

IV

# Dasha

# Shishkin

*Death, Where Is Thy Sting*, 2012, mixed media on mylar, 76.2 x 106.68cm.  
All images courtesy of Susanne Viehmeier Los Angeles Projects. Photos: Robert Wedemeyer

Encounters

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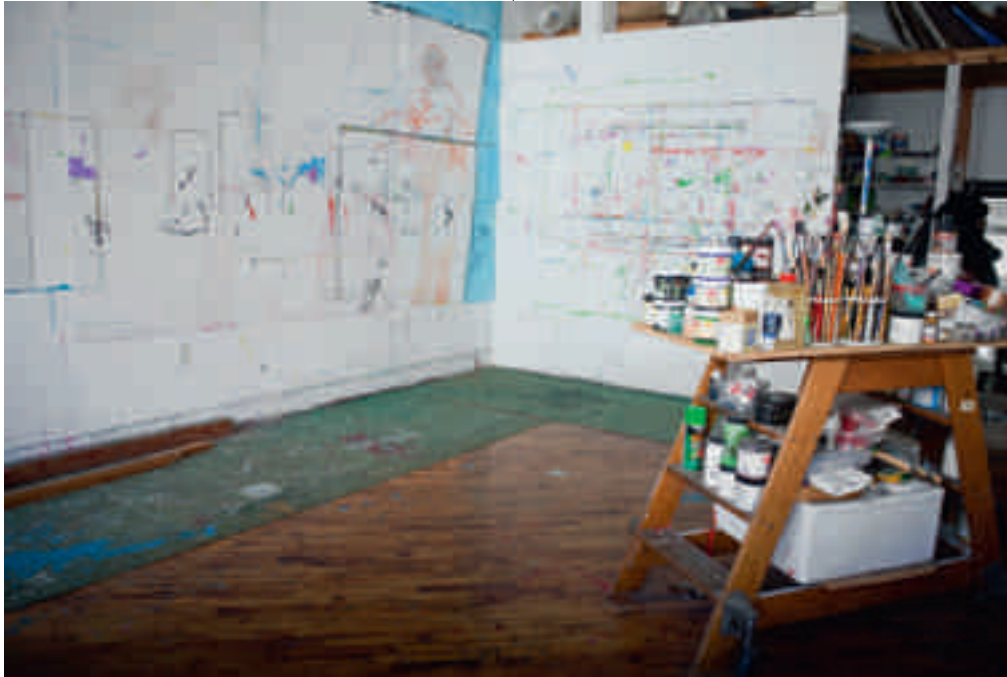
COMPLETE

GESTURES

Text by Katya Tylevich  
Portrait by Paolo Di Lucente



Moscow-born, New York-based artist Dasha Shishkin describes her works as drawings rather than paintings and thinks of those protuberances that reviewers insist on calling phalluses as noses. Here, she talks to Katya Tylevich about her practice – and why she prefers to introduce herself as a librarian rather than an artist.



Dasha Shishkin worries about the toxicity of her art supplies after she notices that her schnauzer, Muhtar, is dyed a St Patrick's Day green from tail to whiskers. Muhtar, who'd spent the day rolling around Shishkin's studio in Bushwick, now wraps his paws around my leg ('not to hump, just to hug,' Shishkin clarifies), as his owner leads me down the hall of this industrial Brooklyn building, which houses several other artists' and designers' workshops. In the late evening, no other lights are on. Shishkin says she arrives early enough each morning so that the start of her workday looks very much like the end of it – especially in these grey New York winters.

We sit down on two foldout chairs in one of two rooms Shishkin rents here, beneath some of her paintings ('drawings,' she says). The artworks are colourful, frenetic moments, which move with human revelry and drunkenness, and hum with sounds of smiley violence and anxiety, clinking glasses and broken dishes.

Born in Moscow, Shishkin came to New York as a young teenager in the early '90s. Her parents both worked in the arts and theatre in Moscow – a big deal, when Shishkin reveals to me she once saw Xryusha (the pig puppet dear to Soviet-raised children, in the way Big Bird is to others) lying on a bed in her grandmother's room. 'It was a magical thing to live behind the theatre curtain, go to rehearsals and actually be asked for my opinion at such a young age,'

she says. And the language and gestures of theatre appear in Shishkin's work today, both in her method (sitting down each day to draw is as essential as showing up to rehearsal) and in the dramatic scenes that she develops through her work, in those magnificently light tableaux, made heavy by subtext.

— *Why do you make the distinction that your works are drawings and not paintings?*

I originally felt that if I called the works 'paintings', then they would be judged as paintings, and at the time I couldn't fathom what a painting truly was. I felt that by calling my work 'drawing' I was actually protecting it. Don't call a duck a swan. I also remember that, as a young art student, when I read Picasso's quote about drawing being an act of voyeurism and painting an act of participation, I thought: 'Well, with my mousey personality, I'm really a voyeur. I'm sticking to drawing.' [Laughs.]

I should say, though, that I've never thought of drawing as subpar to painting. I think the conversation about drawing versus painting is actually driven by language and not material. Drawing is about line, not necessarily paper or pencil. I'm interested in the economy of the line and how just a few lines can create the illusion of space. If I happen to colour in between those lines with paint, I don't think the work automatically becomes a painting. Also, I only paint as God



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intended: with colours straight out of the can, never mixed. And at the end of the day, it’s all just words. If the work doesn’t visually appeal to a specific person, it doesn’t matter which active verb is applied to it. In that sense, I separate my conversations about work from the work itself.

— *Voyeurism is part of the conversation, is it also part of the work?*

Yes, absolutely. When I draw, I have the feeling that I’m leaving this life and entering another – or at least, staring at it. I think drawing is a bit like riding a horse, and simultaneously feeling the muscles of the horse and the person riding it. It’s not fantasy, so much as the element of ‘What if?’ What if I were taller? for example. It’s so cheesy, but in a way I think it really is magical: the swiftness of drawing, the ability to make things up and allow them to happen rapidly. I try not to rehearse my work ahead of time or work toward any master plan. I would prefer to start over several times on different sheets of paper until something right comes along. You do it once, and if it’s good, it’s good. If it’s not, do it again.

— *Do you remember deciding to become an artist?*

I remember applying to art school out of intimidation before the great American collegiate system. I couldn’t imagine having to write all those horrible school papers, so I thought art school might be an easy way out. Once I got to art school, I realized a lot of my classmates had had the same brilliant idea. [Laughs.] I went on to graduate school as a natural step in an arts education. But it was only after I was invited to my first group show that things started to move in a more meaningful way.

I also always drew as a kid. My brother and I played these games where we would draw and simultaneously describe what we were drawing – always very literal scenes. I think, in some ways, it was our mode of escape. Funnily enough, I guess it still is. Drawing is a way to close the door and enter an agenda-less world of whatever you want to be that day.

— *Do you enter it as yourself or as a different character?*

I enter the drawing as every person in it: eating, drinking, dancing. I maintain that there is no real protagonist in my work – or, maybe, that every figure is the protagonist, both as I’m drawing, and later, when looking at the drawing. These works are incomplete gestures: a hand that’s temporarily touching something or withdrawing just after touching something. No beginning or end, no set or active roles. There are endless opportunities for people to enter

or engage with one figure, then move on to another, or not engage with any one figure at all. That’s always a healthy option. I do realize that I’m often not engaged, even with those things I want to engage with. The feeling isn’t every-one’s cup of tea, but it’s there for them, anyway.

— *Have you felt your works change over the years?*

The palette has changed, the abstraction of the bodies has changed. At the same time, I can tell that certain themes will never go away. Sex and violence. [Laughs.] The funny illusion of a tolerance for pain. Other than that, I do think I’m much more attached to unplanned drawing than I used to be. Before, I thought of ‘not planning ahead’ as just one method, now I think of it as the essential method. This may be the result of going through art school, but I used to think that there has to be a reason before something can be made. Having a plan can often mask as a reason. I like the luxury of just making work – I’d rather make 20 drawings and pick one, than plan for 20 days to make one.

— *In both method and aesthetic, you seem to be speaking about a very forward motion.*

My father came from a theatre background; he was a director for a puppet theatre in Moscow. He always said that inspiration is a thing unprofessionals dwell on, waiting for that perfect something to strike. In professional theatre, you have to show up for rehearsal regardless of whether or not you’re inspired to do so. You just show up; everybody shows up. As a director or actor, you start working when you’re presented with the circumstance to do so. I took this to heart: work, work, work, and then sit back and pick what deserves to go on to the next level.

— *You seem to have a strict understanding of the ‘working artist’. Does that come from your parents’ serious understanding of it as a profession, working in the arts in the Soviet Union?*

I remember when my mom just came to the US, she was incensed when a 17-year-old guy at a party introduced himself to her as ‘a poet’. She thought, ‘You either are or you aren’t, but you don’t introduce yourself as one.’ For my parents’ generation, announcing yourself as a poet is like stretching your hand out and saying, ‘I’m a blacksmith.’ In their time, when they said that they were in the arts or in the theatre, the implication was that it was a job, deemed of equal respect to any other serious job. It’s different now in Moscow, and it’s also different in the US. In part, that’s why I actually never disclose my occupation.





A Doctor for your Face, 2012, mixed media on mylar, 76,2 x 106,68cm



Dwelling in the Marvelous, 2010, mixed media on mylar, 91,44 x 60,96cm











When Food Comes Along, Lock It in your House, 2010, mixed media on mylar, 152.4 x 106.68cm







*If God Is for Us, Who Can Be against Us, 2010, mixed media on acetate, 114.3 x 152.4cm*

— *What do you say you do?*  
I say I'm a librarian.

— *Why, of all things?*  
Funny you should ask. It's because I love libraries. I'm a member of every library there is. And also I think that it's because in Russia, being a librarian is probably the worst thing there is. I travel back to Moscow, tell people I'm a librarian and my cool factor just plummets. 'Wow, what happened to you that you became a librarian?'

— *What would happen if you told them you were an artist?*  
In contemporary Russia, maybe that doesn't hold much clout either.

— *Well, what about New York, or other parts of the US?*  
Oh no, no, no. I never say I'm an artist. No. I don't like to talk about work – period. I can hardly even do it in a professional setting. If it's a friendly setting, I might try to describe the work in a funny way, but that necessarily means I'm shooting the work down. And then I feel so embarrassed in front of the work itself: 'Oh forgive me, my work, that I just made fun of you.'

Anyway, I can't sell the idea of my work being interesting without it being visible. Whatever I say about it will either make it more interesting because there's a lack of the visual, or will do no justice to the visual by making it more pedestrian – 'Well, there's the poop factor to consider.' Saying

I'm a librarian is my way out of those conversations. I was recently at a dinner, and the gentlemen next to me was a surgeon. I asked what kind of surgeon, and he said, 'A kind one.' A kind surgeon. What else could you want to hear? That put an end to my asking.

— *What do you make of yourself being called an 'artist' in the third person – like in a show review?*

Well, I've been contemplating 'control' a lot lately. There's somebody's impression, and then there's my intention: can those two things ever meet? Do they actually need to meet? Of course, when other people are looking at my work, they can sometimes point to things I'd never even considered. For example, it's funny, lately I've been making all of these figures with noses sticking out from every body part. In every review, these noses are referred to as 'phallic growths'. At first I thought, 'How can that be?' But oh, wait, yes, anything can be phallic. For me, they were always just noses, which allows every other body part to become a face. Like Hello Kitty: she doesn't have a mouth, but she has a nose. And in my works knees, butts, everything has a nose, and can become a face. It's not an extra phallus, just a nose. But okay, I thought, 'Let it be whatever it looks like.' What's important is that I know what it is.