

Transcript of Interview of Devan Shimoyama 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.

Devan Shimoyama:

Okay. Cool. Just a little bit brighter. It might just be the [inaudible 00:00:09] behind me.

Greg Manuel:

No worries. The focus of this is the sound, is the audio on it. So if we find that it's amazing and we end up pulling video, we'll let everybody know.

Devan Shimoyama:

Okay. Good. Is the audio okay? I mean, I can use like headphones if it's too crazy.

Daniel Strong:

It's pretty good. I think it's pretty good.

Greg Manuel:

It sounds good to me. I have a brother-in-law who's a sound guy and dropped off this weird whole setup in my living room. And now it's a recording studio. But no, it sounds good. My computer sounded terrible which is why he started it.

Devan Shimoyama:

Okay. Just making sure. Because I do have a microphone if that's necessary.

Greg Manuel:

I think it sounds okay. So I'm going to share my screen and do the clap and then we can go into it. I don't know what the screen is going to look like. It might just be questions. So you can all see that?

Devan Shimoyama:

Yes.

Greg Manuel:

And then I'm going to clap. And then I'm going to stop sharing. And now we're in.

Devan Shimoyama:

Great.

Greg Manuel:

So yeah, Devan Shimoyama, thank you for joining us. And maybe to start, you could just tell us a little bit about who you are and remind everybody what you're working on.

Devan Shimoyama:

Yeah. My name is Devan Shimoyama. I am primarily a painter but I would say I'm a multidisciplinary artist working in painting, drawing, printmaking. I also do some photography and I've done some other projects that expand into some social practice as well as installation. My work predominantly focuses on internal investigation of my own kind of identity somewhat. I think that's where everybody's work kind of stems out of. But I'm certainly exploring the intersection of blackness and queerness and kind of looking to celebrate all of the nuances there. So I'm really looking at personal experiences and my own fascination with things that range from epic fantasy novels to just small moments between loved ones, friends.

Devan Shimoyama:

So I think that kind of sums up my practice in a really reduced way. I use a lot of really unconventional materials in my work, things like really sparkly things. I love glitter. I love synthetic materials and jewelry and all of that. And then aside from that, I'm also a professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And I've been here for about six years. And so I work both with the grad students and the undergrads as well, predominantly teaching painting courses.

Greg Manuel:

Amazing. Amazing.

Daniel Strong:

How has teaching been in the last four or five, six months?

Devan Shimoyama:

Well I mean, the outbreak really hit in a way that shut down everything right at spring break. So that gave me maybe a few days to figure out what to do, then quote unquote came back through Zoom, like we're sitting here now. And so I kind of had to do a really quick pivot and I collaborated with a friend and fellow artist and professor of mine, Jordan Casteel — we both went to Yale together. And so she and I were just talking, trying to figure out what we were going to do, and we organized a short lecture series with a bunch of other friends of ours that are painters since we were both teaching painting courses at our respective universities. And it worked out pretty well, just considering the circumstances. It was an opportunity with some unforeseen benefits that was kind of great to be able to bring in some people because of their own generosity and our friendship to come and talk to our students during a time of crisis. So it was really amazing to see how people could be generous and kind, and trying to find ways to bring value in times of hardship and crisis and confusion in arts education. So it was really great.

Daniel Strong:

Is your studio space primarily at the university or do you have a studio somewhere —

Devan Shimoyama:

Yeah. I do. Yeah. I primarily work on campus. I have a really great studio space there that has like skylights and everything. And I have access to all of the facilities as well including the print shop, the digital printing facilities and laser cutters and all of that, wood shops. But since the outbreak has happened even though we've been green-lit in Pittsburgh the university is still shut down, trying to get everything in order for the fall to make everything as safe as possible, I guess.

Daniel Strong:

So you've not had access?

Devan Shimoyama:

No. I've not had access since March 12th, or something like that. But I've been working at home, makeshift studio, kind of, a little bit, mostly taking a break.

Daniel Strong:

How has it been in isolation?

Devan Shimoyama:

I'm used to the summers being to myself to an extent, to work and focus on that. I haven't been able to produce nearly as much working from home. I've made some drawings and I've made a series of masks with Kavi Gupta Gallery where all the proceeds went towards COVID relief. But I don't know. I think that the tricky part about working from home for me is that it makes it more difficult. I'm slower at home. So I don't really produce as much. I'm trying to figure out a studio situation that could work temporarily, that's a little more substantial than what I've been doing, which is kind of like my living room in a corner with what I can do there. But yeah, I'm really kind of itching to get back to painting.

Daniel Strong:

Because I imagine there's a fair amount of, I mean, I hesitate to use the word mess with your work, but there's a lot of different materials and, I mean, you don't want your house full of glitter and...

Greg Manuel:

Maybe you do.

Devan Shimoyama:

I don't think it's a great idea for me to do. I do have pets. But no. I think you'd be surprised to see, if you were in my studio, it's not nearly as messy as you might think. I think because I use so many materials that do create so much mess, I need to sufficiently clean in between using them. I don't really want glitter mixing. So I'm actually pretty clean in studio. I could make it work. It's just that I'd have to maybe renovate my basement a little, move things around.

Daniel Strong:

Right. Our education curator has a pickup truck that's famous in town because one of the activities we do with the local elementary school kids is we let them glue glitter to this pickup truck. And so it's known in town as the glitter truck and she drives it around. Well in the summer, she usually drives it to area parks where kids will come. But our loading dock driveway and the plaza in front of our building, there's glitter all over the ground and everybody knows what it's from because of this project that's been going on for years. And I don't know how much, how many pounds have been added to this pickup truck by just layers and layers and layers of glitter being glued onto it by the local school kids. So we know all about what that does to the décor.

Devan Shimoyama:

There's something kind of similar and it's just a fence in the middle of our campus that students rotate and will take over for a week and paint it usually to promote something for organizations, or to say something political, or send a message, or anything like that. And so it has so many thick layers of paint on it that I don't even know how small the fence is under it actually.

Daniel Strong:

Do you know what the plan is going back in the fall yet? Or are you still kind of in limbo?

Devan Shimoyama:

We're a little bit still in limbo. We've been preparing. Actually after this, I have a meeting with my boss to go over the ways in which I'll approach the different scenarios that could happen for the fall. That could be teaching hybrid, which would be partially online and partially in person. It could be totally in person depending on how small the course is and who decides to come and if those students are coming to campus. And then it could be just completely virtual which would be requiring them to buy a packet, to prepare an area at home to paint. We're working a lot more over the summer to try to figure out how this could look and could actually function.

Daniel Strong:

Alright. I got sidetracked there. Greg, ask a question.

Greg Manuel:

Well, I mean, we can start with works that we've been talking about putting in the exhibition. I know Devan, we've been speaking with Kavi Gupta gallery, your gallery in Chicago, about specific pieces and one of them is a full swing set for Trayvon Martin.

Daniel Strong:

Tamir Rice.

Devan Shimoyama:

Tamir Rice.

Greg Manuel:

Tamir Rice. That's right. The hoodies are Trayvon. And those are works that it's interesting. I was listening to the interview you did just after the Warhol exhibit where you exhibit at the Warhol Museum. And then part of the discussion was around those particular pieces and their kind of specific references. And one of the questions that was asked was how they will be seen in the future moving forward. And here we are two years later, only two years later, but two years later. And they have I would argue even more relevance now than... there's a compounded to it, an added relevance. I wonder what you thought about that and what your thinking is around those.

Devan Shimoyama:

Yeah. So the works for Tamir, all of those it's kind of a series of swings. Some of them are individual swings. And then obviously the one I'm going to this exhibition is full swing set which was in an installation. And they are certainly related to the other works that are for Trayvon Martin which are the larger hoodies completely covered in the same materials. Silk flowers and embellished with costume

jewelry and other craft materials. Those things I'm thinking of as spontaneous memorials. And working on them is kind of slower, more cathartic in a way.

Devan Shimoyama:

And it's a kind of simple thing to do. They're not difficult to make but they're heavy content-wise. When making something like that and constantly thinking about the trauma that kind of incited the making of that work or even these conversations that we're having more and more today which is so so significant. I think it's really interesting to see how the work has aged. And some of those works have gone off into other exhibitions and other spaces, especially the Trayvon Martin hoodies. Those have gone out into other discussions about race. Even right now, it was most recently in an exhibition with [David Hammons's *In the Hood* (1993).]

Devan Shimoyama:

So it's in a dialogue that's been happening for a very long time. So I think that these things like the hood, that silhouette, becomes kind of emblematic, something that holds a lot more content and weight as we kind of move forward in this Black Lives Matter movement. And you can look back at these things through the last 50 years or so. I'm not certainly claiming that that's something that I kind of invented or brought anew, I'm certainly trying to keep putting these things out there into the world. So that way there's more dialogue surrounding these things.

Devan Shimoyama:

And it's really interesting to think, particularly the Tamir Rice swings. And thinking of how a lot of these stories still aren't even being told. I mean, I'm now starting to look at how many Black trans women are being killed and not being talked about in the media. You find out about these things through friends. And so I'm starting to think, "Wow, there's so much weight to these things." Children being violently murdered by police officers and brutalized in that way but then there's also this kind of other undercurrent that's happening with hate crimes that isn't even being discussed. And so I start to think that now that we're starting to talk about these things, now's a great time to open up this dialogue and start talking about these other murders that are happening like Tony McDade and Brayla Stone. There's so many others, depressingly so.

Devan Shimoyama:

And this is really important: why those works that tend to be more about the spontaneous memorial are not figures. I don't depict black figures in pain. I'm not interested in seeing more of those images circulate throughout the world. I think that they can bring a lot of trauma and they circulate enough through social media. And so I do think that that's a way for me to kind of celebrate their life and bring attention towards the tragedy that was their death without kind of disrespecting their family and loved ones by pumping more of these images out and hurting other black people through reiterating it. It's something that's kind of haunting.

Devan Shimoyama:

And I think that that's important to try to have these dialogues about this but also not have the majority of images you see of black people or black trans women, or any of these people being dead or memorialized. I don't think that's something I'm interested in. So I'm starting to think more about the work that I'm making in painting where I do represent images of people's bodies and how I want to

celebrate and put more images that are positive of those people that we so often think of as just automatically dead in our minds. I want to see more living happening.

Daniel Strong:

One of the things interesting of your work is that it does deal with trauma, but not in a traumatic idiom. I mean, the color and the texture it's all brighter than, for example, the subject matter. And it's an interesting way for you to approach it. Because the subject matter is heavy, and yet your work is essentially, I don't know, I don't want to say optimistic. But I mean, what do you think? I mean, is that a word that you would use in regard to your work? Or is that what you're trying to be optimistic in a time when it's very difficult to be optimistic? I mean, what is your general outlook on where we are now and where we may be going and...

Devan Shimoyama:

Yeah. You know, it's funny. Optimism is an interesting word that I hadn't thought about with regards to that work. I think my paintings tend to be optimistic, or hopeful, or they have that as a core part of just the underlying themes in the work. I think it's really important to me to think about fantasy, the sort of, the hero's journey. I love the kind of full circle, and the success story, those trials and tribulations, and kind of circles back to something that's much more positive and strengthened and emboldened and bringing new life into the world. And so I think that, yeah, maybe optimism is an inappropriate term for that. And I do think that that's important to kind of have some level of hope. I do see a lot of conversations that happen where it seems like maybe there is no hope and a lot of [inaudible] and that's totally fair.

Devan Shimoyama:

I mean, things are dark and they don't seem to be getting better. I mean, Kanye is running for president now. I don't know. It's like every day you think it's done, or it's at the bottommost it can be, and then the numbers keep rising of Corona cases more and more. You get six black trans women dying last week. Three of them got media attention. So I understand the kind of hopelessness and the kind of darkness that people are finding in these times but I so desperately don't want that to be the kind of end of that or perpetual state of being. And so optimism I think is really important to my practice then, or integral to at least how people can interact with the work.

Devan Shimoyama:

I remember when I had my show at the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. When I would go there into the museum as far as doing a walkthrough or something like that, I noticed that there were more black people in the museum in general than I had ever seen in my time here. So for me, that was just enough to see that they were kind of seeing positive images of black individuals in a space in which they typically do not feel necessarily welcomed into. And I think that those little moments of sharing that experience with somebody I think is so important. And that kind of is a spark of hope in some sense. It might sound cheesy but I think that that's true.

Daniel Strong:

Do you find it affects your creative, um, not so much output. Because I mean, it's difficult to have output when you don't have access to a studio. But this leads me to think the exhibition we're doing here in the fall, which is all collections based... Well, actually the exhibition that you are going to be in was originally scheduled for this fall and it's actually been postponed to the spring semester. And so this fall, we had to

come up with something and I thought in honor of the 100th anniversary of the 19th amendment, we would show and do an exhibition of women artists. And I didn't know how to frame it until I read an interview by Faith Ringgold in *The New York Times*. It was in early June. And she talked about how she doesn't know what work to make with all that's going on now.

Daniel Strong:

She's kind of like, "What do I want to say in the face of all of this?" And then when George Floyd was killed, she's like, "I think I'm getting my voice." But in the meantime, one of the things she says in this interview is that she — I think mainly in respect of older artists — She says, "Just let yourself continue." And as soon as I read that, I knew that I wanted that to be the title of the exhibition: "Let Yourself Continue." I mean, in the face of (with capital letters) "The Work", there's also the daily work, the everyday.... And I'm wondering if, getting back to my question, is all these things that are hitting us at once, is it affecting your voice or do you kind of know what you want to do? You just don't have access to the studio? Or how are you conceptually approaching what's going on now?

Devan Shimoyama:

Yeah. Right before, I guess, quarantine really hit, I was just starting two bodies of work that I was really excited about. So I have all the surfaces prepared. Everything's in the studio. It's already all conceptualized in my head. I was trying to follow through and make some of this work. And I maybe finished, like, two paintings in that series. And I was already at a place where I was kind of, at that point, was like, "Man, it's a lot making this work that's kind of heavy in content and feels like it's just kind of wearing down on me when I'm making it." Just thinking about a lot of those themes can be just a little toxic I think, handling it day in and day out. And so I was starting a body of work that was much more fun and playful and whimsical and more of a treat to a younger version of myself.

Devan Shimoyama:

And I think that that got derailed by this quarantine a bit. Obviously I shifted the focus. I don't have a space, access anymore. But I started making other work that I could just work within the kind of whatever limitations the situation provided me with and just see what happens. And then I also decided I can kind of take a break a bit and let myself process what's going on and everything's changing every single moment it seems. And so it's really difficult to even process or respond to something in a thoughtful way. And so I for a moment thought that I had this kind of responsibility as somebody with a somewhat of a public platform and making work that's shown in spaces in which people interact with it and go and see it.

Devan Shimoyama:

And I was thinking about how significant this time is. But I also thought about how much my work is about processing something and letting it happen kind of naturally and organically. And I think everything's happening so rapidly that I just was like, "Actually I don't have to do this. I don't have that responsibility." And I can just allow myself to do other types of work that's work. I'm focusing on trying to dream more and I'm really interested more in allowing myself to just kind of really relax and try to find ways to not feel like I have to be a spokesperson for other people and all of that. And so it's really challenging being someone who teaches and working at a university.

Devan Shimoyama:

And that's another thing where there's a lot of changes undergoing right now. A lot of policy is being reexamined underneath this new context, not just with COVID, but also with Black Lives Matter and all of these other things happening. And so there's a lot of this kind of projected responsibility that I felt like I kind of have to rally around this and make my work about it. And that's not the case. I think I just came back to what sort of maybe Faith [Ringgold] was saying. And I'm just letting myself continue on whatever path feels right for now. And I really feel like making work that feels good. And that's what I'm doing and being a little bit selfish and I think it feels nice.

Daniel Strong:

Greg, go ahead.

Greg Manuel:

I was just going to say, you've answered one of the questions I wanted to ask which was about responsibility and how there's a pressure there for you around this time. And I think I'm hearing that a lot from different people involved, different leaders, Black leaders, that one of the things that's most important is that you take care of yourself so that you can then move forward and do the work. And I think it's good to hear that you're not taking that pressure on. Because you have a platform but that expectation doesn't have to come with that platform.

Devan Shimoyama:

And I think also it's at point where people are talking about so many of these nuanced things related to this moment so publicly that I don't think that it's on my shoulders anymore to keep rehashing those things. I've already said what I've had to say over the last six or seven years of my career. So I am not everything that I've had to say but I've said a lot in my work. And I think that for me going back to what I was saying before about that word optimism, I think that I'm just going to continue on a path in which I feel like I don't have to pigeonhole this idea of what a Black artist should be making right now. Not all artists who are in some kind of capital O "Othered" community have to make everything through that lens to service or educate everybody else on something.

Devan Shimoyama:

I think that it's also important to see, and I talk about this with students, it's great to see people of color artists who are making work about, I don't know, math, like whatever, just something else, other interests to see other possibilities. And that's also a part of optimism. People who are in communities that are kind of subjugated or are highly politicized in a multitude of ways and under oppression can make work about a multitude of things and we're multifaceted and it doesn't have to come out of a place of trauma. And I think that it's also really important to see.

Greg Manuel:

It's one of the things we talked about with a lot of the artists in the show and that was a particular interest in that the identifying term Queer, and I don't know how you fit yourself into that or how that word feels to you. But for us, it was sort of this umbrella term that did allow for different people to come together underneath a similar platform that didn't necessarily always overlap but allowed for some of those overlaps. And I think that has been a continued theme. I mean, we were speaking, I think, with Doran, who's a good friend of yours as well, Doran Langberg. And he was saying similar things, that the idea of sometimes just making the work, being pigeonholed into a Queer artist or a Black artist or a

Queer Black artist isn't helpful, or is too much of a burden, or too much of a narrow way to define yourself.

Greg Manuel:

And so by just, even by making the work and by representing yourself and your community, and himself and his community, is in itself an act of, sort of ... empowerment, I guess. I mean, every artist has their different things. And I think at some point everyone steps into those quote-unquote, you know — those terms, those definitions, when they need to — but I think everyone seems to think it's nice to be able to step out of them, which is a good thing.

Devan Shimoyama:

Yeah. There's that great quote, "I contain multitudes," by Whitman. And I think that that's just exactly what's being said there. It's important to also show that we're all so multifaceted and can do anything. And I think that that's really where I'm at right now where I'm giving myself permission to just make what I want to make, follow whatever path feels right and feels good right now.

Greg Manuel:

Has that been something you've done? I mean, you mentioned the early work and you've said the things that you needed to say. I can't imagine that it wasn't conscious necessarily, but was it an intent for the work, the earlier works to be political in some way? And now you've come to a place where you feel you don't need to be as political, or was that a journey, kind of, to get to this place? Or is that always how you've approached the work?

Devan Shimoyama:

I mean, I think any work that I make is going to be political no matter what. I don't have any control over that. My body is politicized in this way so no matter where I go, I can enter any space and automatically it shifts and changes depending on just me existing in there. So I think I have always kind of been aware of that. Sometimes I've made more intentionally, explicitly political work. And then other times, I've made work that just kind of interested me or.... The barbershop work that I've made, that entire body of work stemmed out of a desire to have a conversation, a very frank dialogue with people, directly about these issues of hypermasculinity in those spaces. And with regard to that, that's certainly political but it's not this like huge... It's more talking about Blackness in a vacuum, Blackness and Queerness in a vacuum.

Devan Shimoyama:

And that to me is interesting where you can get into the nitty gritty of something as opposed to this sort of general political moment and saying, "This is Blackness and it's, like, a picture of, "X," whatever, famous painter, and their work. And I think that that's fine. I mean I love Kara Walker, of course, but I don't think that everybody needs to be viewed through that lens. Not every Black artist's work needs to have that kind of pressure to be that kind of political. And I think that that's really important is that we can have different types of conversations about, even, why it's political to look at a Tschabalala Self painting, and it's just a nude Black woman, what's so charged about that? That's more interesting to me right now because I think that that feels more like healing, as opposed to talking about really charged, really, other political things that are more overarching, looking back at slavery, and comparing how the police have developed over time. And yeah, I think that that's a very heavy topic to talk about. And it doesn't feel fun for me to make that work right now. And because it's like every single day, there's, in

the news something that presents a new, horrible narrative or story. And you're looking at a reflection of yourself in some of these deaths or some of these people that are suffering and going through so much. I don't also want to carry that into my studio right now.

Devan Shimoyama:

So yeah, I think that that's been something that depending on how I'm feeling emotionally and mentally and personally, and where I am in my life, I can maybe return to making more explicitly political work that I feel like I'm actively aggressively saying something versus maybe just feeling like I want to be at home by myself or hanging out with my friends and make a portrait of somebody that I just think is a really beautiful person. And I think that that's something really important as well. So that's where I'm at right now. I'm always kind of just going with the flow, whatever my mood is a little bit. Yeah.

Greg Manuel:

Love it. You mentioned the barbershop paintings and I'm curious about... So this stems from a quote I was listening to an interview yesterday and one of the interviewers mentioned how... It was about sort of decolonizing museums and galleries and rethinking the way that they exist in the world. And one of the points that was made was that a museum or a gallery, it places a block between the artist and the community that they're making art for or are speaking to. And there's sort of this wall then or this space that becomes the only place where art can be viewed. And one of the things that I really love that you participated in was the Mighty Mighty project in DC. Was it was your impetus? Maybe you can just tell us a little bit about that.

Devan Shimoyama:

Yeah. It's my work but it was a collaborative effort to make it happen. So yeah, I worked with Cultural DC, which is a great organization and they came to me actually in my gallery too. I think they already had the idea that they wanted to do this barbershop project but just needed an artist to actually bring the kind of vision to it and the dialogue about what nuances we wanted to talk about. And so they had seen that I had been working on all of these paintings and other works surrounding the barbershop and it just kind of was a perfect match. So I worked with them and they gave me access to other people. I worked with Kayla Woodard who made the furniture. We talked on FaceTime back and forth about which work and how we wanted it to look and the finishes and all of that. And he sent that furniture to me. I embellished it.

Devan Shimoyama:

I worked with Kelly Gorsuch who runs the Barber of Hell's Bottom and other barbershops in both Virginia and DC. And so he actually helped with getting barbers to work in there to bring the project to life. We talked about what was important to me for those barbers. I was like, they need to be reflective of that community that they're going to be put into. And I think that what was really important about the project in general was that the work was going to be brought to the community. Those people were never feeling that welcome in the Smithsonian Institution, going all the way over to those museums. And so I really wanted to have this direct engaged dialogue and I didn't think that that fit in a museum, that didn't make sense to me, because I don't know how many museums are making these grand huge efforts to try to get people of color into them and feel welcome and feel integrated into that type of dialogue.

Devan Shimoyama:

And so bringing the work to the community and engaging with them in a different capacity where it actually provided a service, provided a conversation, and brought other types of events like music and other things to the community, I think that was really important for me to kind of... In order to cultivate a dialogue with somebody, you kind of have to meet them at their level. If I want to have this conversation with you, I can't force you to come to me. So I thought it was really important to do that and engage with them there.

Daniel Strong:

That work was really thought provoking for me because the barbershop work, I mean. Because when I was young, and I never really thought about why or... Actually, when I was in high school, I cut my own hair, I think because I was afraid to go into a barbershop. And until I saw your work and I'm now, I mean, we're talking 40 years ago when I was in high school. I never really thought about why I was so afraid to actually go into someplace to get my hair cut. And in seeing your work made me think, maybe that's why. Maybe it's the atmosphere of these hyper-masculine settings. Even still, I don't feel comfortable sitting in the waiting area of a barbershop with all these guys that I don't know. And I don't know if it's just my own self-. But it's a real thing, it's, like, a catastrophe that I was in high school cutting my own hair.

Devan Shimoyama:

It's easy to blame it on your own self consciousness though. I think that's like sort of exactly the problem is that...

Daniel Strong:

Blaming yourself.

Devan Shimoyama:

It's like, "No, something's wrong with me. Everybody else feels normal. It must be me." But that's not necessarily the case. And I think that there's all types of microaggressions in terms of how spaces are even structured. I mean, what's playing on TV? What music is playing? What types of conversations are the barbers having with each other? How are they interacting with women that come into the barber shop? Do they welcome Queer people? Do they have a mission statement on the door? All those different things, I think. Because it's such a place of male fraternal bonding where men cultivated a certain type of masculinity in those spaces. It doesn't leave a lot of wiggle room for other types of masculinity or femininity that might want to come and engage in that way, in that place of business. And they might not be aware. It's something that I think everybody needs to start thinking about more. And that's why I wanted to have a dialogue about it.

Daniel Strong:

Right. Although, I mean, in reality, I mean those may not be microaggressions. I mean, you're walking into a space that may in fact be very hostile to who you are. And of course you may not discover that until you're actually in there and revealing yourself. And so it isn't always micro-aggressive. It's often overt.

Devan Shimoyama:

Yeah. I learned a lot through that project.

Daniel Strong:

Can we talk about your own coming out experience? You were born in '89?

Devan Shimoyama:

Yeah. Yeah. So I grew up in Philadelphia PA. So my mother had me pretty young. She had me when she was about 16. And so I grew up in the household with my mom and my grandparents. And so I ended up growing up predominantly in my grandparents' home all the way through high school and everything. My mom went off to the military and she also later came out to me when I was about five and she is a Queer herself. And so I think that that was a really... I don't know. I feel like I was really lucky in that way, in some ways, and not so lucky and others. I think it was complicated.

Devan Shimoyama:

I was totally fine with it when she told me, I mean, like, "Okay. Great. That's what that is. And now we have a name for it." So I think that it was an educational moment for me and it didn't really change anything with our dynamic except we've always been very close and very open with one another. And whenever growing up, she would always ask me, "Is there any person or boys or girls that you like?" I think she could tell very early that I was Queer and just wanted to let me find that out for myself. But I also had to watch how other people reacted to her own Queerness and coming out. And I think that that was really difficult, to see her struggle through that.

Devan Shimoyama:

And then coming to terms with my own Queerness over the years, throughout high school and everything, and figuring out what level of Queerness? How do I identify? What are these categories and where do I want to fall in this? And everything was so about labels at the time and now it's just like, whatever. Everybody's all over the spectrum. But now I'm like, I almost can't even keep up sometimes. I'm like, am I still this or not? I don't know. But like, yeah. I think it's always been a slow coming out process. It's always happening.

Daniel Strong:

It never ends. Yeah.

Devan Shimoyama:

As you meet people, you kind of have to still find, when do I say this thing, or how do I say this thing? And because, at some point, it's going to be a point of realization for someone or a conversation in any kind of setting. And so it just was a slow process, coming out. I think I started more, so, with who I thought would be the most difficult to tell. And the person who I was like, I need them so badly to be so good with how they respond to this. So I just started there and that went fine. And then it just kind of came out slowly from that one person, from my grandmother.

Devan Shimoyama:

My mother always knew and we were very frank about that conversation and it never was really like coming out to her. It was always, "Do you like any you guys or..." So I just talked about who I liked, or who I was dating, and then that was just very frank. And so when I kind of put a label to, it was a little bit later maybe when I was about I think, like 18, 17. And calling it gay, and then coming out in a very explicit way.

Daniel Strong:

When did you embrace the word Queer? Was it always the word or...

Devan Shimoyama:

Queer? I don't know. Queer, to me, I guess we didn't talk about how I think of that term. But I think the way that you all outlined it is really the way that I've been thinking of it more and more. It's something that's really malleable and shifting. And it's something that you're always, kind of, working from a point of anti-oppression in this way. And I think that that's a really open-ended definition but I would say that gay is kind of underneath that umbrella. And yeah. And I think that I would still identify that way. I mean, I still think there's still that spectrum happening so maybe that's not even an appropriate term anymore. But I do think that I would still use that for me just to be, like, simpler and direct and it doesn't feel...

Greg Manuel:

You mean gay as opposed to Queer?

Devan Shimoyama:

As opposed to Queer I would say. Just be more direct. I guess I am both. Yeah. And I think that it's one of those things — I don't know if this is right, but, it's like “all insects are bugs but not all bugs are insects,” or something [laughter] So it's one of those, it's like... I feel in my mind everyone who's gay is Queer but not everyone who's Queer is gay. So that's how...

Greg Manuel:

No. Exactly. There's like a Venn diagram. There are many Venn diagrams there, in some ways. There's a whole bunch of overlapping things.

Daniel Strong:

Well, I think some of it is generational. I mean, for me, I mean, Queer was an insult when I was a kid. It wasn't something that was celebratory or something that you would embrace. It was something that was hurled at you. And so it is...

Devan Shimoyama:

Me too. So that's why I have a difficult time with it, when it was becoming this kind of intellectualized institutional usage term. I was like, "Wow, this is really intense hearing this word so casually." But I think it's just about trying to de-stigmatize that a bit for myself.

Daniel Strong:

Right. Yeah. I mean, we kind of went back and forth in the early days of whether we wanted it in the title. I mean, I guess we really haven't settled actually on an exhibition title. We're calling it Queer/Dialogue and I put the slash in there because I love slashes in my titles. But we did go back and forth about whether we wanted to include it. And so it's in there now but again, I think it's a process for many people. And in some ways it's generational and other ways it's experience. It's like I said, how the word has been used in your presence depends on how comfortable you are with it, I think.

Greg Manuel:

Yeah. It was kind of just a catalyst for us to start thinking about artists and different ways of putting people together and bringing people together to see where everybody fit. And I think it's been an interesting term to discuss with everybody because everyone comes to it.

Daniel Strong:

Well, and it was actually the student that came to me who is going to be a fourth year, a senior this year. So he's 21, 22 years old. I mean, the catalyst for this whole show was him coming into my office and saying, "I think you should do a Queer art show." And that's just the way he put it. And it was something that I had not done. And I've gone back and thinking about why I haven't done it. And it was actually, well, I won't go to the incident, in which I had made an acquisition by a gay artist, a gay photographer, and a colleague of mine... And it's a work that's not outwardly gay or Queer but it's by an artist who identifies as Queer. And she looked at this photograph and she said, "Oh, it's homo-erotic." And I thought, wow, that's not why I acquired it. And it's not even, really, to look at the work, a major factor of it's... of what it looks like.

Daniel Strong:

And I realized that when the student came to me and said, "We should do a Queer art show," it hit me that it's something that I've actually ignored or... not ignored, but not delved into, based on that incident. I mean, I didn't want to be curating exhibitions of work that people might think I had ulterior motives in showing. That's my own... I mean, I don't want to use the word trauma. But it's like, these are things that I have not pursued, I think, because I did not want people thinking it was out of my own personal proclivity.... So that's something that I've been working through in the past few months, this embrace of Queer art. What is that? And in what way have I not been showing it because of what people might think of me showing it. But anyway...

Devan Shimoyama:

I think that's something that happens a lot. I mean, I have students that are working through, what does it mean to Queer something, as like a verb to Queer something, or what is Queer abstraction, perhaps? I think that there's a lot of these conversations that people are still trying to figure out especially with such a relatively new embrace of a term and in so many different usages. I think it makes it difficult to kind of pin it down and have real nuanced discussions surrounding those themes and pin it down into something that's concrete. Because it's inherently not concrete. And I think that that's what's so fascinating and interesting about Queerness is that it's like a shapeshifter, it's cool.

Greg Manuel:

I think if you look at everybody in the exhibition, there's a really wide range of artists and different embraces of that term or pushback on it. And I think that was so exciting about bringing a group of artists together and having not necessarily a group show, but eight different people sort of speak through their work about ideas that, in some ways, fall under that category.

Daniel Strong:

And there still are. I mean, there are ideological people on the right who, if you identify as Queer, then everything you do is Queer. Your work is Queer. When the student came and said, "You should do a Queer art show," it's like, "Okay. Find artists who are doing Queer art." And what you discover and what we want to do, to explore, is that Queer artists aren't just making work about being Queer, they're human beings, they're individuals. And that's what we wanted to explore is the intersection of... Well,

like you said before, people are multitudes. They're not just one thing and if they are something, that isn't the only thing they are. And that's what we wanted to explore in this exhibition. While embracing the term, kind of widening it out instead of just... Even though there are some people, especially in a state like mine, in a politically conservative state, I mean, there are people that just won't come because the word is in the title. So there's always going to be that pigeonholing by somebody but preferably not by us.

Greg Manuel:

Maybe just as we get to kind of near the end of our time. I wondered if Devan, you could talk about the other paintings that you've suggested for inclusion in the exhibition are from, I don't know if it's an ongoing series or if it's complete. But all of them I think come from the project that evolved around you buying a house and moving into a space and sort of doing work out there in the front lawn or backyard. I'm not sure where. But can you talk about those a little bit and just where they're at now and if that's where you're still working.

Devan Shimoyama:

Yeah. I don't know. I think of everything in kind of chapters. And sometimes maybe it's like one of those, choose your own adventure books, right? Like, we do some times return to stuff and sometimes it just falls off and I'm done, and you can't go back. But that body of work is something that I'm still kind of, it's still on my mind. I could see myself going back to it again. I'm not sure. I have no promises on that. But that was certainly important at the time in making it. I felt like I was going through a lot of significant changes in my personal life and doing really adult things and feeling not so much like an adult all the time but in certain things that I was doing. Being like, I can't believe I'm paying a mortgage, that's like... What am I doing?

Devan Shimoyama:

I don't know. It's just something I never thought about. Especially being a millennial. I'm 30 now. And so it's like an unusual thing to own a home at this age. I think a lot of young people, there was that economic crisis in 2008 that kind of shunned people, especially the young people, from buying homes. It pivoted into a shift of rentals. That's why there's so many of these kind of big sky-rise apartment buildings that come out with like luxury apartments with their micro size and they have a gym at the bottom, and a yogurt smoothie place next door. Those places I think only exist out of the sort of impossibility that was presented to [inaudible] of even owning anything, and having that, kind of, becoming a permanent fixture in a community and actually building something that is your own. And I think that that's something that, I look back at my grandmother.

Devan Shimoyama:

I had just bought a home, right? And she had put in her last payment and now she fully owns, like, finished paying off her mortgage that she'd been paying for 30 years. And I think it's this thing where it felt like a really substantial, significant moment for me, looking at my grandmother, who worked tirelessly for her whole life to own this big thing. And it's so important to own something, for her, and I understood that, to really have something that really belongs to you that can't be so easily taken from you. That's why so many communities are being so easily pushed out. They don't really own anything, or they are easily talked into just a small amount of money to quickly appease them to get them to get out of the way.

Devan Shimoyama:

And so I think that for me, that body of work came out of this moment of my grandmother finishing, completing something, and me starting something new and following in those similar footsteps. And I felt like something magical was happening there. But I also was thinking a lot about the kind of things that I was learning on my own fumbling through being a homeowner, and not really knowing how to like do homeowner things. There's cutting the grass. And I grew up in Philly, so we didn't really have much grass. And so now I have to do the front lawn and like, "My God." Or having to deal with confronting the history of a really old home that has a very predominantly white neighborhood surrounding me and mostly geriatric. There's a lot of older people living here.

Devan Shimoyama:

So I stand out a lot here and so I feel highly, highly visible. And so there's this kind of tension there whenever I'm doing or performing something outdoors. If I have my friends over, if I'm outside mowing the lawn. I've become this kind of highly ogled figure. And so I was kind of thinking about that when making some of those works where I'm performing these tasks outdoors and not knowing how to do these things and hearing people talk in the neighborhood about what I'm doing wrong, or like whatever. I don't know. And so there's a lot of adjustment that I went through with purchasing a home and moving into a new community and feeling, like, a simultaneous responsibility to integrate myself into a community but also feeling not welcome in this community. And not necessarily interested in being a part of it. So there's a lot of contradiction going on and nuance in that work. If you notice I'm alone in all of it. And that's intentional. Not to say that I live alone by any means, I have my partner and two dogs. My partner is white, and so I do feel highly, highly alone in some ways when navigating through this neighborhood, walking my dogs, tending to my lawn, gardening, getting work done in my home and feeling comfortable with having those people come through. So I think that, for me, that work is a lot about these smaller moments of, maybe, struggle or joy or casual. Even some of the other works that I'm thinking about in the show that do feature the interior of the home are more intimate. And sometimes those are shared moments with either a friend or something like that. And so I think that yeah, that body of work is kind of really simple, maybe, initially. But for me, it's just a kind of expression of how I was feeling during that time.

Greg Manuel:

Thank you. Because I've been looking at the works and trying to figure out what it is about them that is... There's something else. Because I initially sort of took them as being sort of celebratory. And I think I read something online talking about buying a house and moving in. And you describing the story of the painting I think it's called *Sage and Smoke* or *Smoke and Sage* ... upstairs ... about the history of the house, et cetera. But what I read made me feel that they were intended to be somewhat celebratory but I couldn't only find that in them. There was always something else. And you just described it perfectly about being an outsider within, even the community and on your own property.

Devan Shimoyama:

Yeah. And it's just complicated. There's so much to be grateful for and excited about. And then there's also those other moments that are just real and that comes with the territory. And I think that for me in those works, especially in that painting, *Smoke and Sage*, confronting my house's history and going into the attic and kind of finding out that there was a fire that —

Daniel Strong:

So you hadn't been told that when you bought the house. You had no —

Devan Shimoyama:

No. So I think they don't have to tell. It's really funny. There's weird rules that they don't have to tell you if it was a certain amount of time ago, or something like that. And so it was a long time ago and I was having these weird moments where I was like, there's energy in this house and something's in here. And I don't know what it is. It's a house from 1926. And so I was like, I feel like something happened here. And I looked at my address, looked at the home and did a kind of deep dive into the property history. And saw that it had a fire in the attic. And I went up into the attic one day because my partner was gone doing something. And for some reason there's this fan up there that ventilates the hot air out of the attic and it came on on its own. And I went up and it wasn't even plugged in and my dog followed me and wouldn't let me stay up there by myself for any amount of time, wanted me to get out.

Devan Shimoyama:

So I went in sage up there and I feel like confronting these kinds of demons within and outside of the home. And I think is really what that body of work is kind of investigating. It shares moments of intimacy, moments of being home alone or with friends inside, but then also looking outside dealing with the kind of like everyday silly things, tending to your lawn, raking leaves, whatever. But also this kind of hyper isolation that's being felt through my body in this space, in this area. So yeah.

Daniel Strong:

Did you anticipate having these feelings when you bought the house? Or did you fall in love with the house and say, "That's the house I want and then you just never..."

Devan Shimoyama:

I fell in love with the house, and knew I liked the house. It was a good price and I love the architecture and it was move-in ready. Pittsburgh is a city that's changing a lot, talking about gentrification. I mean, this is like, really, rapid-fire happening here. So it's a little intense. I didn't want to get at home over where those new homes are being built. They're insanely expensive and really small. And then I also didn't want to participate in that, it felt kind of icky. So I wanted to go to a different area. And I also wanted to kind of have my own space that felt removed from the university. I didn't want to live right where I worked and see all of my students all the time.

Devan Shimoyama:

So this was an opportunity for me to have all of that. And I never thought that I would move somewhere and be like, "I'm going to be friends with all my neighbors." But I didn't anticipate it feeling so strange. There is a Black community not so far from here. There's like a divide that's really abrupt. And it's like a couple of blocks maybe. Maybe like a mile away or something like that. And it's visual, you can see it as soon as you're there. And you can see the difference between the types of houses that are there, not just the people that are outside. So it's a little polarizing especially when it comes time to vote. Because that's where you see everybody coming together, voting and grocery shopping. That's where you run into everyone.

Daniel Strong:

Voting? Sorry.

Devan Shimoyama:

And then that's when tensions are most high in those spaces.

Daniel Strong:

Right.

Greg Manuel:

Voting and grocery shopping.

Daniel Strong:

Okay. I missed that part.

Greg Manuel:

It should be another exhibition. I mean, we've been speaking for about an hour which is great. I wanted to check in and see if there's anything that you wanted to talk about that we haven't talked about or bring up that we haven't brought up. I mean, I have a question about what you're working on now. And there's another body of work with the books. I don't know if the series is [inaudible] but that whole kind of...

Devan Shimoyama:

That was the name of the exhibition.

Greg Manuel:

Exhibition.

Devan Shimoyama:

Yeah. But that's not the name of it. I didn't name the series.

Greg Manuel:

Yeah. Did those take place inside the house?

Devan Shimoyama:

Some of them? Yeah. So a few of them did. I would say like about half of those paintings take place in my house. All of the people are fictional that are represented there. So it's sort of loosely based off my house. It's not explicitly based off of my house, it's sort of a hybrid collage of different parts of my interior of my home. But yeah, that's definitely in here for sure. And I think that that body of work really stemmed out of looking at a lot of work that was being presented, a lot of desire to show a lot more people of color, a lot more Queer and othered artists and, which is great, but sometimes it felt like, when doing that, it felt like there was only room for a certain way that that identity could be presented outwardly to people to kind of consume.

Devan Shimoyama:

And so I felt like I wanted to open that up a little bit more because I think that even those artists that are being pulled into some of those exhibitions, those group shows and things like that, I think even they're

not thinking of themselves as, in that kind of limited way, through which the language surrounding this movement was happening. And I think there were so many different nuances between. The differences between my work and someone like Jonathan Lyndon Chase, I feel like it's quite vast. I do think there's some overlap for sure, of course. I mean, we're both from Philly. We're both Black and Queer. But I do think that that our work does something quite different in that we're both such just different people and individuals that have different lived experiences and different relationships and views of the world.

Devan Shimoyama:

And I think what's great about this exhibition is that I feel like this presents an opportunity to view something like this in a vacuum and not just sort of present them up into some random show that feels like it's more like, "And here's a Black artist. But this is the black artists that you've seen everywhere else. There's maybe like six or seven. And this is what Blackness is right now." I think that this is like an opportunity to celebrate nuances and difference. And so for me, the reading series was more so about presenting, "Here's, all these other things that go into my work that I think about that other people have recommended to me, that they see in my work." And it ranges from poetry, prose, also some institutional texts, it's also sci-fi written by Black people, which you don't often see. There's epic fantasy written by Black people, African and indigenous peoples presented there. There's books about biobehavioral things. So I think that I was really interested in presenting an opportunity to see that Black people have multitudes and that they are not just the sort of like singular idea or notion of what these five or six things that you're constantly seeing and framed a certain way out in the world. And in all these major publications, there's just so much more going on. And so I really wanted that to be kind of like a suggested reading list to give people some insight on that.

Greg Manuel:

You're going to publish it as a reading list?

Devan Shimoyama:

I could. It's really fun to do. I mean, those paintings, I can keep going. I read a lot. So it's something where I'm like, if I feel like I can just, like, make another one of those because I just read this other thing. And I thought that was really great. And now I'm going to make this other work and it's exciting. So yeah, it's kind of a constantly generative body of work. Because that's how I'm reading something, I get excited, and I think, I should paint this. And I've gotten to talk to some of my favorite authors and some of that, which is great. Like Hanya Yanagihara, who wrote *A Little Life*, saw my painting at the Warhol Museum and re-posted it. And I was like, "Oh my God!" I couldn't even believe it [inaudible] written, like, "see that painting?" So it was just like really exciting for me. I kind of geek out at those moments.

Greg Manuel:

I have to ask you, I mean, was that book life changing for you?

Devan Shimoyama:

Yeah. Yeah. The reason I put that book in a few paintings actually is because it was so impactful. I felt like when I think about work that does, it doesn't totally ignore trauma. Of course, I knew it's largely traumatic, but what's really interesting to me about that book was that it's mostly at its core about friendships and it's not about Queerness, or about trauma. It's about love and core relationships and bonding. And I think that that's what's so magical about that book is that it did everything for me in this really amazing way. But the only thing about it that sucks was that I couldn't read it and then like go out

and read it and interact, because you never knew when you were going to get to a chapter where you'd just be in a dark place.

Greg Manuel:

I mean, I cried I think two or three hours straight. I was staying in a friend's house when I finished and I'm sure that the neighbors thought that there was something terrible happening in the apartment below because I was just... So, okay. That was a tangent.

Daniel Strong:

I'm glad you brought it up.

Devan Shimoyama:

Yeah. That was a great book. Great book.

Daniel Strong:

So I think you indicated that you wanted to do some new works for this exhibition. I don't want to put you on the spot. Because I know we're all stuck at home. You may not have time.

Devan Shimoyama:

Yeah. I do. And I've been thinking about what that is a bit. I mean, part of it was thinking about the interior of my home somewhat. But then part of it was also thinking about responding to this moment and having work not ignore this moment. It is interesting to make something right now, even if it's not directly saying something about what's happening. I think it's just interesting to see what comes out during these times. I'm spending so much time in my home that it's like fascinating to make work thinking about that work, that body of work. That's so much about getting to this home and being in this home and existing here and now I'm *really* here. So yeah, I've been thinking about the ways in which I've limited the circle of people that I interact with or talk to. I don't even just mean like that I see in person.

Devan Shimoyama:

I've gone on distance walks with people. I walk my dog so much that people often are like, "Let's go on this walk or I'd love to see you in the park or something." So I've limited the network of people that I talked to but also just in general, it changes the way that I interact with all of my friends that are a distance from me. And so I've been making some portraits, just drawings at home. And those seem really substantial because when I say drawing, usually it doesn't mean that it's... I think a lot of people think like, when you're a painter and you make drawings, the drawings are somehow easier or quicker or somehow less than your paintings. But my painting practice is heavily rooted in drawing. All of my paintings start with colored pencil drawings. It's the very first thing that's on the surface.

Devan Shimoyama:

And so now I'm sort of really pushing that to the forefront. And I've been working on paper at home and it's changed the work a bit. I started making these portraits of myself, self-portraits first, where I really wasn't seeing anybody at all. And kind of just totally by myself, downstairs in my workspace with my dogs. And then as I've started talking to more people on Zoom that I haven't seen in some time or going on these distance walks, I take an opportunity to take a photo of a close friend or something like that and making portraits of them. And that feels also quite intimate.

Devan Shimoyama:

I don't know if I'll get to the point where I'll be inviting people into my home but I think that I could certainly reimagine them in my home through those portraits. So I don't know. Yeah, we'll see. It's something like that. That's what I've been thinking about more. But works on paper is what I was doing. And they're not small. There are works on paper that I've been making about something like 40 by 50 inches. So they're still substantial. They're the same size as a lot of the paintings I make. So yeah.

Daniel Strong:

Well, our collection primarily works on paper. We have about 5,600 objects in the collection and it's primarily a work on paper collection. So we don't have those prejudices against paper.

Devan Shimoyama:

Good. Yeah.

Daniel Strong:

"Oh, it's *only* on paper." No. We actually prize that. So that's good to hear.

Greg Manuel:

I guess we can bring this to a close. Moving forward Devan, the idea is that hopefully as I hope you know, we're creating a website that will sort of not take the place but sit in the space of the exhibition until the exhibition can open in the new year, in the winter, January. And the hope is that these conversations can continue. So over the next little while, once the website goes live, there will hopefully be opportunities for us to partner up with different artists in the show, different academics and have this kind of conversation continue to keep everything live and active and moving forward. So I hope that you'll be around and possibly available for some of those whatever they may be. In this group, there are some people that know each other. There are some people that have worked together in the past and then there are others that have never had the chance to overlap. So I think it also present an opportunity to actually build community and keep things growing.

Devan Shimoyama:

Yeah. It was cool to see the list of artists. I was really excited when I got the initial email. I know Christina a bit, and Paul I've met a few times, and Doron I know quite well. So yeah, it's just like that great opportunity to meet some of the other people too. I've seen their work and followed a lot of them. So it's a great opportunity for that.

Greg Manuel:

Good. Good.

Daniel Strong:

Good.

Greg Manuel:

So I'm going to say goodbye. I will stick around but I'll end the recording. So again, thank you for your time today. And looking forward to speaking again soon.

Daniel Strong:

Good to meet you.

Greg Manuel:

Yeah. Finally. Yeah. Thanks again.