

Points of Entry

by Katya Tylevich

Essay for the catalog of the two-person exhibition [Anton Ginzburg and Dasha Shishkin: *Partial Eclipse*](#) at Fridman Gallery, NY (October 20 - November 20, 2019)

The narrative comes later, and almost as a lie. After the dust settles, the damage is done, or the paper unfolds, the seduction of sense and metaphor can override the realities of chance, involuntary motions, and chaos. A tidy answer to ‘what happened?’ fills the discomfort of nothing happening that isn’t absurd and accidental.

Partial Eclipse leaves the sewer lids of possibility propped ajar, so that whatever entry points different viewers fall into or crawl down, and with whichever conjunctions they connect disparate presented ideas, they are neither right nor wrong, but always incomplete. Viewers actively contribute to the run-on sentence of this multi-limbed body of work, but their ellipses can never become periods.

Arrivals.

The first contradiction of *Partial Eclipse* is its very premise: Fridman Gallery presents a union of artworks completed by two seemingly unrelated artists — Anton Ginzburg and Dasha Shishkin — and this union highlights entropy. Independent of one another, Shishkin and Ginzburg complete separate works in their studios, and meet regularly to discuss their ideas, only to raise questions about them. More exciting to them is the growing abyss of process and transformation than the shaky bridge they inadvertently start building across it.

Partial Eclipse draws upon the surrealist game *Exquisite Corpse*, which merges different concepts and images to form unexpected wholes. The name of this exhibition implies temporary blind spots, before taking in a more complete view. The physicality of the display indeed conceals and reveals different vistas and contexts, as the body moves through the gallery space, navigating claustrophobic confrontations with the art, before staggering off to bigger reveals.

The room’s layout, manipulated by the artists to include an irrational wall as an obstacle exactly where one would expect a clear passage, contradicts the idea of the open white box. The wall fights with the viewer, interfering with the muscle memory of gallery and salon viewing, and denying a step back for a wide view of the works, though many are purposefully positioned high above eye level. The wall is part of the artwork, as is the challenge it presents the human body before it. A single footstep inside the gallery doors, and one is consumed into the exhibition’s never-ending portmanteau: the viewer is the artwork, too. This abstract environment is a distant relative of *Proun Room*,

created in 1923 by the Russian avant-garde's El Lissitzky, who erased delineations between painting and architecture, and any notions of so-called spatial propriety.

The layout also narrows the halls of art history and defies polite distancing between art and observer. Negating the embalment of art on display, the works themselves appear tactile and animate, as if possessed, goading observers into touching. Ginzburg's acrylic and oil paintings, though structured and contained to geometric wood surfaces, protrude from the walls. His painting, *ROMB_4A_01*, appears to be crawling off the wall entirely, onto the ceiling. And the choreographed aluminum panels of *Simurgh Birding Initiative* are turned as if on their heads, moving away from each other and the room, in flight or migration.

The implied kineticism of Ginzburg's paintings become more pronounced next to Shishkin's unframed works: drawings in acrylic and oil stick, made upon surfaces including Mylar and simple textured cloth, with rough edges, wrinkles and all. Shishkin's works on cloth cast literal shadows of metaphor; a gust of wind might lift them from the walls, a sight at once routine and totemic. Those uneven lines Shishkin draws around works such as *God's wall* and *pont transbordeur* (titles so accidentally befitting their surroundings) barely contain the images at all, as if the artist's hand is unwilling to control the works, or uninterested in governing their jurisdiction.

On the gallery walls, bright color fields — in 'difficult' colors including brown and green, which normally do not play well with others — encase specific artworks together, suggesting those moments of comparison to which the artists wish to draw attention. Each painted field becomes an architectural device and another trespasser between mediums. These are natural places for the eye to land, but not rest. Like the gallery's interior, the landings also confuse the idea of boundaries or borders, treating each individual work as an expanding rogue empire that invades and influences the ones beside it; an uncontained radiation zone, each work necessarily contaminates all others in the room.

There is never one point of focus here. The many intersections between the two artists — those creases in an unwieldy piece of opened paper — are never literal fusions of work. What unfolds instead is a freak polyptych, held together by infinite suggestions and associations. Staring at an eclipse has many side effects for the viewer: blind spots, among them ... hallucinations.

Departures.

On one end, Ginzburg, working often in the language of abstraction, sees his works pulled toward figuration. Sometimes the emerging figure a surprise to him, even after careful consideration and planning. In his gouache on paper *Landscape N Series*, the figure seems defiant against the geometries of modernism; other times, such as in his *HAY STACKS* paintings, suggestions of a landscape begin to emerge. In *3i_SUN*

STARE_4A, elements of the human face are the chimera, a trapdoor for the viewer to anthropomorphize among the possibly inanimate.

These visions appear frequently beside those frenetic temptations of Shishkin's works, in which bodies in motion, such as those in *testing of unconditional parental love*, disregard expectations of sitting still for a portrait. The eye cannot focus on any one figure in Shishkin's artworks. Often made of paint, these drawings are freed from the burdens of their fixed medium. Nothing is fixed: movement of figure can become an abstraction in her work, with the blurred vision of multiple bodies or the multiple faces of *berceuse* competing to be the viewer's protagonist. Other times, central figures recede into the background, unconcerned, and declining the invitation to shed their anonymity. Shishkin never abandons the possibility that her drawn figures are accidental; a collection of lines that somehow came to resemble a human form.

Language connects the two artists, in ways that are both concretely literal and also intriguingly, frustratingly immaterial. The artists share two common spoken languages, Russian and English, both of which they employ in conversations with each other, unconsciously moving between different linguistic constructions, syntaxes, and those components of the brain required of fluency, memory, and emotion. Members of most diasporas will find such linguistic voltage conversions familiar.

And when Shishkin and Ginzburg meet in their respective studios and have those hybrid-language discussions, their points of confluence are often more literary than visual. Talks between the two artists rarely pause on considerations of other contemporary artists but gravitate toward common literary interests, particularly within the multidisciplinary practices of Russian Futurists and 1920s/30s avant-garde collectives, such as OPOYAZ and OBERIU.

Shishkin and Ginzburg are both attracted to the works of Alexander Vvedensky, for example, co-founder of Leningrad-based 1920s collective OBERIU. Vvedensky's dark and unsettled texts — often short plays and poems — challenged existing definitions and constructions of the Russian language and questioned its ability to adequately mirror reality. Vvedensky's disregard for fable and moral, and denial of truth as commonly described, ricocheted as threats to the guarded narrative of Stalin-era Soviet society. The strange, carefully constructed worlds of Vvedensky (who, unsurprisingly, suffered multiple arrests and met a tragic, State-sponsored death), are unpredictable, devoid of anticipated hero, plot and dramatic arc. Yet they are full of meaning.

His 'stage directions' for a play titled, *A Certain Quantity of Conversations, or The Completely Altered Nightbook*, describe a carriage, carrying three companions, stopping before the gates of an insane asylum. '*Nothing changes,*' the author writes. '*Consider the poetry of language. Consider impoverished thoughts.*'

The artworks of Shishkin and Ginzburg similarly reject direct allegory and share that quality of immaculately crafted chaos, the optimistically nihilistic, the laughable tragedy

of cosmic jokes. To submit to the unspoken truths and familiarities of such works, one reads between the lines. Or, as in the works of Ginzburg and Shishkin, between the grid.

The formal device of 'the grid' is a hereditary modernist gene detected in the DNA of Ginzburg's works, albeit with mutations. The artist is practiced in the vocabularies of 20th century modernism and his works allude to their turns of phrases, without quoting directly. He breaks apart the traditional sentence structures of modernism, incorporating them into new patterns and rhythms, to participate fluently in contemporary art dialogues. Ginzburg and Shishkin both leave their works without title in the display, but further inquiry finds, for example, that Ginzburg's abstract paintings are called *HAY STACKS*. Language gives them meaning, even if to mislead, and serves as cheeky allusion to Claude Monet's *Haystacks*. His painting, *LANDSCAPE TURN_1A*, also confuses the abstract with the literal, bringing to mind another present-day method of examination: the landscape mode of an iPhone, turned vertically, fighting against easy viewing.

These are purposeful misquotations; or at the very least, a natural metamorphosis of one language confronted by the context and habits of another. It is not unlike the shape the Russian language takes after many years in the United States, becoming a Frankenstein — a natural assemblage with specific pidgin rules, idioms, and linguistic behaviors. Another exquisite corpse. Translation of one language into the ill-fitting constructions of another often results in something at once humorous and sincere. But we have no trouble understanding this absurdity; sometimes one language is not enough for all there is to say.

Shishkin's process is driven by intuitive constructions and demolitions, and yet, there it is, materializing in her work, too: the modernist grid, elements of that same language to which Ginzburg refers. There it is in Shishkin's depicted checkered cloths, the graphic prints of a bedsheet, the curtains, the shower tiles, the bricks behind a frenetic scene of bodies. In the intended use of her go-to surface — Mylar — it appears again: architects use this paper for printing their blueprints.

Body language, rooted in sensation and the unspoken, is likewise integral to these works. Shishkin's works communicate the body language of seduction, pathology, violence, sex, and a mischievous withholding of entrance and exit routes. In her *shame of parenthood*, humiliation worms itself into the title, but contrasted against the ambiguous image (ambiguous in every way: which orifice is depicted, which emotion), the shame may be insincere, or at least undecided.

Ginzburg's film, *A Million*, playing in the gallery's underground level is a fortuitous companion to the silent tongue of Shishkin's works. *A Million* documents three different men, publicly counting one million banknotes (two of the men sit before walls painted in a solid color, coincidentally reminiscent of those *Partial Eclipse* color fields). The

duration of each segment lasts only as long as it takes to count the money. The sight is suggestive, nearly vulgar, as if being viewed through a peephole — particularly resonant in a gallery, a space in which the transaction of money tends to creep around below elevated ideas of art. The film offers no further explanation, only endless connotations. Shishkin's figures of casual and irrepressible encounters feel similarly unsanctioned and subversive.

But if this exhibition is a denial and subversion of narrative, then none of these emergent patterns and crisscrosses matter. Or, they matter only as much as they do not. With explicitly no introduction or conclusion, tight-lipped about takeaway and allergic to didactic, *Partial Eclipse* leaves the possibility of meaning so open as to be a metaphor for meaninglessness... or disorientation, displacement, the unholy union of fractured parts.

In this way, the works of Ginzburg and Shishkin, just as this essay, tiptoe around another kind of narrative. A big one: the origin story. Or, more specifically, the artists' shared place of origin, the Soviet Union, which, though no longer a point on a map, is that illogic meeting ground (that illogical experiment) — the patient zero — to which so many of the mutations, visions, artistic, and literary interests of this exhibition can be traced. Both artists received their art education in the United States and have long since worked in New York. They stick to no one plot, school, style, or story. But just as displaced languages develop their own logic when combined with new tongues and contexts, there is also a way to speak the language of chaos and absurdity fluently. *Partial Eclipse* communicates that which breaks apart in words, on maps, and even on paper.

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