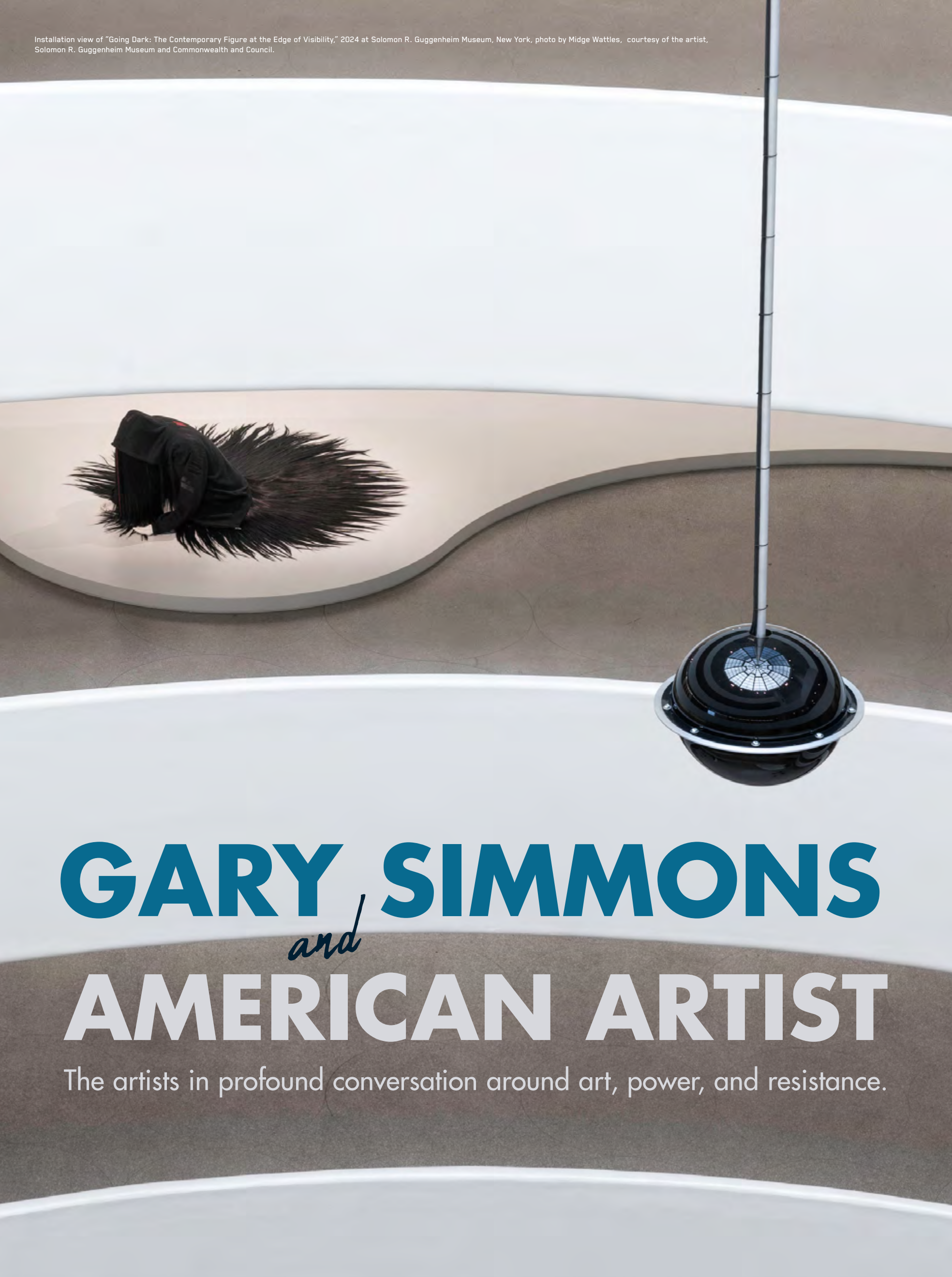


Installation view of "Going Dark: The Contemporary Figure at the Edge of Visibility," 2024 at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, photo by Midge Wattles, courtesy of the artist, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Commonwealth and Council.



GARY SIMMONS

and

AMERICAN ARTIST

The artists in profound conversation around art, power, and resistance.



Gary Simmons, "Champagne Powder," 2024, oil stick and acrylic paint on gessoed paper, 30 x 22 inches, photo by Paul Salveson, © Gary Simmons, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

By Ana Novi

In a cultural moment marked by urgency and reckoning, some conversations do more than inform—they connect. Here, two of the most incisive voices in contemporary art: Gary Simmons, renowned for his erasure drawings and immersive installations that confront the enduring legacies of American racism, and American Artist, a conceptual artist whose work challenges the architectures of surveillance, policing, and institutional power through a futurist and critical lens.

Although Simmons and Artist had never spoken prior to this exchange, their rapport is immediate—grounded in mutual respect, intersecting histories, and a deep belief in the power of art as both mirror and catalyst. Simmons’s practice, rooted in sculpture and painting, makes visible the haunting residues of racial violence in American culture, often through blurred and ephemeral gestures that evoke both memory and erasure. American Artist, who uses they/them pronouns, works across text, video, performance, and digital media. Their projects—including *Sandy Speaks, I’m Blue (If I Was [REDACTED] I Would Die)*, and *The Studio Museum in Harlem is Moving*—interrogate algorithmic bias, institutional opacity, and the systems that define and police Blackness, while also imagining Black futurist possibility.

The dialogue spans everything from the emotional labor of critique to the quiet strength of community, offering a portrait of two artists working—in very different but resonant ways—to shape a more just and expansive cultural landscape.

GARY SIMMONS: *Well, interestingly, as much as our interests have overlapped, we’ve actually never met—have we?*

AMERICAN ARTIST: We have not, which surprises me. I’m a fan of your work. The art world’s a pretty small place, so I just assumed our paths would’ve crossed by now.

GS: *Right? I split my time between New York and L.A.—maybe that’s part of it. But yeah, it’s surprising.*

AA: Same here. Lately I’ve been digging into some of your earlier pieces. I was more familiar with your recent work, but the older projects—it’s clear we’ve been exploring similar ideas for a long time.

GS: *Yeah, I got really excited when they proposed this conversation. I thought, “That’s someone I’ve actually wanted to meet—to talk to, get inside their head a little, see what makes them tick.”*

AA: Artist-to-artist conversations are always the best. The only thing better is an in-person studio visit.



American Artist, portrait by S*an D. Henry-Smith.



Portrait of Gary Simmons by Tito Molina / HRDWRKER, © Gary Simmons, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

GS: *Exactly. This feels like the next best thing—a kind of remote studio visit, even if we’re both just sitting at home.*

AA: It’s funny—during COVID, remote studio visits became an actual thing. I don’t know how it was for you, but it was definitely strange.

GS: *I didn’t know how to navigate it—studio visits, conversations with other artists. It all felt so isolating. But there was something fascinating about that mix of distance and intimacy happening at the same time.*

AA: Yeah, you could really get into the weeds with someone—not just skim the surface. That honesty unlocked something.

GS: *It led to these unexpected creative paths. People opened up in ways you wouldn’t anticipate. Isolation will do that.*

AA: Definitely. For me, it was a really reflective period too. I was coming off a lot of work around police and surveillance—critical pieces. I did a lot around 2019. And then COVID happened. Then George Floyd was murdered. Suddenly, work I’d already made started getting a lot of attention—even though it hadn’t been created in response to that moment. It was being reframed through it.

GS: *Yeah, totally. Same thing happened to me. I had older pieces—even from the ’90s—that people began pulling out, trying to recontextualize them. The work suddenly felt newly urgent. And at the same time, it was disheartening, because the underlying issues hadn’t changed.*

AA: Exactly. That’s the exhausting part. Realizing it’s the same cycle, over and over again.

GS: *Yeah. I came out of CalArts in the late ’80s, when folks like Craig Owens, Douglas Crimp, and Benjamin Buchloh were teaching. There was a lot of ACT UP energy in the air—AIDS activism, friends dying, people organizing. It shaped everything.*

AA: That history really formed you.

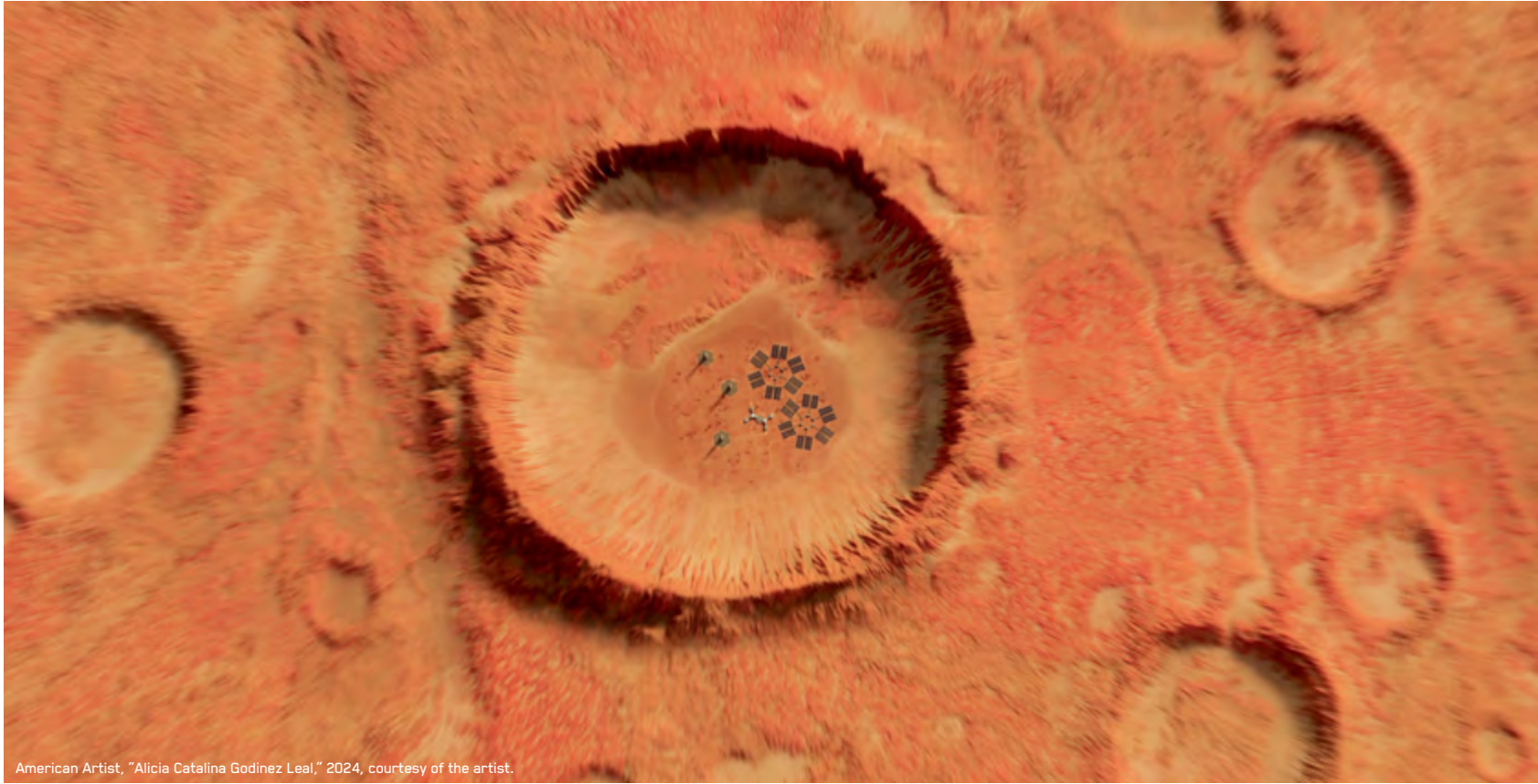
GS: *Completely. And the frustrations we were wrestling with then—police brutality, institutional racism—they’re still here. They’re not history. They’re the present.*



Gary Simmons, “You Can Paint Over Me But I’ll Still Be Here,” 2021, installation view, “Gary Simmons. Remembering Tomorrow,” Hauser & Wirth Downtown Los Angeles, 2022, photo by Jeff McLane, © Gary Simmons, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.



“American Artist: Shaper of God,” installation view, REDCAT, Los Angeles, 2022, photo by Brica Wilcox, courtesy of REDCAT, Los Angeles.



American Artist, "Alicia Catalina Godínez Leal," 2024, courtesy of the artist.



Gary Simmons, "Marnie's Nightmare," 2006, Installation view, "Gary Simmons: Public Enemy," Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2023, photo by Shelby Ragsdale, © Gary Simmons, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

AA: But it comes with a cost, too. Now you're expected to do everything—be your own publicist, your own social media manager, your own archivist. The hustle is real.

GS: Yeah, the DIY model can be freeing, but it's also exhausting. That's why I always say: find your community. No one does this alone. Collaboration isn't a luxury—it's essential.

AA: Absolutely. And it's not just creative collaboration. It's also emotional, logistical. You need people you can call when you're overwhelmed. Someone to look over a contract. Someone to remind you why you're doing this in the first place.

GS: That's good for art. It forces us to speak in a broader language. Not dumbing things down—but being more inclusive, more expansive.

AA: Exactly. I really push back on the idea that criticality has to be opaque. You

can be rigorous and still speak plainly. Still invite people in.

GS: Totally. Some of the best conversations I've had about my work have been with people far outside the art world—a barber, a cab driver, my neighbor. They get right to the heart of it.

AA: And it makes you ask: who are you making this work for? Is it just for your peers? Or is it for the world you live in?

GS: For me, it's curiosity. Staying curious about the world, about people, about materials. The moment I lose that? That's when I know it's time to pause.

AA: That really resonates. I'd say—integrity. Not in a moralizing way, but as a quiet internal compass. Asking: does this feel real? Does this still reflect what I believe?

GS: That's everything.

AA: Yeah. I think a lot about the tools we have now versus back then. There was no social media. Activism was slower, handwritten, hyperlocal. Now something can go viral in seconds.

GS: Absolutely. After Floyd, people mobilized at a speed that would've been unthinkable in the past. If we'd only had flyers and word of mouth, it wouldn't have reached half as far.

AA: Right. And yet, sometimes I wonder: does that speed make the engagement shallower?

GS: Exactly. Speed doesn't always equal depth. Back then, it was slower—but also raw, visceral. You had to be there—body and soul.

AA: Yeah. Organizing has always happened through collectives, in living rooms, at late-night meetings. Now it can happen through a hashtag.

GS: I remember Michael Stewart—he was a graffiti artist, beaten by police. That was a lightning bolt in New York. Same with Eleanor Bumpurs, Yusef Hawkins... Names that still need to be spoken.

AA: And it's the same today. Recognition of Floyd's murder was global in scale, but the emotional impact on the Black community was the same.

GS: Exactly. That pain resonated with people in places like Nebraska or Idaho—places that might feel isolated. Suddenly, they didn't feel so alone.

AA: That kind of solidarity born from grief—it was real.

GS: I remember saying at the time: I'm curious to see what younger folks do with that energy. If it can be transformed into something strategic—not just reactive—that's real power. When I was younger, protest meant your body in the street. There was no Twitter, no Instagram. I often wonder what we could've done with that kind of amplification.

AA: Sometimes I feel conflicted making work about these issues—knowing it might be mobilized by people who have never been impacted by police violence.

GS: Yeah, that's the paradox. Who's seeing the work? Who's really understanding it?

AA: Exactly. Am I making it to educate? To make something visible? Or is it for my own processing? It's complicated.

GS: It is. And the people who most need to see it—they're not going to the galleries. They're not reading the art magazines. They're not showing up at biennials. So most of the time, we're speaking to the converted. Other artists, other marginalized folks, other thinkers. But if even 1 percent of people from "the other side" connect with the work—maybe that's enough.

AA: Yeah, I wrestle with that all the time. Is raising awareness enough? And then there's the other issue—what happens when that work gets commercialized?

GS: [Laughs] Yep. When tragedy becomes a marketable asset.

AA: Exactly. You make a piece about systemic violence and suddenly it's a collector's item.

GS: Right. And then you think: Who's buying it? Someone who might not even believe in what the work stands for. And once it leaves your studio, you lose control. Someone could flip it at auction. It could end up owned by someone whose values completely oppose yours.

AA: That part is terrifying.

GS: It is. I had a friend—Jason Rhoades—who tried to put boundaries in place, to control who could collect his work. But once it's out there? Good luck.

AA: Exactly. And honestly—for artists like us, the financial realities are real. You have to survive in order to keep making.

AA: Totally. Artists deserve to have a decent quality of life.

GS: Right. There's nothing romantic about starving in a crappy apartment just to stay "pure."

AA: [Laughs] Preach.

GS: And there's value in working from the inside, too—being in those spaces, having the resources to create bigger work, to reach more people.

AA: That's the tension. How do you stay true to your vision—and still make it sustainable?

GS: There's this romanticized myth of the suffering artist—this idea that struggle somehow validates the work. But honestly, there's nothing noble about not being able to pay your bills. I think younger generations are beginning to reject that binary, and that's smart. You don't need to be starving to be serious.

AA: Yes, and I think our generation—and even more so, younger ones—are asking, "Why not both?" Why not have health insurance and make meaningful work? There's a shift happening where sustainability is becoming part of the creative process. And that's long overdue.

GS: Exactly. There's a misconception that hardship is the engine of authenticity. But what if stability is what actually allows for deeper risk? What if knowing you can pay your rent frees up mental space to take bigger artistic chances?

AA: Totally. When you're stuck in survival mode, there's just no bandwidth for experimentation. I tell my students all the time—there's no shame in wanting a stable life. That doesn't make you less radical. If anything, it makes you more consistent. More effective.

GS: Teaching keeps me honest. It reminds me of what's at stake. You're in dialogue with students who are just beginning, who are idealistic, hungry. And they ask tough questions—the kind that make you reassess your own path.

AA: Definitely. They don't hold back. I remember a student once asking, "If this system is so broken, why are you still in it?" That hit hard.

GS: Those moments can be uncomfortable, but they're crucial. The best thing we can offer as educators is the full picture—not just the success stories, but the setbacks, the rejections, the compromises. That's where real mentorship happens.

AA: Absolutely. And teaching can be a space to model a different way of being an artist. Yes, I navigate institutions—but I also critique them. I try to show that those things don't have to be mutually exclusive.

GS: Institutions are still institutions. They're built to maintain power. What's exciting to me is that more artists are building their own platforms—collectives, alternative spaces, online initiatives. That's where a lot of the most vital work is happening.

AA: Yeah. Institutions aren't going to save us. But we can use them strategically—step in, say what needs to be said, and step back out. It's about being mobile. Not getting locked into one mode of visibility.

GS: Exactly. Sometimes the most impactful thing you can do is use an institution's platform to amplify voices that wouldn't otherwise be heard—and then bounce.

AA: Yes—with intention. Especially now. The tools have changed. The internet shifted everything. You can build an audience, shape a conversation, make an impact—without waiting for a museum to validate you.

GS: That's powerful. It democratizes who gets to participate. When I was starting out, if you weren't in a gallery, you basically didn't exist. Now, you can publish your own catalog, curate your own show, and broadcast it to the world.