

Dialogues: The David Zwirner Podcast

Michael Glover & Thom Browne

Michael Glover: I'm Michael Glover, and my next book will be *Thrust*, which is *A Spasmodic Pictorial History of the Codpiece in Art*.

Thom Browne: And I'm Thom Browne, and I'm a fashion designer.

Lucas Zwirner: From David Zwirner, this is *Dialogues*, a podcast about artists and the way they think.

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LZ: We're taking artists, writers, philosophers, designers, and musicians and putting them in conversation with each other to explore what it means to make things today.

This week's pairing: the writer and poet Michael Glover and the designer Thom Browne.

About a year ago, Michael sent me a proposal for a book on the history of the codpiece. And it became clear to me that Thom Browne would be the perfect fit as a conversation partner, since codpieces have been important to Thom's designs in the past and actually in some of his most recent collections.

Thank you, Michael and Thom, for doing this, for being here today in your studio.

TB: Thank you. It's nice to be here.

MG: My pleasure to be invited.

LZ: And I thought, given that we have an art historian, a historian, here, that maybe Michael could tell us just a little bit about A, what a codpiece is, and in the context of that, what its history is. I mean, how they were developed, how they became popular in fashion and in visual art.

MG: The codpiece developed as a way of dealing with a problem of draftiness between the legs, because hoses in the Middle Ages were two separate pieces of stockings. They weren't joined. So there was this absence in the middle—his

scrotum shriveling absence. In order to deal with this problem, a limp triangle flap of something very similar like linen was used. As the cod piece was used, by the sixteenth century, which was its heyday, it had a fashionable heyday, which lasted about fifty years, that's all. It was referred to later, but its fashionable heyday, as documented in paintings, lasts about fifty years. By the time the sixteenth century came around and we see the paintings in which codpieces feature so flamboyantly and so vaingloriously, it's become something totally different. It has become something... It's a testament of braggadocio, of vanity...

LZ: And of a certain kind of masculinity or...

MG: ...masculinity, of masculine forcefulness. So that's how, that's how it came about.

LZ: And I guess the, obviously the... your relationship to it's fascinating to me because, on the one hand, as we sit here and looking at some of the codpieces from the spring/summer, it feels to me feminized in a way—sort of, obviously in some cases, explicitly attached to feminine clothing. But I think the whole idea of it as a kind of male vanity feels less present. And I'm wondering how you discovered it and/or the form or whatever it means to you.

TB: I think, for me, I mean, I always reference, yeah, things from the past, but I like to make sure that people see it in different ways. And for me, the codpiece—one, I think it looks actually very masculine on the clothes. But for me it was more of almost taking the idea of the codpiece, but also to referencing the idea of how, I guess maybe, how the codpiece kind of evolved in regards to being used in the sports world. Because in baseball it's used, you know.

MG: Exactly that.

LZ: The cup, as it were.

TB: The cup, yeah, so appropriately called. But for me, it was almost a combination of the two of them: the sports reference but then also to historically, because this collection here, too, in the room was based on very classic eighteenth-century feminine panniered clothing. But it being done for men, I felt like there needed to be something that masculinized it, so that it didn't like kind of overwhelmingly feel feminine.

MG: I did say that the codpiece hadn't endured, but in fact it did endure in some areas. And sport is one of them, of course. Another is ballet. But it's there for the first reason, the reason to protect the crown jewels in difficult situations.

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TB: And it is funny how more so I think in ballet that it is really... it does really accentuate.

MG: Very ostentatious in ballet.

TB: Yeah, and sometimes it's so in your face, and sometimes it's a little uncomfortably in your face.

LZ: I found that, too. In watching ballet, it can be a sort of distracting part of the costume. And of course, you... I think the funny thing about the codpiece, and that's historically been the case, that you don't ever know if it is full of air, as it were, or you know what I mean. That's a really famous historical debate.

MG: Exactly, well, it was padded, you know, in order to enhance the braggartliness of it. It was padded with horsehair, things like that, in the sixteenth century. And it was used as a pocket in addition to being, you know...

LZ: Right, so it had an actual function.

MG: That was a place to hook your glasses onto, and to keep ointment against syphilis in, and things like that, you know—so multipurpose.

TB: I mean, I loved reading your work and hearing that sometimes it was used for a pin cushion.

MG: That's fascinating because, well actually, you know, these Tudor costumes are so complicated to put together and to hold in place. You have to have a multiplicity of pins at the ready, in your codpiece, to whip them out in order to pin it back again.

LZ: You said before that you thought it's a sort of masculinizing feature of the collection. I mean, when I look at the collection here, part of what I think is amazing that you see for men, clothing that feels like it replicates what would have been underneath female clothing at the time—meaning the sort of under structures... whether it's the... And then you see structures that actually look like these corseted and then twined or wired pieces that go on top.

And in the show, there was this trompe l'oeil effect where the outside was taken off and there was a reveal. And I mean those dynamics, of course, are in the air: the question of masculine and feminine and how they interact. But is that something that you find yourself navigating increasingly?

TB: I have always played with the idea of masculine and feminine, and I love the idea. I mean, we live in

a very beautiful world that actually is so much more accepting in regards to entertaining the ideas of crossing over. But for me, I don't separate them.

I love the confidence that it shows in a guy who can really embrace being provocative in a very feminine way. And then I love women, too, who embrace the opposite. And I think we live in a world that it's time for people to really start moving it forward. And I do it with my collections, and I think it's a lot easier for me to do them now than it has been in the past for, I think, other designers, because we just live in a more accepting world.

MG: This issue of gender slipperiness, gender ambiguity, is such a fascinating one, because it's everywhere in the art world. I mean every capital you go to, there's a show on this theme.

LZ: You mean, visual arts shows, basically.

MG: Visual arts shows, which I am generally looking at. This all, this issue of gender fluidity also proposes fascinating problems and challenges, I think. When I went to the *Camp show*, in which obviously you are represented, there's this wonderful piece by Vivienne Westwood near the beginning of the show. She's showing off a pair of nude leggings. And this is an ideal of male beauty, and there's a fig leaf covering the pubic area. There is no hint of a bump whatsoever. That's quite interesting, I think. Therefore, this gender fluidity, is that a challenge to sixteenth-century ways of looking at masculinity, of using the image of a phallus more forcefully?

TB: I think that's what was so interesting about the *Camp show* was how you saw so much from the past—the eighteenth and earlier centuries—that they did embrace very feminine ways of dressing and of living and sometimes so much more so than now.

LZ: Than now. Absolutely.

TB: (08:06) And that's what made it so... That's what was so strong about that show and... was that it showed that. I think people, especially entering into the show, I think they thought so much, they knew so much about camp, when in fact they didn't know anything about camp. Or they thought it was such a, just a very current idea, when in fact it was a very... And that was the genius of Andrew's show, I think.

LZ: (08:31) Yeah. And seeing paintings like more Paul Cadmus paintings—I mean, a painter that should be seen very, very widely and is not. And I found the discoveries in there to be incredible.

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I mean there was also, he got a Franz Haas painting. I mean there was something, right? Maybe it wasn't a Haas, but there were some unbelievable paintings that made it into the show, too, that were just brought from all over the place.

TB: Yeah, I mean the show does... it really does depict the true nature of camp, which was... I think everybody expected the final room and that's so, but the two, the entrance was, I think, such an amazing education for people.

LZ: Right? Sorry it wasn't a Franz Haas, it was a Caravaggio that's in the show.

TB: Caravaggio, yeah.

LZ: There is a Haas that's like that. But when you were sort of thinking about this whole codpiece theme... I mean, part of what Thom is saying is, I think, speaks to it directly, which is that it's often these... what fascinated me was these young boys, often on the cusp of manhood, where the codpiece is particularly pronounced in the painting. So you have this kind of premasculine character, where there's a real kind of... and, of course, you could paint that as showing that there's a future line, that there is a kind of real virility there. But it seems like there's probably... I wonder how you read some of those paintings?

MG: Yes. I think this is so interesting, there's one of a young nobleman called *Farnese*, and his codpiece—he's a very young boy—his codpiece is so enormous it's pulling the garment down. And this is a portrait painted of his mother. I thought, this is so interesting that this was perfectly acceptable. There's nothing unusual about it, nothing outrageous.

Now what struck me as also very interesting, and it also feeds a little into, I feel, into what you've always done, Thom, is the question of the acceptability of codpieces to Catholicism, and the way it was not acceptable so much to Protestantism, and this time and time again was coming up.

You see some of the most boldest and outrageous costumes on, for example, the man who looked after the San Marco Basilica in Venice. You see that extraordinary leather suit he's wearing and a codpiece that is absolutely amazing. And this man was secondary to the doge of Venice. He was a revered man and a man of the church. So the church doesn't find this at all strange or challenging that codpieces should be part of this. Yes, it's to do with need, it's part to do with the fact: yes, you will provide us with children. The line will continue.

LZ: Of course, at a certain point, it just becomes a fashion item, meaning it becomes a thing that you can add to a formal arrangement simply as a shape.

TB: Yeah, I mean, when I approach my collections, too, I do really start from proportion and from shapes. And for me, the idea of the codpiece was really, it was almost, it was really a tongue-in-cheek way of making people, you know, just talk and really just to be somewhat provocative. So it worked, for me, in this collection—it was all decoration.

But in regards to the rest of the shapes, there is usually a very strong reference—but referenced in a way that you understand loosely where it's reference, but it's not specifically or literally done that you think like you've seen that before. You've seen the reference, but whether it's in the fabrication or in the... in how far I push it, then you see maybe a little bit and how it's been done differently.

LZ: And the research process for you, is it kind of like an immersive? Because it certainly feels like you move... if there are references, I don't seem them explicitly, as you say. Is it like you immerse yourself and then don't look at what you have around you, and sort of let things come as they come or?

TB: I am the worst when it comes to research. I sometimes feel—and this is my nonintellectual side, and I always admit that I'm the furthest thing from being an intellect when it comes to designing—I love to have references in my head or references that I can remember from a film or a piece of art.

But I specifically don't have them around, or I don't research them too much, because I find sometimes it becomes crippling. Because it's very easy to almost fall into the trap of literally re-creating something.

And I think sometimes in design it becomes so much easier when you just... you know as much as you know in your head, but then you forget enough that you can actually make it your own.

MG: From my experiences as a writer and as a poet, only poems that emerge are the ones that work. If you think of a theme beforehand, for example, most political poetry is rubbish because people know what they want to say before they say it. The only really, the real things, the really good poems emerge in the writing. And you don't... it's just pursuing something that is barely there at the beginning and emerges in the making, exactly as you've explained your method of doing.

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TB: Yeah. Throughout the creation, it evolves in so many different ways that sometimes at the end, you smile because it's almost very different than what you thought it was going to be. But in a way, you know where it started, and it's almost a happy surprise in where it ends up.

LZ: But in your book, Michael, the... of course, you've selected a certain number of codpiece images, not every single one. This is not a sort of comprehensive history, it's very much a personal history in a funny way. And so in the same way that over researching, I mean, I'm sort of curious about the research in that kind of a discipline, because I would assume it's much more academic. But of course, it's also quite playful, what you're doing in your book.

MG: Oh, completely. And what interested... I suppose I was interested in the fact that it, well, the book itself was a complete discovery. The subject of the book was a discovery to me. It happened quite by accident.

I was... it was one Saturday morning. I was in one of my... I was having a love affair on Saturday morning with one of my favorite museums in London, the National Portrait Gallery, which shows off portraits of the great British worthies. And I was in the Tudor room, which is a fairly low-lit room. And at one end of it, there's the largest painting in the entire gallery, and it's a cartoon. And there Henry the Eighth stands in front of Henry the Seventh, and I was looking at this that Saturday morning. And the more I looked at it, the more I saw that the dead center of this painting was this enormous codpiece. And that like a Catherine wheel, Henry the Eighth's world was pivoting about this giant codpiece.

And I thought, What could be the significance of this? and at that moment, as you were saying, other images rushed into me as I was thinking about that codpiece. And I thought to myself, "Surely there's been a book about the codpiece in art, even though it's a rather unusual subject." And that moment, the title appeared in my head as well: *Thrust*. I said this has to be the title, such a ridiculous title. I mean, it goes with the ridiculousness, the pomp of it all as well.

So all these things came together on that Saturday morning, when I was looking at this painting. And I discovered there was no book. So I wrote it. But yeah, it's very playful. It needed to be playful. It needed to be playful and serious because it's an uproariously funny subject, male vanity. The ginger coverup hairpiece, all this is wonderful stuff. We never stop laughing at it.

LZ: I want to sort of come back one more time to this question of sort of the feminine masculine. I mean, when you see things like this being used in a collection for men that obviously moves fluidly between genders, do you see—I mean maybe this is a sort of silly question—but do you see a world in which collections are simply... go out into the world and appeal to whomever they appeal to? And they're...

I mean, is that something that you think is nearby in the fashion world?

TB: I... it is something that I am actually thinking about. Because I think, I don't know, it is something that is very intriguing to me, and I think we do live in a world that is more open to it. And I think it's really interesting, and I think because I've done collections that... I did a collection a couple of seasons ago that actually were stereotypically women's clothes, but they happen to be on men. And in a way, they looked more masculine sometimes in those clothes than they do sometimes in, say, streetwear. And so I think it is really interesting.

And I think, I don't know if we'll ever... because I think there is something nice about... I think it's nice that people just be whoever they want to be and feel like if they want to feel masculine, they feel masculine. If they want to feel feminine, they feel feminine, whether it's a guy or a girl. So yeah, I think we're getting to a time that...

LZ: Because it feels almost like the only thing holding us in the women's collection versus men's collection would be a distributor—I mean like a distributor or the kind of sales angle, as it were, because the easier way to market them. But actually, you could imagine a collection of yours being available in all different sizes and cuts, as it were, and appealing to whoever sort of comes in and is excited about it.

TB: Yeah. I think it's just in how you approach it and how you really, like you say, how you just introduce it to people. Because, I think, in a way, if you just put it out there as clothing, that it would be interesting to see how people would perceive it.

LZ: And you sort of said going maybe back a little bit that this interest in the masculine feminine has been with you for a long time. And I'm curious how that sort of featured into, I guess, your beginnings and really the beginnings of the designing, and the suits, and the cuts of the suits. I mean, in reinventing the suit, were you already thinking about, you know, how something that was a traditional masculine symbol—I would say, or at least remains that way for me—could be modified

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in a way that would either soften it or change its perception in the world? Was that actively on your mind, or was it more of an intuitive?

TB: It more... it was more intuitive and happened through the years. At the beginning it was really just taking... I always, I was a stubborn kid and I always wanted to do things just exactly how I wanted to do them regardless of what anybody thought. And for me it was really at the beginning, just taking something that everybody thought they understood, a classic piece of clothing, and just reintroducing it to people in a way that they thought like, it was done incorrectly, or it wasn't... Who was I trying to introduce this to? Because it just doesn't even look like it should be real.

So it... I guess it started there, and then over, since I started in 2003, there's so much that's happened in the world. And I think the idea of men and women becoming more interested in—and being more confident in regards to being more interested in trying new things—that's when the idea of pushing the ideas of masculine feminine. Because at the beginning, it really started more with just fabrications, using more feminine fabrics in masculine ways, and in women's, using the opposite.

But now it's... we live in such a different world, even since the beginning of this, since the 2000s. And so I think it's... and it's still evolving.

LZ: And to go sort of even a step further back, I'm curious, was the suit something that was sort of part of your childhood? I feel I've heard you say that there's in some ways a reference to your father and his suit wearing?

TB: Everything does start with a piece of tailored clothing. And my father is up in heaven, like laughing that he's ever referenced in regards to anything that I do. But it does start from tailoring. And yeah, I grew up big Catholic, Irish Catholic family, so we all had navy jackets. And so it was definitely something that I grew up in, but it wasn't... this world I didn't even know it existed when I was a kid, so.

LZ: So there was no sort of early... it wasn't that there was a sort of fashion aspiration early on.

TB: No, it was, I didn't even realize that...

LZ: (21:16) Fashion was something?

TB: ...fashion exists, other than you went to a store. I didn't even think somebody actually designed the things that were in stores. It was like not something. All we cared about was school and sports. Yeah.

LZ: But then there's the simplicity and the kind of rigor of not caring, or the fact that there's a kind of built-in uniform if you live in a family like that, where you don't think about it but you wear, that might speak to something in the aesthetic.

TB: Yeah, we grew up, we all wore the same thing. We all grew up basically in that very kind of all-American uniform.

LZ: Right. Michael, what about you? Sort of like, how did you find your way to visual art? What was the, what are some of those, the sort of formative stories, or formative pieces to the puzzle? I mean, yours in a funny way is more traditional in the sense that I know you studied at Cambridge. You ended up as a journalist and then how did you make your way to visual art? Were your parents interested in it?

MG: (22:09) No. I came from a working-class family in Sheffield. There was no art on the walls whatsoever. The only art, that was in a book that my great grandpa had been given as a leaving gift when he stopped working for Sheffield independent newspapers. And it was a large volume of old nineteenth-century prints, and I used to like it because it smelled of mold. That's the most interesting part about it.

I was the only member of my family who went to university. And I had a very inspiring teacher at school who was a poet. And I recognized when I heard him speak, first of all, he spoke in fully formed sentences. And that was something that never happened in our house. Our house consisted of violent ejaculations, swear words—not terrible ones but swear words all the same. And I used to try and replicate the word "bloody" by using the word "blood" a lot. So when I met this man at...

LZ: People were shouting at each other a lot.

MG: Yeah, they were shouting at each other and I was spectating at this, but it never went anywhere. It had no meaning, all the shouting. There was never any conclusion. And this low-level warfare continued the following day, equally without conclusion.

But when I met this man at school, my teacher, he was a very good poet. Not only did he speak in fully formed sentences, but I could see that he spoke ironically, which means, he said a certain thing, but he didn't necessarily mean that. I thought, "This is very interesting. This is a way of speaking I have never heard before." So his way of talking led me to think, led me into the path of literature. So, it was his

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influence that got me to... he encouraged me to try to go to Cambridge, which I did. But then, as I say, then I became a literary critic.

I changed to art criticism many years ago because I wanted to describe my wife's paintings. That was the principal stimulus. I'd been writing a lot about poetry and fiction and biography for many years. But I wanted to write about painting. And I used to go to galleries, and I used to say to myself, What five adjectives would I use if anybody were to commission me to write a piece about this painting? And I would listen in my head, I imagined.

LZ: And pray for a commission to come along.

MG: Eventually, I was working for the *Financial Times*, and there was a big show of Basquiat opening in Lausanne. And I was going to Lausanne, and I said to this man who was watering his plants at the time, I said, "I'm going to Lausanne, what about writing a piece about this Basquiat show?" And I had never written about art in my life. And he was, without turning away from his plants, he said, "Why not?" And that was it. That was the beginning. And what I wrote he obviously thought was neither not much better and not much worse than what anybody else was doing in fine arts.

LZ: That's the good thing about art criticism: low bar.

MG: So he let me do another one. And it continued and so it continued. And the literary criticism, the writing about poetry, that continues, but it's obviously pushed aside by writing about art.

LZ: And was visual art a part of your early-life education? And if not—which looks like it's not from the head shake—I presume it is entered in some way. I mean, in a funny way, the words people use to describe some of your aesthetic, minimalist, things like that, of course, have, you know, for me, art- historical reference, whether it's someone like Albers or, you know, sort of these people that really explore a range of color.

MG: When I look at those panniers on your spring/ summer, I immediately thought of Velázquez. And *Las Meninas* completely appeared in front of my mind, the shape of that.

TB: I mean, I have to say, growing up, my mother was... I mean, my parents were both attorneys, so it wasn't really an artistic family. And we... the same for us. We didn't have art on the walls. And, but my

mother always wanted us to do something. We either play an instrument, or I took art classes because that was something that she knew I was interested in. But I stopped it very early on because we all were also in sports. And sports took over and so that was our upbringing.

Now, yeah, I mean I have to say, art and a lot of film is where I get a lot of my references—I mean the panniers here, specifically. And I'm so fortunate with living with my partner, Andrew. He... I look over his shoulder, what he's doing. And here I was looking, he was looking at a Vigée Le Brun painting, and I thought, there's something so beautiful about the idea of figuring out how that could be brought into the world today. So I do use art a lot as a reference, but also, too, a lot of film.

MG: I like very much your point that it's just a flicker, a hint of something almost out the corner of the eye. But, of course, the whole thing to combust from almost nothing. Whereas if you've got a book about visual art, nothing would have happened.

TB: Exactly, right.

LZ: Just seeing some, right. Just a momentary noticing.

TB: But the thing is, too, because I really don't know that much about art at all. But I am interested in it, and I do look at art all the time.

MG: Well that's helpful, isn't it?

TB: Yeah, I mean, because, for me, I just... I like the idea of having all those references, and like I said, I just... I'd like to forget enough about it in order to be able to really use the reference and not steal from that reference.

I want people to see just like... I design, I am in this business more to design things that end up in museums. And the other part of it is I do in order to fund and really support this.

LZ: Now I wanted to... the equal conversation for a writer, of course, interestingly, I mean it's funny to be in these different disciplines. But of course you've picked a path that has nothing to do with the world of commerce, as it were.

MG: Well, the point about poetry is that you sign up, when you sign up to that—if you can describe being a poet as signing up to something—is that you know from the start that the poetry is aggressively

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antifinancial. There's nothing whatsoever. The consolations of capitalism will never be at your door. You know that. So you don't even think about it.

So you know you have to do something else to help you out. So you start to write about art. And you write books. And you write other kinds of books as well. But generally speaking, as with Thom, I write the things that are congenial to me. And I suppose the advantage of being a writer is that you never retire from it. People sometimes do try and get me retired. They asked me what I did once, and then I said, "Well, there was a moment when I wasn't even born. I'm not sure about other than that." But so I mean, I will never stop until my heart stops because it's... What else would I do with my hands and my time and my thoughts and my brain and my whatever capacity I have to do anything? It's all invested in that.

LZ: But as different as your... it's fascinating to me because I didn't anticipate this coming into the conversation. But as different as each of your metiers, your paths, are, both of you have managed to carve something out which gives you a lot of distance from the world of kind of hyperspeed, of the internet, of the noise. And one sort of feels it in both of you, that there's a kind of sense of calm, that there's something else that's being cultivated. And I guess the question, as difficult as it might be to answer is, How does that work? I mean, how do you manage to exist in a world that is so, frankly, fast and fucked up, and sort of demanding, and in your face and continue to stay kind of committed to those principles?

MG: I don't know that it so much to do with discipline, isn't it? This is cleaving to oneself, right? It's acknowledging that there is something that is absolutely fundamental to you. And for me, it's writing poetry. I know that if I didn't write poetry, I'd go mad. And I have to do it. It is part of the core of my being.

So the other stuff is important, but it is more or less important. So by cleaving to that, that's the kind of anchor of sanity and solidity and certainty that gives me the kind of rootedness that enables you to be a little calmer on the surface.

TB: Yeah. Yeah. Me the same, I mean if I didn't get to do the collections, I wouldn't want to be in fashion. And for me, I just... I want to be able to put ideas in front of people that make them think. And in order to do that, I do the more commercial side, which I love as well, but it's not what drives me.

LZ: He loves it.

TB: I love it. Yeah. No, I do love it. I'm very proud of it. And you know because it is based on something very pure. It is based on something very pure. So I am proud of it. But every season you see why I'm in this world and what... just what deep down I really want people to see is that, those ideas.

LZ: And maybe we talk for a second about the shows, which is sort of... we've been orbiting around them a little bit. But having now watched, obviously, a number of the videos of the more recent ones, how do those ideas develop? Is it a narrative that that sort of forms? Is it a setting that is the first thing that you kind of imagine? Because that feels very different from designing a collection, feels really like making a film or doing something that has a narrative component and a very strong visual component, and, of course, sound too.

TB: It's different. Every collection is different. Sometimes it starts with an idea that I build the story around, or sometimes it's a story that I design the collection into. So every collection is different. The most important thing is that, at the end, it is a fully formed experience and story for people. That there is a meaning for everything. There is a reason for everything that you see. There's a reason for everything that you hear, and that people leave with just remembering something.

LZ: Well, I think it's a good place to stop. And I just want to thank you, Michael and Thom, very much.

TB: Thank you.

MG: Yeah, thank you.

TB: Really nice to meet you.

MG: Lovely to meet you.

TB: Yeah.

LZ: *Dialogues* is produced by David Zwirner. You can find out more about the artists on this series by going to davidzwirner.com/dialogues. And if you like what you heard, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. It really does help other people discover the show. I'm Lucas Zwirner. Thanks so much for listening, and I hope you join us again next time.