Transcript of an interview of Doron Langberg by Curators Daniel Strong and Greg Manuel.

Conducted in conjunction with the exhibition, ***Queer/Dialogue***, on view at the Grinnell College Museum of Art from 7 September through 12 December 2021.

Greg Manuel:

Thank you for coming and we'll let you introduce yourself.

Doron Langberg:

Thank you. I'm Doron Langberg, I'm a painter currently based in New York. I'm originally from Israel and have been living in the U.S. since 2006, which is 14 years now, which is kind of crazy to think about. I moved to do my undergrad at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and then continued to do my MFA at Yale. And then I moved to New York. I've been kind of painting here ever since. That's me in a nutshell.

Daniel Strong:

Did you go to New York cold? You just kind of packed up New Haven and off to New York? Did you have a place to live? How did you start in New York?

Doron Langberg:

Once school ended I moved in with my then boyfriend, now husband, who was still in his graduate program at Yale. I kind of had a place to crash and I would just go to New York and look at apartments. A bunch of us actually found a studio together in Ridgewood and then I kind of knew I wanted to live next to there. I moved with, definitely, a supportive community of friends, which is invaluable when you're just entering the craziness of the city.

Daniel Strong:

Did you have to support yourself in random jobs like struggling artists in New York or were you already embarked on your painting career when you got there?

Doron Langberg:

It's kind of a mix of all of it. Being a non-citizen ... At the time I also didn't have a green card. I could only really work in a very limited capacity under ... It's an immigration status called OPT, which is optional practical training. You kind of have to work within your profession. I did a little bit of gallery work, assistant work, but pretty quickly I started teaching adult classes and then teaching college. That was kind of in addition to trying to show and sell as much as I could. I feel like, also, when you move to New York, you kind of do anything that is within your power. I've had friends move in with their parents or took a million jobs. I always knew that I would have my family's support if I needed it and I think that was huge for me. To really allow myself to devote time for my practice in that way.

Daniel Strong:

And what year did you go to New York?

Doron Langberg:

2012.

Daniel Strong:

So after the meltdown, that was passed. Economic I mean.

Doron Langberg:

Which one of the meltdowns?

Daniel Strong:

The 2008 economic crisis.

Doron Langberg:

Oh, financial. Yeah, definitely. Yeah, the market had recouped, I think, by then. Although, I feel like in the space that I occupied, at the time, I don't think that the market really effected anything.

Daniel Strong:

For some people it hasn't come back yet so it's not ...

Doron Langberg:

Absolutely.

Daniel Strong:

Crises don't end anymore, they just start.

Doron Langberg:

I know, as we're seeing right now.

Daniel Strong:

And God knows where this one's going to go. How have you been doing the past ... This is the amazing thing, Greg and I just met you in March and it was the week before this whole ... I mean, it had kind of started, but we were still out and about. Greg and I were eating in New York restaurants and we met you, I think it was, March 8th or 9th, or something? And then a week later everything started to shut down.

Doron Langberg:

It's wild, yeah. We barely eeked out the Armory [Art Fair].

Daniel Strong:

Right, exactly.

Doron Langberg:

I feel so lucky to have been able to show my work there before everything got canceled. I've been fine. Painters, we're alone in our studio, we're naturally quarantined as it is. I think that the only challenge was, how do I get to studio? My husband, who's a doctor, was very aware of the severity of the situation and really didn't want me to go. But at some point I think he realized that if he doesn't let me go I'll murder him so it's for the sanity of the relationship.

Doron Langberg:

I've been good. I've been in the studio for over a month now, probably even two months at this point. And working on my show in L.A. that's supposed to open in September. But I feel like my own personal situation is a stark contrast to so many of my friends and just what's going on in the world. To say that I'm doing fine, it's like we're all in it in a way and it's affecting everyone.

Daniel Strong:

Do you know of people who had to leave the city or can't ...

Doron Langberg:

Yeah, I had friends who kind of jumped ship on their lease and moved somewhere else. I think a lot of people that were already thinking that, or were barely making due, and then this really hit them hard and they had to find a different solution.

Daniel Strong:

Right. Your show in L.A., in September, none of us knows what's going to be on the books next week, let alone ... That's still going forward and you're still working for that?

Doron Langberg:

Yeah. I think that L.A., as of now ... I think the gallery is even open, at least by appointment. There's a surge of cases now, again, as things re-open so who knows what September would be. But I'm making the work and there's nothing really else to do on my end.

Daniel Strong:

Right, exactly.

Doron Langberg:

It keeps me grounded.

Daniel Strong:

It's interesting to hear the different ... I think the Times, last week, did a thing on artists, what artists are doing in quarantine. And so many of the visual artists are like, oh, you know, this is our normal life. We're stuck in the studio or we live in studio, we work by ourselves. And then you hear the performers and it's the performers that are at loose ends.

Doron Langberg:

Oh my god.

Daniel Strong:

Dancers. Dancers that have to stay in shape, but can't ... And also just missing the performative aspects of their careers, where painters are ... We only perform at the openings and then we go back into the cave.

Doron Langberg:

And even that ...

Daniel Strong:

I shouldn't say we, I'm not an artist.

Doron Langberg:

No, definitely. It's total luck that this particular situation kind of spared us, to a degree, and allowed us to just keep working. Every day in the studio is actually really nice because there's not a lot of interruptions. I can just really focus.

Daniel Strong:

How are you doing without community? You have your husband, but ... So much of what this exhibition was grounded in is ideas of the queer community and how it intersects with other communities in general. How are you getting along without that community interaction?

Doron Langberg:

Just on a technical level, because I paint from observation, I haven't been painting people in my studio, I've been working with more photo references. Which was kind of closer to my practice maybe six years ago or so. Kind of finding a way to channel everything I learned from working from observation into working from images again has been interesting. That's definitely kind of a shift in terms of community.

Doron Langberg:

But, actually, otherwise, I really feel like I'm much more connected to my community. Early in COVID, I was working on this auction fundraiser for the Food Bank of New York City so you'll see all my gallerists and I essentially organized this auction with 94 artists and so many of them are my good friends. People were sending in work to the gallery and I was on the phone with auction platforms and really trying to get it together. We ended up raising half a million dollars for the New York Food Bank. I was in touch with a hundred people almost on a daily basis, texting and trying to figure out what to do, and logistics, and stuff like that.

Doron Langberg:

And then soon after that ended I think that the Black Lives Matter protests in the city started. And once again, I'm surrounded by hundreds of people, always seeing so many friends in the front line of this.

Daniel Strong:

Were you out on the street at all?

Doron Langberg:

I was, yeah. I think the first week or two, I think I went almost every day. Of course we can touch on this more, but to me, the process really started to seep in, in terms of trying to educate myself and do a lot of soul searching in terms of where do I harbor white supremacy and how I can actively do what I can to kind of fight against it. That's been kind of my focus.

Daniel Strong:

Personal growth.

Doron Langberg:

Yeah, it's really insidious. I thought I was engaged with those issues before and I thought that I knew about them. I think that kind of just delving in deeper it really ... For me, it was definitely consciousness raising.

Doron Langberg:

And in general, I was just talking with a friend of mine, since moving to the states, understanding race in America has been a huge learning curve. I'm obviously still learning what that is and what my role is in it.

Doron Langberg:

I think that practice definitely has brought me closer to a lot of people in my community.

Daniel Strong:

Just prior to talking to you we heard from Devan Shimoyama, what he wants to contribute to the exhibition. And I know that he's a friend of yours.

Doron Langberg:

Yeah, what did he say?

Daniel Strong:

I didn't speak to him, but I got the list of things. And one of the pieces he wants to include is the swing set, the work that he did in honor of the killing of Tamir Rice in Cleveland. Today would've been Tamir Rice's 18th birthday.

Doron Langberg:

Wow.

Daniel Strong:

It's kind of a commemorative day to talk about this kind of thing and how it's ... It's interesting how these things happen and then they disappear. Do you feel this time might be different, that this isn't just going to go back to the way it was? Maybe we're actually going to get somewhere this time?

Doron Langberg:

I think that, for me, it's been different, for sure. I think just seeing the amount of white people on the streets, protesting, also feels different. The difference in my mind was really kind of hearing from aspects of my community that we need to mobilize, that white people need to say something and do something, and have conversations with other white people. I think it was such a clear call, with a very specific action plan that I could follow. Whereas I feel like in the past, I just didn't know what to do with all of that. I think that this call from the Black community, to the white community, to take up the burden of making a change really clicked for me and so many other people. And they found a place within this movement where they could mobilize as well and feel like they have the power to enact change. In that sense, I feel like it's definitely a shift and we're seeing the conversation kind of grow and grow.

Doron Langberg:

I was just talking to you guys casually before, even in my undergrad now there's a call for a true examination of solidarity, inclusion, equality. I think that all these institutions that have, for years, sent out these signaling messages about, oh, we stand for diversity, we support Black voices and voices of people of color are now being asked to deliver and a lot of them haven't. I think it's a time of reckoning for a lot of us.

Greg Manuel:

It's shifting the framework, which isn't really there to begin with. A lot of those responses prior we're realizing were performative in a lot of ways.

Doron Langberg:

Very.

Greg Manuel:

And now that the curtain has been pulled away I think there's a time and an opportunity to actually make those performances real and build something. Deconstruct what's already there and build it back up again with the right pieces.

Greg Manuel:

When I've been talking with people here ... I'm in Canada, it's really no different here. Differently framed, there's a different kind of history, different sort of narrative, but it's all essentially the same thing. Our institutions are going through the same thing and our people, our communities, are doing the same thing.

Greg Manuel:

What I've found interesting is the fact that a lot of the work is being done, as I think it always is, within the queer community as sort of a starting point.

Doron Langberg:

Absolutely. I was so happy to see so many queers out in the protests and it really felt like we showed up in a way. Or at least my corner of the queer community, for sure. It's heartening to hear that it's the same for you guys.

Greg Manuel:

If we look at the history of pride even, it was black trans women who started that process in a lot of ways. I'm wondering, I guess, have you had conversations outside of the queer community or specifically within the queer community about how we need to show up or how we can show up? Is that ally-ship different ... I guess what I'm really asking is, you identify as a queer man, your work is specifically often about that identity, I would argue. Are you conscious of that in your work? When you're making the work. And are you conscious now of ... Is there more? How are you including more in your work or in your process?

Doron Langberg:

That's an interesting question. I think that even in regards to Corona, or kind of responding to the immediate moment, I think that, as a painter with my process, it's not necessarily set up that way. I feel

like even understanding how my Jewishness kind of folds in to my practice, took me a decade to figure out or find a language for, or understand what, where it's located. I think that this is a process that I'm going through right now and I'm sure it'll find its manifestation in the work eventually, but it's very hard to pinpoint specific aspects of the work in that regard.

Daniel Strong:

I'm trying to formulate a question based on what you just said about Jewishness. Is there a foundational sense in common with Jewishness and queerness? At its foundation, is it an aloneness or is it a foreignness? What is the core feeling of being that it took you a decade to figure out.

Doron Langberg:

To articulate?

Daniel Strong:

Yeah, which I did not do very well in that question.

Doron Langberg:

No, you did. I think that ...

Daniel Strong:

Sorry. I'm going to interrupt. What is it about being Jewish and being queer? Sorry.

Doron Langberg:

Totally. Being Jewish is a huge part of my life, I'm from Israel, Judaism is inextricably tied with that place for millennia. My Dad's family was living in Poland during the Holocaust, he was born a month before the German invasion of Poland. His Mom hid him in a monastery and his family paid off some Polish farmer to hide her in an attic, tried to kill her, it didn't work out, she ended up escaping, kidnapping my father from the monastery. They jumped from one refugee camp to another until they ended up in Israel. His brother, who was older, also had this insane story and he ended up in the U.S.

Doron Langberg:

I think the traumas of Jewish life and, again, being part of ... Living in Israel, etc, they're all a huge part of my DNA, but how do they necessarily find manifestation in the work? And it was really only until I met Avram Finkelstein, I don't know if you guys know him. He's a queer artist, activist, he was the founding member of the Silence Equals Death Collective and he designed the poster at the time. And was part of Gran Fury and obviously active in Act Up and stuff.

Doron Langberg:

He wrote a book about his experience, the visual side of AIDS protesting. And in the introduction he said that his family also came from some Eastern European country and escaped during the Holocaust and if there's one thing he learned from his Grandma or his parents was that everything can be taken at any moment. When your entire village burns down and your entire family gets murdered, that's deeply embedded in ... That knowledge, that possibility, is deeply embedded in who you are. And I think that Jewish people and queer people share that knowledge, that no one will save us. There is this possibility

of everything that we care about dissolving, but obviously the queer community experienced during the AIDS epidemic.

Doron Langberg:

I think that that connection is really deep and very much focuses me on issues that I feel like are the most important. Relationships, connections, love, pleasure, introspection, these things that give meaning to our lives and that's why I feel kind of this queer, Jewish, experience is what I feel focuses me or compels me to deal with these subjects.

Greg Manuel:

When you're making work, is it a conscious decision to make work from that place or you're just naturally making work from that place because that's where you are?

Doron Langberg:

I feel like that also goes to your question about how this new relationship to racial justice, in the states, how is that affecting work? I really just feel like I'm sort of vehicle for these ideas and my job is to facilitate them. I try not to judge them as they emerge. I don't feel like there's a lot of decision making. It's not like I'm deciding to do this or that, I'm just following a certain kind of intuition or a certain set of ideas that come to me and my job is communicate them as clearly as possible. Which requires a lot of analytical decision making in terms of size, color, form, composition, materiality, there's a lot of thinking. But I think the original impulse for what to paint, how to paint it, etc., is something that is not decided on, it's kind of arrived at.

Greg Manuel:

Interesting. And we sort of talked about that a little bit when we were at the studio with you and the ideas of you being labeled a queer artist, you being labeled a Jewish artist, and those things. And you've essentially talked about that. You're doing the work outside of the painting, I guess, you've talked about just doing anti-racism work, starting to learn, and starting to incorporate them into your work. I don't mean incorporate into your work, I mean incorporating it into yourself.

Doron Langberg:

To myself, yeah.

Greg Manuel:

Which then naturally sort of comes out. Or will naturally come out in future works. It's interesting, one of the questions we had sent around ... We made this list of questions probably a month and a half ago, in the middle of the COVID pandemic, but not in the middle of the now Black Lives Matter protests and the new world we've been in.

Doron Langberg:

Yeah.

Greg Manuel:

2020's been a big shift in a lot of ways. One of the questions that we asked was about the pandemic and how it's ... You mentioned Gran Fury and the AIDS epidemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has been

compared to that by a lot of people. There's been comparisons made or parallels made. And the same thing around the Civil Rights movement, which is now, of course ... That question seems trite now, one month later. What do you think about those comparisons and those sort of parallels that have been drawn? Are they valid for you? Are they there for you?

Doron Langberg:

I feel like having not experienced either of those historical events, I feel a little bit removed from those comparisons. I think it's interesting to think about how the AIDS epidemic had been allowed to become what it is now, in terms of just a worldwide, millions of lives lost, issue. Really because of the criminal negligence and homophobia of the administration. I think there's a lesson to be learned, that not being empathic and not acting with compassion and sensitivity is devastating, it's deadly. And we've seen it, again, with this administration.

Daniel Strong:

One of the comparisons that I see is that during the AIDS ... Which I lived through, but was not really touched by it. I knew a couple of people who died, but I was in high school in the mid 80's and it didn't really touch my then community. When I boil it down, it was really about people dying alone and untouchable. They were considered untouchable, in the early years you didn't know if you could shake their hands. Not only were they untouchable because of their disease, but also untouchable because of their queerness. Now we're in a situation where people in general are dying alone and untouchable. They can't be visited by their families and I wonder if that's where some of the empathy might come from. People finally realize what the queer community went through in the 80's and the 90's, now it's happening to everybody. Now you can get a sense of what it means to be in a hospital room dying and not being able to be with your loved ones.

Doron Langberg:

I would hope that people would spend time thinking about that, but I guess I'm just a little skeptical.

Daniel Strong:

Yeah, it's like, how hopeful can we be that maybe we've learned a lesson and that these protests aren't just going to disappear and we're going to go back to where we were after Freddy Gray died in Detroit or Michael Brown died in Ferguson, or Tamir Rice in Cleveland? Maybe in a month we'll just be talking about George Floyd like them. Or can we be hopeful and maybe it'll get somewhere, I don't know.

Greg Manuel:

Doron, you mentioned ... In that question, you're 34, 36?

Daniel Strong:

You're not supposed to ask.

Doron Langberg:

I'm 35 tomorrow.

Daniel Strong:

Oh, happy birthday.

Doron Langberg:

Thank you.

Greg Manuel:

It's an important point because you did skip the AIDs epidemic. There will be different experiences there. Before you got on the call Dan and I were talking about the word queer in particular and how it's meant different things at different times. I won't speak for you Dan, but you had said that for you growing up it wasn't a good word. And I think, for me, at a certain point, it was a word that I had to adopt and took on very consciously, and I wondered, Doron, if that's something you had to do or if it was a word that always seemed to fit to you. Or maybe it doesn't still fit, I don't know.

Doron Langberg:

I think when I was growing up it was “gay.”

Greg Manuel:

Yeah.

Doron Langberg:

It wasn't queer. Kind of towards the end of undergrad that became more of a term to rally around. I feel like I identify with it and I feel like it actually does do a good job at kind of differentiating ... It's both very broad, but also, in its essence, it's about resistance and about claiming freedom to pursue the thing that feels inherent to you in whatever form.

Daniel Strong:

Can I ask what your coming out experience was like? Was being gay something that you were always proud about or was it a process?

Doron Langberg:

Yeah, I was. I came out, I guess now, relatively late to today's standards because I came out to my parents around 17, 18, when I finished high school. And I really didn't have that many queer experiences, consciously at least, until around that time. I think there's definitely a sense of just a stunted growth, in that regard.

Doron Langberg:

But I think my Dad, when I came out, he was like, oh, I knew for the past 10 years. I was like, couldn't you share with your son your thoughts? It would've been helpful. It was surprising because I think, actually, the woman in my family had a slightly harder time kind of understanding. To them, I was always an artist and I would go to art school, it was very permissive so in their mind they were like, oh, he's wearing pink bell bottoms with flowers on them because he's an artist.

Daniel Strong:

He's an artist, yeah.

Doron Langberg:

And he's going to the pride parade to go be with his friends because ...

Daniel Strong:

He's supportive of his friends.

Doron Langberg:

Yeah, I'm not sure why. There was, I think, some measure of denial. But I think I could have not asked for a more supportive response and environment. Going to art school since middle school, everyone's gay around you. I didn't really have that struggle like so many other people did.

Greg Manuel:

You would've had to have done military service?

Doron Langberg:

Oh, I did. Yeah.

Greg Manuel:

Was that a big shift as far as acceptance? Perspective?

Doron Langberg:

Oh, absolutely.

Greg Manuel:

Were you out at that point?

Doron Langberg:

I was outed, I guess, on my first day at the base. They were like, okay, you're gay, right? And I was like, yes. I am.

Doron Langberg:

My job was to be an airplane mechanic and I remember that two days after I got there I saw these guys in my unit wear these ... What looked like diaper, but made out of aluminum that they had made because our department makes these parts for the plane. I don't even know if they told me that or if it was just their own joke but it was to protect themselves from me.

Daniel Strong:

Oh.

Doron Langberg:

You know what I mean? Okay, am I that threatening to you? I guess. Around that time was the first pride parade in Jerusalem. There was a lot of conversation around that in the base, where they were like, you guys, whatever that means, have Tel Aviv, why would you want to do it in Jerusalem? It's so offensive.

Doron Langberg:

I don't know if it was joking or not, but one of our ... There's soldiers, which are usually young and they're just normal 18 to 21 mandatory service and then there's older employees, which were probably younger than I am, at this point, but at the time, were just like, I'd rather have a murderer son than a gay son. Kind of just thinking about these things like, oh yeah, that was really fucked up, the stuff they were saying. But I always felt very respected, I think they actually liked me a lot. And I think in their mind they were like, oh, he's a different kind of gay.

Doron Langberg:

I don't think I had enough self-awareness at that time to care that much about them and what they thought. I kind of just continued to do my thing.

Daniel Strong:

You weren't responsible for making the plane fly or anything were you? What actually did you do on these airplanes?

Doron Langberg:

That's a good question, not much. Our unit built little parts. In Israel ... I think it's different in the U.S. ... I think in the U.S. they literally just buy a new plane or something.

Daniel Strong:

Right, probably.

Doron Langberg:

But we don't have those resources so my department was, you patch them up in whatever ways. If there's a part that was corroded then we would re-make it.

Daniel Strong:

Oh.

Doron Langberg:

Pretty crucial I guess, but we had people signing off on it. I wasn't alone.

Daniel Strong:

Because you weren't mechanically inclined before that were you?

Doron Langberg:

I am so mechanically inclined.

Daniel Strong:

Oh, you are?

Doron Langberg:

As a painter, I'm very good with my hands.

Daniel Strong:

Oh, that's true.

Doron Langberg:

I'm very handy. I actually did a really good job and I got best soldier award.

Daniel Strong:

Oh.

Doron Langberg:

Not that it inspired me to pursue a career in airplane repair.

Greg Manuel:

Amazing.

Daniel Strong:

And that was before you came to PAFA, right?

Doron Langberg:

That was right before. I got discharged two months before because I had been admitted to PAFA and then I just got the fuck out of their basically.

Daniel Strong:

Yeah. Cool.

Greg Manuel:

You're a practicing artist, you're also one that has become quite successful and been well known in the last, I would say, five years, there's been this ... I don't want to say meteoric rise, but ...

Doron Langberg:

Oh wow, thank you.

Greg Manuel:

There's been a lot of attention. People are seeing your work, which I think they should. What are your feelings around things moving forward? We talked about it a little bit, just a little while ago about your show in L.A., but do you have any thoughts about what's going to happen or where things are moving as far as the gallery world and the art world, the whole commercial side of things? Is that something you think about or worry about?

Doron Langberg:

Yeah, I feel like there's not much I can do. It is what it is, so I don't really want to get anxious about it.

Greg Manuel:

Yeah.

Doron Langberg:

So far, both Yossi [Milo Gallery] and Benjamin, the L.A. gallerists have been able to do well and survive, and they're doing okay, which is so fortunate. I know that a lot of artists are working with galleries that their future is very uncertain. In that regard, I feel very fortunate.

Doron Langberg:

And I think that we'll see. I think it really depends on so many factors but also I feel like as long as you're making work that's relevant to the world then there'll be an audience. I think that it's my obligation to be attuned and to be sensitive, and let the work change with the time, and let the work change with me and kind of be part of the world in a real thoughtful way. And that's kind of the most I can do in that regard.

Greg Manuel:

It's kind of all any of us can do is be consciously part of it. Adapt, I guess where needed and be open to those kinds of changes.

Doron Langberg:

Yeah, definitely.

Greg Manuel:

Kind of a lighter question, or maybe not, but you've obviously had some artistic influences and then people that you've looked up to, either in the art world or not, sort of two questions. One is, who are those people or are there a couple of people you want to mention? And are there artists that are working now that you think more people should be paying attention to?

Doron Langberg:

Yeah, absolutely. Shout out what?

Greg Manuel:

Shout out to friends.

Doron Langberg:

Yeah, definitely. My community of friends is extremely important to me. Of course there's many historical influences, people from very early on like Van Gogh or Velasquez, and Vuillard, and Bonnard; RB Kitaj, David Hockney, Wolfgang Tillmans, Alice Neel — huge influence. Nicole Eisenman, there's an endless list of people that I'm so indebted to. But I think the people that inspire me the most, and the people I feel that maybe are my audience in way, are my friends who are painters. And I think I'm fortunate enough to have ... I feel like my friends are the best painters. Many of them are actually quite also well-known. I'm so happy to kind of have witnessed their success as well.

Daniel Strong:

And they're also your subjects? Subjects in your work?

Doron Langberg:

My subjects are all kind of like ... I only paint people who are kind of in my immediate community, family, lovers, friends. Both in my life and in my work I feel like I'm very attuned and involved with my community.

Daniel Strong:

Is it important to you that the people that you paint you have a relationship with? You're not going to the park and surreptitiously painting people lounging in the park.

Doron Langberg:

Is not even a matter of, is it important intellectually or ideologically, it is the work. The work is my relationship. It comes from the relationship, it wouldn't have existed otherwise. My ideas about color, form, materiality, composition, image, everything, comes from interactions that I have and experiences that I have. There wouldn't be a reason to make it if it wasn't for these connections. And I think the work is about a human connection and eliciting empathy and kind of giving space for everyday moments to become meaningful. Yeah, I feel like that's kind of the origin. The origin is in those relationships.

Daniel Strong:

So you're painting your husband how often now? How many times have you ...

Doron Langberg:

Oh my god. It's so ironic that the person I married is going to be the one person in my life that absolutely hates to be painted and refuses to pose for me. Not often. I feel like I have to wait until he does something that he feels really bad about and then my response will be like, well, I was thinking about this painting and he'll be like ... ugh.

Doron Langberg:

No, but also, actually, that was a big part of kind of our dynamics early on. He's a doctor and my work is to be explicit and I think that that clash could be, for him, not productive. We're trying to kind of navigate my professional world with his professional work, for sure.

Doron Langberg:

Wait, but I did want to shout out some friends, can I?

Daniel Strong:

Yes, sorry. I didn't mean to cut you off there.

Doron Langberg:

No, just to name a few. Of course my list that I prepared is not loading. Even from under grad ... I was an under grad with Njideka Akunyili Crosby who is this phenomenal painter. Just being with her under grad, grad, seeing her grow. Other people that I went to school with at Yale, Jennifer Packer, who I think, is one of the best painters around right now. Kenny Rivero as well, an artist that I really love. Julia Bland, the phenomenal abstract painter. Didier William, that I mentioned to you before, a phenomenal painter, printmaker, draughtsperson, who was actually kind of my T.A., or my professor, when I was in Norfolk in 2009, so we've known each other for a long time.

Doron Langberg:

And then more recently I feel like the people that have been highlighted as also doing queer figurative work like Salman Toor is a good friend of mine, Louis Fratino, Jenna Gribbon, That's kind of my immediate community and I just feel so lucky.

Greg Manuel:

Have those relationships come from being in shows together? The show Them, which was on, like, two years ago….

Doron Langberg:

It depends. I think that Jonathan Lyndon Chase, for example, I met him when he was a student at PAFA and I was teaching at PAFA. And we did a studio visit. Salman [Toor] I remember reaching out to him after I saw his show and I was like, how dare you be such an amazing painter, I need to meet you. Jenna Gribbon as well, I really loved her paintings, which I saw in some show and I reached out to her.

Doron Langberg:

I think a lot of those relationships actually pre-dated the kind of current moment, or the group of us framed together. Devan [Shimoyama] and I, like you mentioned, we didn't go to school at the same time but he came in as I was leaving so that connection was made a while ago.

Doron Langberg:

If you're in New York, and you're on Instagram, you'll end up connecting and being made aware of people who are making work in the same world as you, so we're definitely all connected.

Greg Manuel:

And before all of this current COVID situation happened, I mean, I would imagine part of your life in New York ... Part of the benefit of being in New York is actually actively going to shows and being part of that scene, and connecting to people. Were you one of those artists that was out at ... Are you somebody who goes to openings or do you tend to stay in the studio?

Greg Manuel:

There's two minds around that, an artist I used to work with said, "The only real artists are the ones that are at home in their studio. You'll never meet any real artists at an opening."

Doron Langberg:

That's funny.

Greg Manuel:

Yeah.

Doron Langberg:

No, I like openings. I don't feel like I go too many openings, but then I remember talking to Andrew, my husband, and he was like, "You go to openings all the time. You're always at openings." And I was like, "Really? It doesn't feel as a big part of my life." But yeah, I obviously ... Almost 100% of my social life is,

let's go to this show and have a drink. I don't really feel like we're going to an opening, it's just meeting with friends and seeing work. I mean, what else would we do with our lives?

Greg Manuel:

Well, sometimes openings aren't the place to see the work anyway.

Doron Langberg:

Yeah. It isn't, but it is.

Greg Manuel:

Yeah.

Doron Langberg:

You definitely see it and you get to experience it with other people and kind of experience that moment of revelation, which I think is really special. Obviously if you go to a show after the opening you've seen it on Instagram, you've seen it ... There's kind of has been an opinion that was already formed around it. Kind of being in that moment and just experiencing the work fresh I feel like can be really exciting.

Greg Manuel:

Yeah.

Daniel Strong:

Let's talk about process. How does it work? Do you invite people to your studio? Do you do it in their studio? Do you do it in their homes? How do you initiate this putting a friend of yours on to paper or canvas?

Doron Langberg:

Depending on the piece I would just ask them to come to my studio because it's probably the easiest because I have everything set up here. They'll sit for me for maybe an hour, two hours for a small painting and then I would work from that small painting and make my larger works. Sometimes, for example, in my painting I had at my fall show at Yossi [Milo], of two guys rimming, that was something that I obviously had to go to them and to be in their environment, where they feel most comfortable. I kind of packed up my things, I have this portable easel that I take around. Yeah, it's either them coming to me or me coming to them. But often times it would be me texting someone and being like, hey I have this idea, would you be down? By this point, obviously, my friends know that I do this and it's kind of part of our…

Daniel Strong:

So there's no, "you want to do what?!"

Doron Langberg:

Very rarely. I think people who are more tangential to my life might have that response. I think it also just feeds into people's ... People want to be painted, you know what I mean? Even if they're not as familiar with my working process, if I do ask them they're like, oh my god, I'm so flattered. They're not necessarily flattered from the outcome, but they're flattered to be asked.

Greg Manuel:

Has that changed? Has that relationship to your subject changed as you've become more known?

Doron Langberg:

I think I get more people asking me to paint them.

Daniel Strong:

But change the name [laughter].

Doron Langberg:

But change the name, yeah, totally. Because my practice is so personal, in the sense that it really is derived from my immediate environment, maybe it changes on how my immediate environment changes. For example, painting Jenna, painting Louis, painting Salman, whatever, all these things came about because of the visibility of my work or my career, I guess you can say. It's still the same kind of relationship to the people around me.

Greg Manuel:

That makes sense. And just to be clear, 90% of the work that you do, the paintings you make, the drawings you make, are done live. They're done with a live model, they're done in ...

Doron Langberg:

Anything that I can, yeah. Right now I'm painting a big landscape of my brothers, obviously they can't come here. One's in Israel and the other one's in, like, Buffalo, or something.

Greg Manuel:

Yeah.

Daniel Strong:

“Like Buffalo or something.” [Laughter]

Doron Langberg:

Or something, I know. I said that and I was like, he's actually in Buffalo. I've been there, but in my mind I was like maybe in denial still. They're far, I ask them how to pose and they send me photos and stuff like that.

Doron Langberg:

But when I can, yeah, absolutely. With my family, I know them so well, or with Andrew, I know him so well, I can almost do it with my eyes closed. I don't need ... I think the purpose for me for working from observation is to be able to gauge each move, each brushstroke, each decision, against my experience with the person that's in front of me. And to decide whether it feels like them, does it resonate with how I experience them? And I feel like with people that are just so close to me, it's just embedded in me already. I don't really need them.

Daniel Strong:

That must come from confidence as a painter, because I can't ... Of course, I'm not a painter and I realized at a young age I was not going to be a painter. I would be scared to death that I wouldn't do them justice, where obviously, that doesn't even enter your mind. You just know that because of the relationship, you're going to be able to capture them. Is that ...

Doron Langberg:

Yeah, I mean, sometimes they think that I didn't do them justice. But as long as I feel like I capture something that resonates as true to me then I'm happy.

Daniel Strong:

Right.

Greg Manuel:

I should ask that question rather than say it. Are you trying to represent that person so that other people can recognize them or are you...

Doron Langberg:

Absolutely.

Greg Manuel:

You are. It's a conscious attempt to...

Doron Langberg:

Yeah, does it look like them? Definitely. Often times they would come with their ... If I'm painting a friend, their boyfriend will come and I often ask the boyfriend, do you think it looks like them? Is there anything about your experience of them that doesn't feel accurate to this painting? And that's actually quite helpful, because a lot of time they'll be like, oh, look at the nose. They usually are talking so often times the mouth gets fucked up because they wouldn't shut up.

Doron Langberg:

It's funny because I think it's kind of an outdated idea to care about likeness, you know what I mean? It's almost like I'm not supposed to care about likeness.

Greg Manuel:

Right.

Doron Langberg:

But I title my show like this, so obviously I care about it. I think there's something really magical and kind of hard to explain that happens in that moment. We've seen photos of ourselves that we've kind of felt are not us.

Daniel Strong:

Oh yeah, absolutely. I hate photos of myself.

Doron Langberg:

Yeah, because it feels as if something inherent to us is not being captured so it's obviously not about accuracy, right? Because a photograph is literally an indexical mark of the light that we reflect back from us so it's exactly what we look like.

Daniel Strong:

Right.

Doron Langberg:

It's more about kind of the spirit that's being captured. And I think that that's actually what painting does so beautifully. Capturing someone's likeness is not just, does it look like them? It really is embodying who they are.

Daniel Strong:

Right.

Doron Langberg:

If you see a Velasquez portrait ... You're in front of something alive. You're in front of a person, you're not in front of a painting. And I think that for an object to hold interiority is ... That's what I want from my paintings.

Daniel Strong:

Right.

Greg Manuel:

Interesting, I like that. I ask because I worked with a couple artists who also do portrait, or paint family, friends, paint people that they're close to. The end result often is it's just based on the energy, it's based on sort of a feeling and doesn't ever necessarily ... I can't see that that's the same person, sort of thing. But with your work, because your work is ... There's a lot of abstraction in your work so I find it interesting that you are trying to ... And you explained it very well, you're not necessarily trying to create a realistic rendering, but you are trying to capture the essence of that person. I think I told you, one day I was walking through Art Miami and I walked by your painting of our mutual friend Mark.

Doron Langberg:

Oh yeah.

Greg Manuel:

And I knew it was him immediately, but it was a very ... There's sort of an abstraction or an etherealness to the work that you make that isn't as ... I'm used to seeing ...

Doron Langberg:

Exactitude.

Greg Manuel:

Yeah. This sort of rendering.

Doron Langberg:

I honestly feel like the abstract energy of the work or the brushiness, or the openness, or the freshness, the “gesture”ousness of it, or the fact that it could even appear not finished, in a way, I think that is part of what captures the likeness. Because it foregrounds a certain kind of emotional world or spirit, or movement that is so much part of how we experience each other. In a world, where if you really render the shit out of something, it's dead.

Greg Manuel:

Yeah.

Doron Langberg:

So what are you left with that? Some people can do it, and I feel like that's why someone like Ingres or Holbein are the great renderers of painting. What was magical about them was that they could render something to this insane degree and it filled their figures with life, whereas I feel like if I try to do that, it just feels like something went horribly wrong.

Daniel Strong:

With somebody like Ingres, though, the way he's rendering somebody, he's convincing you that it's so accurately rendered. And then you look at his anatomy and it's like, no human being every looked like that.

Doron Langberg:

Oh, absolutely.

Daniel Strong:

Arms are coming out of breasts, and they've got 16 extra vertebrae. It's almost like Velasquez, too. People think they're seeing reality, but no they're not. They're seeing life in a different form and it's being executed by a genius who can take many liberties with the real and convince you, even though they've taken so much liberty with the human body or with the human relationship.

Doron Langberg:

A lie that tells the truth.

Daniel Strong:

That's right.

Doron Langberg:

No, but I actually feel like it's interesting to even bring up the word, the real.

Daniel Strong:

What is it?

Doron Langberg:

To me it's really important. And like you were saying, recognizing Mark, right? There's something about that you know ... For me, at least, it's important that the viewer knows that they're looking at a real situation. And they're looking at people they know exist and they have a real role in my life. And that feeling communicates. Whereas I feel like for so many other artists, working figuratively ... Which I super admire and love their work, but it seems like their visual language or their stylization points inwards at their emotional world or imaginative world and not necessarily at "the real."

Doron Langberg:

And I think that's just kind of pointing outwards verses pointing inwards, in a way.

Daniel Strong:

Right.

Doron Langberg:

I think it's just a different ... They're both very useful for different things and I definitely admire so many people who use that language. Louis is a good example of that, Louis Fratino. I feel like it's a slightly different approach ... I try to achieve things differently, if that makes sense.

Greg Manuel:

We're getting close to the end of our time, I wanted to ask you about one of the things we've been asking everybody else is ... Well, it started as a, here we are in COVID, what's keeping you busy? What are you reading? But now I think there's, possibly, potentially, a deeper reason for asking the question. But where are you learning? Where are you finding places of learning these days, whether that be TV, podcasts, books, or are you?

Doron Langberg:

Yeah, I am. Definitely. It's funny for me because not having grown up here I never had an American history class. It was never a prior to take it in undergrad. I guess I didn't have the initiative to do that in grad school. I think that now I'm just trying to catch up on a lot of reading that maybe is kind of elementary to people who grew up here. And I do Audible a lot in my studio, which is nice because I can do that as I'm painting. Right now I'm listening to, Freedom is a Constant Struggle by Angela Davis. Kind of spliced with The Souls of Black Folk from W. E. B. Du Bois. Which is shocking to me that it was written in 1903. I didn't even believe it when I Googled it. Because the issues that he's bringing up and kind of all the struggles he's depicting, it's almost like, has anything changed?

Daniel Strong:

Nothing's changed. The 20th century, I mean, go back and look at the first ... The 21st century is just like the 20th century was, it's global wars, financial crises, and a pandemic. We're just reliving the early 20th century.

Doron Langberg:

Yeah, it's insane. Even Malcolm X speeches that I've been listening to ...

Daniel Strong:

Right.

Doron Langberg:

Even down to ... This was a surprise to me, maybe for everyone else it's kind of common knowledge, but even down to his description of the positionality of white liberals, for example. And how that they're allyship is mainly driven by self-promotion or harnessing the black vote for their own agenda and then abandoning them.

Daniel Strong:

Right.

Doron Langberg:

It's literally the conversation we had about neo-liberal politics. Hillary, etc.

Daniel Strong:

Right.

Doron Langberg:

It's just shocking to me that this wasn't something that was so present in the conversation that I had ... I'm also ashamed that I didn't seek it out before, you know what I mean? I'm listening to these books and learning more about the history and the different attitudes, and sort of the analysis of the politics has been really important.

Greg Manuel:

I read a post today, I'll send it to you, I'll find out who exactly wrote it. It was a retweet of a retweet, of a repost or something on Instagram. But it essentially sort of framed the learning that is going on now for white people, essentially, and saying, pretend you're walking into a class an hour late, you would never go up to the professor and say, "Oh, I'm so sorry." And interrupt the whole class and disrupt the process that's already in place. You sit down and you do the learning, and you really quickly try to catch up so that you can participate.

Doron Langberg:

Yeah.

Greg Manuel:

That was a nice way of framing what I think a lot of people are doing right now, or should be doing, or are trying to do.

Daniel Strong:

Or still hoping we're doing.

Greg Manuel:

Yeah.

Daniel Strong:

But we don't know yet.

Doron Langberg:

I feel like everyone kind of shifted ... Obviously, I think we were aware and engaged more than the average American, but now I feel like more aware and engaged. I hope that the average American has also kind of taken one step, you know what I mean? Towards awareness, towards involvement or towards accountability.

Doron Langberg:

I'm sure it's in different degrees, but I do feel like there's kind of this ... People that I've never seen get involved are more involved now. I think everyone's having their own process right now.

Greg Manuel:

Before we go, is there ... This isn't the end of the conversation because we may have 10 more before the thing is over. Hopefully there will be opportunities for artists to speak with each other and different conversations to happen over the next little while. Did we miss anything that you wanted to bring up?

Doron Langberg:

One of the things I found interesting in your questions was about queer affiliation and I think you asked is it a privilege? Is it a duty? Is it a responsibility? And I was kind of thinking about it ... Obviously reading through the questions I had a lot of thoughts about each one of them and that was kind of one that I didn't really have an answer for. I thought that was interesting.

Doron Langberg:

I really believe that we work from our experience and that's kind of our default mode. I think that the responsibility, or burden, or however you want to ... Or privilege, is to be true to that and reflect that in the most honest and direct way. And I think that the times where I feel like people are betraying their responsibility is when they don't work from their experience or they assume that their experience is universal. Or when they are evasive about who they are and what they are. I think that, to me, is an important point. When queer artists make bro abstract paintings it upsets me because it's like, why are you claiming neutrality when neutrality just means straightness or heteronormativity? You know what I mean? I think this kind of acknowledgment that we all have a position, and that position is colored by our experience, to me, is where the responsibility lies. More so than this affiliation or that affiliation.

Daniel Strong:

Right. Everybody has a responsibility just to not fake it.

Doron Langberg:

Yeah. And if you're a white, straight, man, making work about squares to me seems to miss the point. Not that one can't make work about squares, but to think, what does that mean to you and your experience? And how can you make it clear that there's an awareness of that experience is not shared? What do you have to say in a way that's not going to be universalizing a certain kind of aesthetic or perception? I think those were kind of my thoughts around that.

Daniel Strong:

Are you working today? Are you working on something? Are you on deadline? Are you keeping busy?

Doron Langberg:

My deadline is September for the kind of project I'm working on so I feel like ... I kind of like a long deadline because it's both, I know they're going somewhere and I have time to fuck around with them. Yeah and it's not like, oh, I have a week to get this done.

Daniel Strong:

Cool. All right, well, hopefully we can do this again.

Doron Langberg:

Yeah, I would love to. This was fun.

Daniel Strong:

Yeah.

Greg Manuel:

Thank you. I know we've made some decisions about some of the artwork that's coming in the show, etc. There will be lots of opportunities to sort of continue the conversation. And as I said, maybe we'll end up having you and Devan have a conversation at some point.

Doron Langberg:

Oh, yes. I would love that. I love Devan. So amazing. Yeah, I would love that.

Greg Manuel:

It's ...

Doron Langberg:

Thank you guys so much.

Greg Manuel:

Yeah, thank you.

Daniel Strong:

Yeah.

Greg Manuel:

Enjoy the rest of the day. Stay safe.

Doron Langberg:

You too.

Greg Manuel:
Get some sleep.

Daniel Strong:
Thanks, Doron.

Greg Manuel:
Thank you.

Doron Langberg:
Thank you guys.

Greg Manuel:
Cheers.

Daniel Strong:
Bye.