

KATE SHEPHERD



HOW IS MY practice supported... what does support mean?

Collaboration, technical assistance, being “kept company,” spiritual renewal, financial partnership, a social trampoline, another eye, my mother! I have been blessed by many relationships, the most supportive of which is with my “right-hand man” (female) assistant, with whom I have worked for 11 years now. I first asked her to come help in the studio when I was pregnant and she was the cashier at Mama’s in the East Village. I would leave her hard-to-read notes of tasks to do in the evening after I left. This odd exchange evolved into a long-lasting relationship; we are still working and even traveling together. She does a lot of the “doing” work but is also involved in the decision-making process. What’s most important is that she remembers conversations from years ago. This week I retrieved a photo which I hoped to use for a wooden puzzle work, and she replayed a discussion about it that we had had two years ago.

We sit at the desk three or four times a week going over the ideas, photos, sketches, illustrator and sketch-up files I have accumulated. Together we edit my instructional or technical e-mails for clarity. She prepares panel surfaces, does inventory, bookkeeping, and shares her opinions about work while it is in process. She is informed about the world at large; I would rather talk politics with her than with anyone else. While I would like an “office manager,” I do all the e-mail correspondence in the studio, which can take more than half of the focus time. Rarely

Kate Shepherd
Respite from all News, All Grey
39 ¾”x25 ½”, 39 ¾”x24 ½”, (2
¼” gap)
Oil on panels
2003
Courtesy of the artist and
Galerie Lelong

does anyone else speak on my behalf, as I like to be the one who cultivates relationships and oversees details. This is not ideal...

I've gotten technical help with drawing. Starting in 2002, when I began to use more complicated imagery that I could construct with a thread-based perspective system, I worked with an architect. The first impetus for doing so was to make a painting based on a Caucasian rug. We started to work based on my sketches, and then moved on to building ideas directly on the computer. I have had a longest and most meaningful working relationship with a man who moved home to Palestine, so for the last five years we have had a back and forth using e-mail, iChat and screen-sharing. He has taught me how to use various programs and their keyboard shortcuts, and has even inadvertently chosen colors for paintings by showing me a rendering that just sticks in my head.

With his help, I also make files to send to a screen printer with whom I make editions, drawing surfaces and monoprints. I have worked closely with the same printer for 12 years; he is a better colorist than I am (!). There is less and less pre-planning in my work these days, and I enjoy how the input of all the printers in his shop can bend a project.

From two ex-assistants who are really smart and creative problem-solver artists, I have sought carpentry and logistical help. We are each other's teachers. One has fine skills in fabrication and installation, exhibiting an intense respect for craft and workmanship; he has taught me about specific use of fastening systems, hardware and tools. With the other, I have discussed architectural perspective and techniques for wall paintings, and we have built countless things with great efficiency. Every time I move studios, we take apart the shelving wood and reconstruct it to accommodate the new space. I get a huge kick out of working upwards from the size of the materials.

My dealers: I tend to work with people who are sympathetic yet business-minded, with whom I have an honest and frank exchange. Showing and selling art is about promoting ideas, and in the best of worlds there is a sensitive understanding that goes two ways. I have recently branched off from making solely paintings, and so these relationships have been crucial in bringing new work forward.

My husband and I are supportive of one another's work lives, and, to other people, we appear to have an unconventional marriage, as they have never seen him! I socialize and attend openings on my own, as well as travel for shows and research. He is very trusting of me, and shares a tendency to focus intensively on work (he has a particularly demanding job). We value our time together at home with our son, and have pretty much gotten along without a sitter while splitting childcare. We have found help: when our son was a baby, he was in day care, then later he stayed for after-school, and now that he is older he takes care of himself more. By having a family, I often feel like I live a double life and am in two places at once, which is very stressful, but it's worth it.

Art is like an abstract run-on religion in and of itself, yet I also have a deep need for metaphysical interpretation from other sources and disciplines. I have found teachers of metaphysics and words and music from the Christian Science Hymnal to be particularly resonant. I spend subway time for reading, sometimes taking the train to the end of the line and back if I want to read more of the *New York Times*. Oftentimes, my focus is on an analysis of language and on the structure of ideas that are parallel to how I think about art work.

Having a good place to get bread is terrifically helpful; most days I eat a cheese or avocado sandwich without stopping work. Because I have a child, my day in the studio ends at dinner time. I make no appointments during the day and my best working hours are between 2 and 6 p.m. When there's an event to attend in the evening, I don't go home to change first; I wear pretty much the same outfit every day! (Thank you Italian tailor for the identical shirts, and thank you Uniqlo for everything else.) Every Monday, a woman comes to the apartment and does the wash....The super's helper mops my studio floors every other week, and these are true luxuries. I especially appreciate any help with cleaning...!

In creative terms, I am invigorated by collaboration; maybe this tendency has something to do with my theater family (my father was a pioneer of political improvisation theater, and my mother is an actress and director). As my work revolves around

conceptual structures that are game-like, I constantly “volley” via the US Postal Service and e-mail. Playing makes me immensely happy and helps me to trust my instincts. To one of my dealers, I sent magazine clippings with captions and he made a book from them. Recently, I wanted to send a pencil to a friend who is particularly fun, and after three tries it reached him unbroken. A Swiss artist and I have been sending each other objects from cast-off materials that serve as unrelated props for an ongoing story. And with artists down the street from my studio, we trade half-made works on paper for the other person to finish. I would not be as happy or productive without the exchanges I have with my friends.

In the studio, I make an effort to execute new ideas before explaining them away, so as not to lose momentum and a personal connection to the process. Afterwards, I try to avoid “storytelling” in the hope and belief that the work can speak for itself. I try to speak about my work honestly, which is hard to do because by the time the work is done, I have forgotten a lot. Essentially, the response of the viewer (friend, dealer, collector) is the last element of “support,” which helps me to understand the effectiveness of my expression and intention. Without talking about it, I watch people while they look at my work, and their immediate response is palpable to me. This truly helps me to know if I am bringing an idea to fruition, while also heightening my self-awareness. •