

Dialogues: The David Zwirner Podcast

Lisa Yuskavage & Tamara Jenkins

[SOUNDBITE; LISA YUSKAVAGE: I'm Lisa Yuskavage and I'm a painter. TAMARA JENKINS: I'm Tamara Jenkins and I'm a filmmaker.]

[MUSIC FADES IN]

LUCAS ZWIRNER: From David Zwirner, this is *Dialogues*—a podcast about creativity and ideas.

[SOUNDBITE; LISA YUSKAVAGE: When I first started making the work that I feel I was meant to make, I was told by many people who had previously roundly supported me, do not do this, this is a big mistake.]

LZ: I'm Lucas Zwirner, Editorial Director of David Zwirner Books. In every episode on the podcast we'll introduce you to a surprising pairing. We're taking the artists we work with at the gallery and putting them in conversation with some of the world's most extraordinary makers and thinkers.

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LZ: Today's pairing: the painter Lisa Yuskavage and the filmmaker Tamara Jenkins. Figurative painting in the twenty-first century owes so much to Lisa Yuskavage. Since the early 2000s, her portraits of women—and more recently, men—have challenged norms and expectations in contemporary art. These nude and semi-nude figures, painted with an Old Masters control of color, are lush, erotic, vulgar, and angelic. Set against otherworldly landscapes and dramatically lit interiors, Lisa's paintings feel classical and modern all at the same time. Her work is in the collections of museums around the world including the MoMA, the Whitney, and the Art Institute of Chicago, among many others. She's been showing with David Zwirner for the last decade.

When I asked Lisa about having this conversation, there was only one person she wanted us to call: Tamara Jenkins. Tamara is a filmmaker, writer, and director. Her breakout film, *Slums of Beverly Hills*, is now a cult classic. It's based on her own coming-of-age story growing up in a lower-middle-class family on the outskirts of Beverly Hills. In 2007, she made *The Savages*, starring Laura Linney and Philip Seymour Hoffman, for which she was nominated for an Oscar. *The Savages* is about adult siblings struggling with their own paths in life, while caring for their sick father. Her new film, *Private Life*, comes out this fall. It tells a story about infertility and marriage in middle age. It's an exquisite jumble of emotions and it shows Tamara's gift for tragicomedy.

Tamara and Lisa, welcome to *Dialogues*.

TAMARA JENKINS: Hi.

LISA YUSKAVAGE: Hi. Thank you.

LZ: It's up to you how we begin, but I thought, you know, one of the stories that we've heard is how you guys met and the sort of initial sequence of running into one another, encountering one another, seeing one another's work, and maybe that's just a place to begin and then we see how things unfold.

LY: You go, Tamara—

TJ: [crosstalk] The East Village.

LY: Because I feel like I always, I know my side of the story, I want to hear your side. **TJ:** I feel like you have a much clearer vision of it. But it was on Avenue A, what year?

LY: It was '96. It was the summer of '96 because it was super hot.

TJ: It was very hot, and there was a bar that functioned during the day as like a cafe. And you go in there for—

LY: It smelled really strongly of alcohol.

TJ: Beery.

LY: But yet they rented the daytime as a bar, it was before there were Starbucks.

TJ: But it always had a stinky kind of cigaretty, sour smell. Even though—

LY: It was called the Nation, and—

TJ: Very good coffee.

LY: You were working on *Slums*.

TJ: I don't know if I was, was I?

LY: Yes, you were.

TJ: Okay, so it was before it happened.

LY: Clearly, clearly, I do remember everything.

TJ: You better tell the story. Anyway, I would go there every morning, drink coffee, and sit at these tall like, high top tables, whatever, you know. And they were right by the window, and I would smoke. I don't smoke anymore, but I used to smoke and I had my little notebook and I would drink coffee and write.

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LY: And the barista, Tim.

TJ: Baristo.

LY: Tim was very personable and he knew about my work somehow. And I can't remember how. Back in '96, you would actually even show somebody, maybe you would literally show them a slide if they asked you what you do. And he said to me, you know, you should know each other, and we looked at each other and in a way kind of, he said something about—

TJ: No, he said, Oh, you guys should know each other. She's a painter, she's an artist. Lisa's an artist, and you're a filmmaker. And I think we looked at each other suspiciously.

LY: We both went no, thank you. Like kind of, no, thank you.

TJ: Also just like, who wasn't an artist or filmmaker on Avenue A in 1990, whatever it was.

LY: But I remember having a small enough conversation with you where I asked you what you're working on and you said I'm making a film called the *Slums of Beverly Hills*. And I said, you know, okay. And then we, I never saw you again. And then I was at Angelica, and your film was playing and there was like a pamphlet with your picture. And I was like, Oh well, I guess that's the end of that possible friendship. And you . . .

TJ: You mean you didn't think, Oh, she really wasn't lying.

LY: I figured you went Hollywood and were never coming back.

TJ: Oh.

LY: And um . . .

TJ: No, I never left, I still live on Avenue A.

LY: But it was funny because I was so enthralled with the movie and I was like, Oh, that's too bad I didn't have more of a conversation with her. And then the next thing I think you remember a little better because it was probably a little more in focus to you because we then met again.

TJ: And then that I remember because he reintroduced us. And then, but wasn't there a breast thing? Didn't he say, Oh, you guys? I know that there was that piece in *The New York Times*.

LY: No, that was the first introduction. He brought up breasts, which is probably why we didn't want to—

TJ: But how did he know the *Slums of Beverly Hills* had breasts in it? I mean, thematically.

LY: He may, you may have just shown him . . .

TJ: My own?

LZ: Just exuded.

TJ: Exuded boob?

LY: I think that somehow he knew that and you have to ask him, but it was just the kind of thing where at the time somebody says, Oh, you guys have this big boob thing in common. Obviously, I don't think about my work as that and you don't think about your work as that, which was probably the damning part of the introduction in a way because it was nice. But it was also like, ew, I don't really want to be introduced that way. So I think that I had seen your work finally, and then you hadn't seen my work, but—

TJ: But I had seen that piece in *The New York Times*.

LY: There was an article in *The New York Times* about me and my process. And it was a couple of years or a year later. And I do remember we sat down, I remember we sat there and had coffee for as long as we could. And then we had something to eat and then we walked around and for some reason I remember we walked into Babes in Toyland. We didn't buy anything because we were being shy.

TJ: So shy.

LY: That's so typical of us, would be like, don't say my work has boobs. But then we would wander into the store just to be silly because it was new in the neighborhood, we were both being like, I dare myself to go into the store on Rivington Street. Anyway, so we just walked everywhere. We went to see some shows and it was kinda like, like an eight-hour marathon, getting-to-know-you friendship thing and kind of stayed like that. And it was kind of a magical thing. It's a nice New York City story.

LZ: Lisa, let's go back even earlier. Is there some moment, something in your early childhood, some experience with art, that you feel really set you on your path to becoming a painter?

LY: You know, growing up without art in the neighborhood. I grew up in Philadelphia fortunately. Because Philadelphia is the type of town that has great

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art museums and culture, I was able to be exposed to it and then decided once I was exposed to it that I wanted to only know artists for the rest of my life and be surrounded by artists for the rest of my life.

TJ: When you were little, you made that commitment to yourself?

LY: Probably like eighth, ninth, tenth grade. It was like locked and loaded. Like these are my people. You know, I didn't know anybody who really was creative so I was kind of making it up from looking at art.

TJ: Did you draw when you were little? I mean I have an eight-year-old so I watch her draw and make things. Were you an obsessive drawer as a kid at all?

LY: Probably not, I was not unusual as a little kid. I don't think so. My parents might have a different memory of it, but I actually wrote poetry. And because I had big feelings that needed to get out. And I think it was more about wanting to have an expression of the heart and sort of like have a place for that. So I started writing poetry in a copybook and I started to illustrate the poems. I would find pictures that would closely illustrate them from magazines if I could find them, do collages. I became popular for the first time. I was probably in seventh or eighth grade. People started borrowing the copybook very respectfully, like, Lisa, what would you mind if I took that home tonight? And like instead of like, you know, smacking me in the back of the head or tripping me or whatever else.

TJ: Wait, to read your poetry?

LY: Like read my poetry. Usually the girls, of course. It became known that I was making poetry in this book and they would borrow it. It became this thing where like—

TJ: Passed around.

LY: People would borrow it. And I think that, you know, honestly, connecting to people is probably the addiction. You know, your heart to the world. And know in a big way, and so that's the addiction. It's like I made contact—I didn't really like the movie *Contact*, but I love the idea of, it's like Jodie Foster's out there with those big satellites. I think that's what it's like to be in art, especially a little kid in a world where there is no art. You're like trying to get like, is that, that crackle? Is that, is that the sound? I mean, it kind of goes back to our meeting.

LZ: Do you have memories of some of what you reacted to in Tamara's work back in the day when you first saw the *Slums of Beverly Hills* or sort of what the initial feelings were watching?

LY: Well, I think that the funniest things were also super dark. And now I know her and it's just like the kind of like, the humor is always weighted. She's comedic, but like in the most profound sense, like you have to laugh otherwise you're going to cry. And then sometimes like, we watched the new film, *Private Life*, yesterday. I found myself on a wave of laughing and crying, a lot of waves.

TJ: Wow.

LY: Yeah, it's a really good movie.

LZ: Really good.

TJ: Thank you.

LZ: You know, Tamara, I had a similar reaction to the movie, I found it extremely moving. And I was wondering what was the inspiration for *Private Life*, what's the story behind it?

TJ: I myself went through infertility drama with my husband when we tried to have a child and we were not young. And when I was in the throes of it, I would download to a friend of mine all the trials of the process—to my friend Rebecca—and she was in hysterics and she was also traumatized by the whole process. This happened, whatever, all the failed IVF cycles, the miscarriages, it's very epic and unpleasant, but she was my confidante during that period and ironically she ended up having to go through her own IVF drama so she was well prepared.

But during my telling, you know, confiding in her, she said, Oh, you know, you should really write all this down, this would be really great for a movie. And I was completely repelled by that idea and I swore that there's no way in hell I would ever write about this stuff. And then it went away and years later, I don't know how many years later, not that long after actually, a lot of my friends started trying to have babies and going through similar—it was around me, it was like a little mini epidemic that a lot of women I knew who had sort of delayed having kids because they were artists and had weird lives, not necessarily painters, but writers or journalists or freelance-type people who lived in New York. And everybody gets married in New York much later, often, and delay, lives in tiny apartments, and just delays a certain kind of aspect

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of adulthood because they're so preoccupied with their vocation or their profession or their career or whatever.

So when I started seeing it all around me, that kind of got me interested in it as the subject matter, infertility or whatever. But it's so funny because I don't—even though the movie is about a couple in the throes of fertility, what really I was interested in writing a movie about was about a marriage in middle age, like not a young marriage. And so the original title of the movie was called *The Middle Ages*. But I found that this platform of having these characters in this scenario was such, it created such a heightened way of watching their behavior and it felt like a really, just a test of a marriage in a way that I was really interested in. And it dealt with all these things that I was also interested about aging, about a middle age marriage, about this kind of creative class sort of outgrowing their original way they came into the city and outgrowing their East Village life or whatever. So anyway, it became a great, the subject of fertility became almost like an emotional location for these characters to be in. And then the laboratory experiment was to see how will they behave under these circumstances. So that was kind of how it started.

LY: Your film, *Private Life*, being about a marriage foremost, and I sort of saw the film in a short version, you shared with me a small version on your laptop once—

TJ: At the very early stages of editing.

LY: About a year ago. And I'm such a big fan of Mike Nichols's *Who's Afraid of—* I mean, who's not a fan of that movie, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* You know, like what a dump, I could just watch that opening scene over and over again. Just the pleasure that they took in that role or whatever. But this disaster of a marriage and the looming dead child and there's this kind of looming dead child in your film that doesn't—

TJ: That was definitely a reference for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* I mean, you know, thinking about stories where infertility has a place like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, like stories in the Bible. I mean, it's a big theme. This is a different like, moment because it's involving artificial reproduction technology that never existed.

LY: But that's so amazing because it's such a—I mean, I do think that one thing that we have going for us as women artists is if we can tell our stories. They have not been told.

LZ: It's funny as you were saying that, I've talked with you so much, Lisa, about color, about form, and even about influences from Stevens to fiction. And you know, as you're saying that about Tamara's movie, is that something that you're actively thinking about in terms of the subject matter? I mean, of course your subject matter is, or not so much now, but has been largely women and has of course presented that in the way that you're saying. Do you think of this idea of telling your story as a female artist?

LY: I do think that as an artist you have to somewhat come across your Excalibur, like everyone else might be coming along, tugging at it or looking at it this way, looking at it that way. And then you just, you know you're making your work when it just kind of moves. I mean I'm not saying every painting or every year or every body of work is certainly not like that, but it clicks, it's like I'm where I'm supposed to be. And I mean when I first started making the work that I feel I was meant to make, I was told by many people who had previously roundly supported me, it was like, stop, go back, do not do this.

TJ: Do not go down this road.

LY: Do not. This is a big mistake.

TJ: The work that you're making, that you are totally connecting to for the first time in your life—

LZ: Don't do it.

TJ: Don't do it.

LY: No. And that's why, you know, the couple of shows ago I did this painting that had triptych in it. And in the foreground was a woman laying on a bench and you could see her, she looked a little like, it really freaks people out when I say this, but a little bit like what you see when you're about to diaper a baby. And the only reason I say that is because a little kid I know who had a little sister said that and it seems like the most lovely thing to say when you hear it from a little kid, but then other people who see it as pornography get really freaked out that that view is like a baby.

TJ: What's that painting called?

LY: *Triptych*.

TJ: Oh oh oh that.

LY: A very original title. And in the background was—

LZ: Very clear. We're not going to separate that one.

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LY: Well, I actually had already—yes, I only signed one. The one with the least amount of information too. So it had a group of women in the background that were wearing these aprons, and a lot of people were very freaked out by the chorus, you know, like the chorus in the background. And when I went to Moscow and it was also like '92 and it was like right after you could go and Matvey is from Russia so we went there to see what it was like to go back. And everywhere I went in the museums, these old ladies with, the babushka ladies came up to me and they said in Russian, which I studied, but I kind of didn't know what they were saying. And they kept saying to me *nel'zia*. And I said to Matvey what does *nel'zia* mean and he said "don't." I said, Don't what? He said, Whatever it is you were going to do, Lisa, they just said, they just saw you and they were like "don't."

So I think that they weirdly trickled years later into those paintings and so I call them the *nel'zias*. It makes absolutely no sense to anybody else. But that's like part of my little inner world, which I realized that they are also the chorus of judges who have told me "don't." It's not like when they said that we were laughing about the ladies in Russia saying just whatever you were thinking about doing in the museum, you know, get too close, whatever. But there has been an endless amount of don'ts to me and . . . I basically just incorporated it and because that's the only way you can really move forward is to incorporate, ignore it or incorporate it. And I really sort of rather enjoy being able to use it.

LZ: Speaking of people telling you "don't" or telling you not to do something. Tamara, what were similar hurdles that you might have come across in the film industry?

TJ: Prior to making a commercial film, I was like an art person. I made performance art, I was in plays, then I made these little black-and-white films. And so you enter the world of commerce when you make a movie, your first movie, because movies are very expensive to make and so you get thrust into the business aspect of making a film and you might not really have the skills for that. And I feel like that's something that I've learned but I didn't have it naturally. I didn't have what it felt like to make a movie in a studio setting, which is very intense. And you have to constantly be selling your work even when you're making it to get the support from the studio. I mean in painting, it's very different. But in movie making, everybody wants to affect the film.

LY: So it seems like it's amazingly great—

TJ: That anything ever comes out.

LY: —that anything ever gets done. It's unbelievable.

TJ: It's just that there's all these things coming at you. So you find this and I, it's taken me many years to find that, but anytime somebody chips away at something that you're trying to do, and I was youngish, I mean, you know, whatever. That was just very hard for me to navigate, they don't teach that in film school. Like, Oh, people are gonna be chipping away at your vision constantly and snapping at you. It's like the birds.

LY: They don't tell people that?

TJ: I mean, I don't think, I certainly wasn't. I don't think I was prepared. In fact most of my pals at that point hadn't made movies in the studio setting. In the studio setting when you make a movie, you go through a very systematic process. For instance, you have to test screen your movie where this thing that you've been working on and it's unfinished. You go to a mall and you put your film up, and they've recruited an audience by standing on the street and saying, Hey, you, do you have anything to do tomorrow at two o'clock? No? Okay, well come and see this girl's movie. They're supposed to be people that would maybe see your movie. But a lot of times it's just people that don't have a job at that moment or they whatever. So they recruit an audience that's supposed to be your audience but rarely is 100 percent necessarily the audience. And they watch your movie and then they fill out a form that says, you know, was it good? Did you like it? Did you like that character? Did you not like that character? Who was your favorite character? What was your favorite scene? Did you like the ending or did you not like the ending? So that all happens on paper and then they all hand in their page, you know, would you recommend it, would you not, you know, would you rate it excellent, good, bad, poor, whatever. And then there's some room for filling in your own thing. And then after the audience fills out these forms, somebody gets up in front of the room, they create a focus group and they say, Okay, the director is not here . . .

LZ: But you were there.

TJ: Feel free to say anything you want. Meanwhile you're sitting in the back like shaking and so nauseous, and they're going to talk about you. And so what do you like about the movie? And some guy gets up and he has this sort of patter. What'd you like about the movie? What didn't you like about the movie? And it becomes very complicated. For instance, if the studio wants you to have a happy ending, they might tip the guy who's running the thing to sort of, so they raise their hand and go, Oh yeah, you know what? I do wish the ending was more happy, or whatever it is. So it's

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a very corrupt process. It's also, and it's very painful and you basically sit in the back and you hear random people just say, I don't know. I didn't really like it. I mean, who did this? She's not a good writer. I don't know, whatever they say.

LY: None of your movies have had classic happy endings either.

TJ: Right, that was just an example, but I'm just saying it's a bizarre process. I mean, could you imagine making a painting and then you show it up—

LY: The gallery always wants me to have a happy ending. So that's . . .

LZ: I was just thinking what if we sort of got everybody into the, did a focus group and just brought people into the studio, what do you think? This painting should be in the show, this painting shouldn't.

TJ: Yeah. Is it too purple? It's a little too purple. I don't really like the purple. The boobs are a little, I don't know, they're uneven, they're asymmetrical. I don't like that. So basically anything that's, it's not a good way to—

LY: What people don't know is that Tamara was grabbing her breasts as she said that.

TJ: They're uneven.

LZ: What was some of your early performance work and how did you transition from performing? Probably acting in some way or being the person on the stage, to making films and then really making your first commercial film in *Slums*?

TJ: Well, I originally thought I wanted to be an actor and I lived in Cambridge and in Boston and I eventually fell in with this theater company where everyone created their own work. Actors wrote, writers acted. It was called Theatre Works and Vinny who was sort of the artistic director of the company, he acted. Everyone did other things besides their one role as being actors. Anyway, they had like a Thursday night or a Wednesday night or some night that was the theater was dark, but after hours, after the main show ended and anybody that wanted to do kind of like a cabaret-type short thing. So anyway, I signed up for something. My performance art involved slide projectors, so there was something very primitively cinematic about them. But my first performance art piece revolved around my father's nightclubs. There were these 1950s and 1940s nightclubs that

my father owned. And there were these amazing black-and-white photographs that look like Weegee photographs.

LZ: What were those called, those clubs?

TJ: The Black Cat, the Glass Door, the Mayfair House, the Bali Hai. It was in Philadelphia and it was one spot on 14th and Latimer, I think is something like that, and it was the same physical spot that he had all of these different incarnations of restaurants in, but he would go bankrupt because he would do that. And then he would reinvent it and reinvent it and reinvent it. And its most famous incarnation, at least notorious, it was a place called The Black Cat, and Blaze Starr used to strip there. There's a famous story of Rizzo, who was then the police captain of the city, raiding the club. And there's a pink biography of Blaze Starr. I'm very interested, I'm sort of, I've been recently re-obsessed with it. But anyway, this material was fascinating to me. It was like an archeological dig because no one really explained anything, and I found this trove of black-and-white photographs with strippers, with my dad, with these various nightclubs. And so I did a performance piece called *Family Album*, which featured the stories of this past and these nightclubs. And so that was my first performance piece.

LY: Was it popular? People like it?

TJ: It got a good review, it was the first time in my life I got a review. I remember they said it was a 45-minute wait, it was a good nightcap or something. As time went on, I got sick of schlepping my slide projectors around and I became very attracted to you know, a couple of formative things. One of the most formative things was Spalding Gray in my life. I fell in love with Spalding Gray and maybe because he was doing autobiographical material and I realized you're allowed to do that, it gave me license to do that.

LZ: So Tamara, in the catalogue essay you wrote on Lisa's work, you talk about autobiography in her painting. You know, in some ways in a medium like film, autobiography is easier to spot. But with you, Lisa, when you have a static fixed image, a painting, it's harder to identify, and so I'm really curious to see how you see autobiography in your own work?

LY: I believe that autobiography is embedded in my work rather than narratively in my work.

LZ: Sure.

LY: There are things that kind of have roamed around in my life. Like few years ago, I was making a lot of green paintings, and they had landscapes and sort of

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farmland in it. And you know, when I stepped back and looked at those paintings, I realized that in some ways that they were so influenced by a time when I first saw real landscape, which is when I was brought to Ireland. Because we were a working-class family, it was rather unusual. In 1967, my mother had this desire to go to visit her grandmother who was still alive in a very small town called Letterkenny. It's so incredible. We arrived at night and I was scared to death and I said—I was like seven—and I said, I hate this place, it stinks, I want to go home. I thought that Philadelphia smelled good, like the smell gasoline and that was a good smell. It was like a barnyard smell, but it was dark, it was pitch black, they did not have electric light.

So the next morning the sun came up and I had clung to my mother all night crying and I wanted to go home and I hated this place. The sun came up and I looked out the window, like I heard the roosters crowing. It was a farm, it was a working farm. My grandmother had been born on this farm. And it was a weird trip through space and time that almost no one of our class had ever. Look, my grandmother got on a boat, she was not going back and she was like, why are you going? Why do you want to go back? We left there. So the sun comes up, I look out the window, and it was technicolor green.

LZ: Wow.

LY: And there were hills and animals and I just like went like crazy. I just ran through the landscape and was just like ecstatic about the color, about the world. So in a sense that like color or vibrancy or things like that, they affect you, they become kind of, they thread into your work in layers.

There's a quote by Guston, which is—I'm going to paraphrase because I don't have it written down in front of me—where when you think about his middle period work, the abstract work, and how much he contended with abstraction and then his later work, which is supposedly figurative but is so weighted in language. And he says something like, that the figuration has to be understood as simply another layer in the abstraction, moving through it, over it, and around it. So the idea that like, something that in an abstract painting would be a round red thing in a green field, that would apply visually in a figurative painting. But then it would also have that other layer of what is the green thing, name it, where are we, what is the timeframe, does the red thing represent something extremely emotional. I mean, it's a kind of a complicated thing, but that always also really affected how these things unpack themselves.

LZ: You know, it's amazing, these moments early on in artists' lives and their careers that continue to vibrate decades later. And Tamara, I was wondering are there other influences that kind of have that same resonance for you later on?

TJ: When I was in film school and we were making short films, they kept showing the short films of, this was Martin Scorsese's student film, this is Spielberg's student, they were all male filmmakers and there were often guns involved and they were—well, not Scorsese—there was a razor blade. Anyway, then someone showed Jane Campion's film called *A Girl's Own Story* and it was like somebody unlocked a key to my brain or something and it had nothing to do with anything that anybody else was doing. And anyway, she was . . .

LY: She's good.

TJ: She broke open my psyche.

LY: You always want to see her next thing, you know, when's her next movie?

TJ: Yeah, she was a giant.

LY: But people feel that way about you too, Tamara, and that's probably why people were like, what took you so long? But not because they're berating you, but I think because they're excited to see and so hopefully—

LZ: Here it is.

LY: It's coming up. Coming your way.

TJ: October.

LZ: October. Thanks so much, guys, for being here today. It was really fun.

TJ: Thanks, that was fun.

LY: Thank you.

[END CREDITS]

LZ: *Dialogues* is produced by David Zwirner. You can find out more about the artists in this series by going to davidzwirner.com/dialogues.

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