arts. I have always loved ballet and piano, took lessons in both when I was a child and was horrible at both. So naturally, ha, why not explore this with people that are really good at what they do and see if I can interject my thoughts into those fields. I am totally (metaphorically) naked putting this out there for others to see and hear. It's a great big experiment, a risk, and that's the adrenaline and

the elation of it. I have assembled a real motley crew of collaborators in the most complimentary use of that term possible. I've never been part of a clique and have friends from all walks of life. It's been fascinating to put random professionals together who don't know each other and see what happens. I have been collaborating on all aspects of a performance for about a year with the phenomenal Tatiana Nu ez, a classically trained ballerina; Mick Rossi, a prolific experimental musician who is part of the Phillip Glass Ensemble; and David Quinn, an incredible fashion designer who created a costume. Although I am a lifelong connoisseur, I've never choreographed or worked on music seriously before, and it's been really stimulating to work with a dancer—a living, breathing body who is an extension of my sculptural ideas. It's been incredible to see a 15-minute score take shape, which developed from the catalyst that is my purposely bad, out-of-tune piano playing. And lastly, I have worked with accomplished poets in the past and was going to enlist one to pen a new poem for the exhibition catalogue, but after much urging from friends and colleagues, I ended up writing a poem myself! My first serious poem. I love writing titles, and many people have said how poetic my titles always are, so it felt natural to start from there. In the poem, also titled *Always Begin At The End*, I took a word from each of the work's titles in the show and wrote a sentence from a stream of consciousness. I ordered the sentences by length and made it so it could be read both forwards or backwards, as a mirror image. I'm really pleased with the results and dare I say might write more now that I have (almost) gotten over the fear of it all. I never like being too comfortable when I am making art. I think interesting things can happen when the feeling of being mortified comes out of your invention.

GdG: It's so important to push yourself, and that's what I love about your work. It also helps to have friends you admire and trust who can guide you. You mentioned how important titles are and how you really spend time crafting them to reflect your work. How does the title of this exhibition, *Always Begin At The End*, resonate with how you're addressing the political era that we've been living through? And also how does time function in your work? I think the title hints at that, too. Maybe in this interview we did begin at the end!

DS: All the work in the show encapsulates everything I've been thinking about and processing over the last several years, which is a lot. The personal, the political, and where those things intertwine. In previous work, the political narratives were more ambiguous, but now I'm addressing those issues much more directly, at least for my brand of work. I can't help myself. A painfully large portion of my cerebral real estate has been filled with the current events of the last five years. I'm thinking about divisions, borders, everything is injured... We have created a big societal monster. I often like to

imagine if all this madness in the world did not exist, what would we make art about? We probably would be more in tune with the natural world and our human experience. As I said, I LOVE titles, and I do consider them to be a crucial component of the work. And my work has always been about time. The exhibition title can be interpreted in a multitude of ways. It refers to the cyclical nature of things—where one thing stops, another starts. Sometimes we repeat things. It's about how we tell a story, where we begin, how we interpret it, what we leave out, and what we choose to include. It's also about hope and getting through the tumultuous experiences—envisioning an end to all that ails us, from the divisiveness, racial tensions, to the pandemic, to our democracy hanging by a thread. Of course, you can also think of it in a more macabre way referring to the overarching reality of death looming over our existence, especially with the pandemic and so much loss around us. It's also simply about making art, the process of it. For this exhibition, I was in my live/work studio for many months due to the pandemic, barely leaving. I decided to finish all the works I started over the last five years that were incomplete. So, it's a literal ending to the works' making and the beginning of their existence in being seen. Also, coincidentally, the unintentional abbreviation for *Always Begin At The End* is "Abate." I thought that was a wonderful, serendipitous discovery. The title has many interpretations, is a kind of riddle, a continuous loop, and that's how I prefer it.

Gabriel de Guzman is Director of Arts & Chief Curator at Wave Hill, where he oversees the visual and performing arts program at this public garden and cultural center in the Bronx. From 2017 to 2021, he was Curator & Director of Exhibitions at Smack Mellon, where he organized group and solo exhibitions featuring emerging and under-recognized mid-career artists whose work explored critical, socially relevant issues. Before joining Smack Mellon, de Guzman held a previous position at Wave Hill; as Curator of Visual Arts, organizing solo projects for emerging artists, as well as thematic group exhibitions that explored human connections to the natural world. As a guest curator, he has also presented shows at Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Programs, BronxArtSpace, Dyckman Farmhouse Museum, Rush Arts Gallery, En Foco at Andrew Freedman Home, the Affordable Art Fair New York, Northern Manhattan Arts Alliance, and the Bronx Museum's 2013 AIM Biennial. Prior to Wave Hill, he was a curatorial assistant at The Jewish Museum. His essays have been published in *Nueva Luz: Photographic Journal* and in catalogues for the Museum of Arts and Design, the Arsenal Gallery at Central Park, Kenise Barnes Fine Art, and the art institutions mentioned above. He holds an M.A. in art history from Hunter College and a B.A. in art history from the University of Virginia.

* Essay from the forthcoming catalog for "Always Begin At The End"
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