

TRAMPOLINE THIS WORD THAT ACCIDENTALLY GOT SO EXCITED



PHOTO BY GENE OGAMI

A Conversation between **Joey Soloway** and **Iva Gueorguieva**

Iva Gueorguieva: I recently pulled out my sketchbook and I was like, “Shit, the last entry was April 21.” And then there’s some really funny stuff from March 6, 9, 10. And it’s just like the world exploded in the course of a few days, and then I stopped doing anything.

Joey Soloway: It was like the first half of life. And now we’re in the second half of life. It was March 13—actually, I think of it as January because we had a huge loss on the morning of January 21 in our community. Our friend died. And from there, it’s been this rocket ship of unprecedented ability to tolerate things we never thought possible. March 13, it exploded. It was epic at my house; there were floods, and people were coming over. Other people were telling us to stay away from people—“Put masks on; stay in your house.” And that was nothing compared to where we’ve been since then. I’m just trying to attract the idea of keeping a journal, trying to document any of it. It feels so intense that documenting it in any way feels kind of crazy.

IG: It’s interesting. What is the appropriate response to a crisis? You look back and see these moments of I’m responding; I’m reacting; I’m responding; I’m doing! And then there’s just silence. In my sketchbook on March 12, I wrote, “Pandemic. Everything is shutting down. Still going to the desert tomorrow morning.” And then I wrote, “I talked to my brother. He’s okay. It’s raining like crazy,” which was happening in your house. “Endless rain in the forecast. Surreal.” Then I wrote, “Kim texted”—I have no idea which Kim, but “Kim texted. I love life. Me too. We all do.” Then there were moments when I remember calling friends and asking them, “What should I draw?” Joey, you told me on March 19 to draw, “I have soup. Do you have bread?” And then it’s just silence. Sometimes silence is the only response to such an overwhelming crisis.

JS: I also feel like a lot of people have been vigorously yelling ways in which the world must change for so long—like in your paintings where people can feel your perspective on fascism or violence. My work has been begging at first for women to have the experience of what it would be like to be centered the way men do and now for trans people to have the experience of what it would be like to be centered the way cis people do. For anybody who works the way we work, making a cultural product is almost like the least we can do and the only part we can actually share. But underneath we’re absolutely constantly filled with rage. I can go off into a rage about patriarchy at a moment’s notice. Imagine being a young male and seeing Shakespeare, Picasso, God and Jesus in every book. Meanwhile, none of us assigned “girl” at birth can even imagine what we would feel like if we grew up in a world that was expecting us to be geniuses, brilliant, powerful, to be politicians.

IG: In my 20 years of painting, I’ve been making works about how the world is all power relationships, vectors of power. Unfortunately, in the consequences of these networks of power, there’s violence and oppression. There are real consequences to actual bodies. It’s interesting to think, “What is the role of art?” I grew up in a Communist country where art had a very specific role. It was social realism as a way to illustrate the movement of revolution. Ultimately, it’s really about storytelling. Whether it’s the patriarchy or racism, these stories have real consequences. Undoing them and replacing them and finding other ways to speak, scream, cry and just let that energy guide us right now is about unleashing a vital, life affirming story. There are so many stories that need to be heard.

JS: We are all part of a revolution, and we want to yell at the top of our lungs every second. Now we can do it that much more without being afraid of losing our jobs. White men are now asking themselves, “How

can we create space for people of color, Black people, nonbinary people, women—and do it quickly, so that we don’t get beheaded?” I’m not desperate for money anymore, which means I don’t have to behave a certain way around cis straight men. The whole rest of my life, I did—so much so that it didn’t even occur to me I wasn’t straight. I so much wanted to succeed that I sucked up to the important men and dreamed of having enough self-confidence to make something. I’m still in rage mode, but my role is trying to just relax and let people of color lead right now.

IG: What has that looked like lately?

JS: I’ve been like a polymath creative, moving intensely from area to area, really deeply learning new skills. The first one was just family, home schooling my sons, the three of us in the house, finding ways to incorporate learning with life. It was really beautiful to just have my kids with me and have the family of three for the first time, really ever. It’s been a new time for me to parent as a nonbinary person, without all of the weight that comes with being a good mother. It’s been amazing, so that’s my main focus. Then I started renovating the basement and made an artist studio/space for myself. In doing so, I realized I’m an artist! I’m a visual artist. I started pulling out all of my visual art that I had done and connecting with so much shame around everybody telling me that I wasn’t good. It wasn’t actually that people actively told me I suck, but nobody told me I was good. I had so many male professors that I had crushes on... Remember those eyes, Iva?

IG: Yes!

JS: I just got those framed. It’s the eyes of my art teacher. I did this amazing piece of pointillism—I could’ve made a whole career out of only doing pointillism for the rest of my life. It was his eyes staring at me. I mean, I sort of found myself as an artist. And just when you think I would have been beginning to put on an art show, I discovered the garden. So that became the space where we and some other artists began finding ourselves in ritual to hold space for something almost too big to do anything else.

IG: Salad Hill! There’s something about that time, being outside—with our masks—but still being outside and being together. In a normal circumstance, we’d have been calling this person and that person and asking, “What are we going to do?” But now all there is is, “There’s a little seedling. Where should we put it?”—this connection to the birds and the sun and squatting in the dirt. There are moments in your life when you’re moved by ideas, and then there are moments when you’re just like, “Shit, I’m right there,” really actually feeling. There’s no ego, no separate perspective. I remember listening to an interview with you about directing and sitting in your hips.

JS: Yes, that’s how you taught me to look at art.

IG: Really?

JS: Yes, I remember you talked about that feeling of relaxing your eyes, relaxing your third eye, relaxing your body, getting as much in response mode as you can and allowing the piece to work on you. I always wanted to understand art. I would go to art shows with people and really not know what to say. I would stand in front of a painting, and then you would keep reminding me to just receive it. That’s what I do as a director. I’m always trying to communicate that to everybody on set. When the camera’s rolling, we’re all in the same kind of relaxed jaw, loose arm, soft belly, bent knees. Allow, allow, allow. Create a sacred space for the actor to take risks.

IG: That’s so interesting because that interview really inspired me to find that place for myself in front of the canvas, which turned into being actually in the canvas. The only way to work is to be squatting in this way. But then that was more of a conceptual sort of thing. To be in the



Gueorguieva's *get out of the bed battle battles and deliver*, 2020

garden on Salad Hill, doing this moment of life and death, being with the plants and our friends—that was completely around the corner from our usual bullshit.

JS: But that was always there! That's what was so shocking—we could have been in my backyard gardening and sharing and talking and laughing how we are right now and just being present, but it never occurred to either of us to do it.

IG: There's something about letting go. These new black and white tapestries I've been working on are overtly figurative. They're women rescuing other women, holding, cradling, picking up, carrying—almost like they're in battles. They're sensual and almost weirdly religious—even though I don't believe in God, they sort of reference Italian Renaissance painting, but not in any conscious way. When it was raining like crazy in those weeks of horror unfolding, every once in a while, I would come to the studio, and all I had was dirty water. There was no point in mixing paints, so I just had dirty water and black paint. These figures kind of came out of these wet puddles of dirty water, the most basic of materials. I was creating everything I wanted to be close to. There's one painting of two women facing each other with their knees bent and their foreheads touching, and there's a sense of loss. It's of letting go in some ways and also of not wanting to let go. Ever.

JS: How letting go? I feel like your paintings are so much about people grabbing on for dear life.

IG: Oh, for sure. No, it's more like letting go of my usual hang-ups, my fears. Usually the figures and narratives are buried under all this color or architectural fragments or swirls, and then I can be hidden in there. But I let go of that fear and allowed it. Reaching for another human being could be very embarrassing, just right there in the open.

JS: Mm. I wonder what I'll end up calling that one.

IG: Me too! I'll be working on a piece for weeks sometimes, and I end up with what I call existential lasagna. There are so many experiences

layered up in the work. There's always synchronicity between things that I read, things that I encounter, things that I feel, but then I send the image to you, and a phrase or a word comes back, and it's just astonishing how right on it is. There was one piece that I made a month or two ago, and you wrote back, "I'm dying in here." And I was like, that is exactly what this piece is about. But I didn't have the phrase.

JS: I just look at it as big as I possibly can—depending on what screen I have—try to relax and receive it like you taught me and just text you the first thing that comes into my head. It really is like the death of seeing.

IG: And it's so meaningful to me that instead of me making that last stroke, it's your title that holds a protective layer for the way in which the work can now go out into the world.

JS: That's interesting that it's protective.

IG: I find it very protective. It's always astonishing how perfect it is. I could never imagine any other title for the piece. That place where language and image meet is so interesting. I was looking at another title, *We stand against the idea of sea dinosaurs in outer space*. It's so beautiful and so wacky. There's something about the phrases that trigger a different kind of brushwork. It liberates what I do next in a drawing or a painting. They become like little trampolines of invention because when you collaborate, you let another artist's consciousness into your space. My graduate professor always said to be aware of who you let into your studio, but I think when you let in another artist's consciousness, it's like, "I'm not alone. I don't have to do this alone." I love that. Painting is such a strangely nonverbal way of being in the world. It's often the case that this kind of cross-pollination happens. In filmmaking, there's a team of people working together, but in the art world, collaboration is often obscured. These conversations between artists are not as visible, but they happen all the time. For me, it's absolutely essential. It's a life force in my practice.

JS: I love collaboration. So, I've been doing something really sneaky. I've been taking notes during this conversation to name the paintings you've been working on lately.

IG: Really? That's so exciting!

JS: I have a lasagna of words that I want to put into a blender and use for the paintings. I'm making a suggestion—even if I don't look at the work, it's still gonna be an amazing name.

IG: I love it. It could also just be whatever your lasagna of words is. After all, these five paintings came out of a witchy cauldron...

JS: I've got one—it's embarrassing out here carrying dirty water.

IG: Love it. Yes.

JS: Okay, I knew you would. Some of these things I wrote down were things I was thinking when you were talking. Then, *there's get out of the bed battle battles and deliver*. That's a good one, right?

IG: That's a great one! I can see it. You speak, and my eyes move cause I'm in the studio, and they just rest on the exact painting.

JS: We'll need one for the title of this article as well. What about *i always do this alone hung up on*?

IG: But that's the perfect title for that little guy that was the beginning of all of these paintings.

JS: Okay, here's another: *the protective detective*... When you said that my titles are protective, I thought you said they were a detective.

IG: They're both!

JS: That's why I wrote, "the protective detective." And then what else? This trampoline this word that got so excited it accidentally... Hold on. *trampoline this word that accidentally got so excited*—that's cute. That should be the title for the article.



i always do this alone hung up on, 2020, Sides a & b



stop beating puddles, 2020, Sides a & b



PHOTOS BY GENE OGAMI