



February 1 – March 6, 2022 Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery

# Dana DeGiulio

## *Live or Die*<sup>1</sup>

“Heidegger calls the subject ‘the bearer of predicates,’ but then Gwendolyn Brooks called art a broken window. Laughter, wrote Kant, is just violence becoming nothing, and joy is something else. They’re flower paintings, you’re right, and then some others.”

—*Dana DeGiulio*

In “Against Interpretation” (1966), Susan Sontag addressed the privileging of content over form in the viewing of an artwork. Sontag argued that from the time of Plato and Aristotle into modernity, content comes first before form. Viewers and critics alike assume that their task is to understand and interpret the content of a work, to the extent that it is impossible to remember a time when we did not ask what a work said (content), rather than concern ourselves with what it did (action or form). The result is that we are tasked with what Sontag describes as “defending art.” Media theorists such as Boris Groys have taken this one step further, to suggest that the artwork itself is sick, reliant on a curator (etymologically related to ‘to cure’) to give the ailing image presence.

Rather than lean into interpretative models of presentation, Sontag implored viewers, and especially critics, to develop a new vocabulary for forms. Instead of deciphering a relationship to the work’s content, to the picture, critics could attempt a “loving description of the appearance of a work of art.” Decades ahead of the transparency promised by Neoliberalism, Sontag upheld transparency—the thing in itself, “of things being what they are”—as “the highest, most liberating value in art.”

The deliberate adoption of genre by an artist gestures towards form over content. Its ubiquity makes genre recognizable. Almost everyone

can see it, access it, and know it without a text. In contrast, the use of symbolism, especially that of clichéd symbol (e.g. floral still life painting), though gesturally transparent as Sontag has valued, can cause something to break. The artist might be forced to reckon with their own receptivity to finding significance in cliché, or the symbol might overload and breach as it acquires new meanings for others. Or it could cause a break of genre itself.<sup>2</sup>

The late Lauren Berlant explained in their essay “Genre Flailing” that a writer might be “...trying to open up the object or close the object, extend a question or put it to rest...Genre flailing is a mode of crisis management that arises after an object, or object world, becomes disturbed in a way that intrudes on one’s confidence about how to move in it.” The discomfort of that insecurity provokes a desire to slow the flailing or make it stop altogether, to render the transparency of form opaquer and return to the privileging of content.

Transparency—of form/genre/symbolism—becomes an object in crisis itself, indifferent to our presence and potentially even repelling our interest. Embedded in the form of a window, it is also present for us to see/feel in/on/through but not to see as picture itself, either literally or figuratively. The window allows us to look in on the picture as a hole in a wall. Paintings are also holes in this way.<sup>3</sup>

Each painting opens and closes, being both “is” and “for,” threatening to undo through the window the very compression the picture’s symbol already enabled for us. In that moment the content might be let in, the viewers might want to be let in, and we all might be slapped back by the glass coming to terms with the violence inherent in the transparency.<sup>4</sup> Let the right one in.<sup>5</sup>

1 Anne Sexton opens her 1966 book with a Saul Bellow epigraph, from an early draft of Herzog: “Don’t cry, you idiot! Live or die, but don’t poison everything.”

2 Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms*. Ugly Duckling Presse, 2010.

3 Conversation with the artist, January 2022.

4 The first line of Dana DeGiulio’s book, *Nefertiti for the Blind* (2019), is “A small animal approaches its reflection in a window shot with sun and is slapped back by the glass.”

5 *Let the Right One In*. Directed by Tomas Alfredson, EFTI, 2008. The narrative of this 2008 Swedish romantic horror film is built around an enduring mythology about vampires—that vampires are unable to cross a threshold, even a window, without an invitation.

## CHECKLIST

Dana DeGiulio

*Live or Die*

*Some days*

2019–22

21 paintings, oil on panel

Courtesy of the artist.

*As ever*

2020–21

27 paintings, oil on panel

Courtesy of the artist.

FROM LEFT

a. *One Giotto lamenting angel*

*Wet fur froze*

b. *Clean*

Bra, soap

c. *Our bodies*

Courtesy of the artist.

d. *Dissolver of sugar*

e. *Wuthering Heights*

f. *Closer*

g. *It's only afternoon*

h. *Listening*

i. *There you are*

j. *We Belong by Pat Benatar*

k. *The name underneath the name*

l. *Pure wish*

m. *Listener*

n. *The world is a crying baby*

o. *Not heat*

p. *Diver*

q. *Part of god*

r. *Greg*

s. *I will pour in all i get of you*

t. *No signal*

u. *Listen*

## Dana DeGiulio

Dana DeGiulio is a painter whose project pits action and materiality against image. Her work in video, drawing, installation, painting, writing, and teaching is about edges and touch and attention, and tries to ask the means what the ends are. The work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Artforum*, *Contemporary Art Daily*, *Mousse*, *Erev Rav*, *Chicago Artist Writers*, and other publications. In 2019, her book *Nefertiti for the Blind* was released by Attendant. She has been an itinerant professor of visual art for the last fourteen years and currently teaches at New York University, Columbia University, and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She works at home in Brooklyn next to the window.

Dana DeGiulio wishes to thank Ben Chaffee, Rosemary Lennox, Paul Theriault, the staff at Wesleyan, and Michaela Murphy, Audrey Adams, Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, and Aurelia D'Antonio without whom nothing.

## RELATED EVENTS

### **Opening Reception**

Tuesday, February 1, 2022 from 4:30pm to 6pm  
Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery

### **Public Deinstall and Closing Talk with the Artist**

Sunday, March 6, 2022 at 4:30pm  
Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery

#### Cover image:

Installation view of Dana DeGiulio, *As ever*, 2020–2021, Twenty-seven paintings, oil on panel. *Live or Die*, 2022, Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery. Photography by Dana DeGiulio.

Curated by Benjamin Chaffee. Art installation by Paul Theriault and exhibition management by Rosemary Lennox. Special thanks to Dana DeGiulio, Andrew Chatfield, John Elmore, Kyle Beaudette, Rani Arbo, and Justin Ross.