

# **Vermont Arts Council**

## **Transcript**

### **Vermont Made, Episode 3**

#### **“Finding the Shadow Self with Photographer Shanta Lee Gander”**

##### **Desmond Peeples:**

This is Vermont Made, the show where Vermont Creatives share the story behind one thing they've made. I'm your host Desmond Peeples, and in this episode, I journeyed to the Southern Vermont Arts Center in Manchester to speak with one of their exhibiting artists, my friend, Shanta Lee Gander. You may already know Shanta through her writing, but she's also a talented photographer. And you can see for yourself in her first solo exhibit, Dark Goddess on view at Southern Vermont Arts Center until September 26. In Dark Goddess, Shanta worked with a number of women from her community to portray those aspects of the sacred

feminine that are not tidy and maternal and safe, but are the sources of great power. Shanta spoke with me about what that exploration means for her personally, about collaborating with the models to draw out their personal vision, and much more.

### **Desmond Peeples:**

As I said, we recorded this episode onsite at the Southern Vermont Arts Center. And I have to say, if you haven't been there before, like me, even just the driveway itself is worth the trip. You have to go up a long winding road through fields and forests that are filled with enormous sculptures. And by the time you've reached the beautiful campus, you're thoroughly in another world.

And we're sitting here in the conference room of one of these buildings at the Southern Vermont Art Center, which I've never been at. We're here to talk with Sandra Lee Gander about your exhibit,

Dark Goddess, photography featuring ... Well, can you give us a little summary?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Sure. So, seven models, think I got that right, seven models. And I shot in different locations, New Hampshire included, parts of Vermont. And the whole premise of it was about the exploration of the other side of the goddess, is something I've been thinking about for about six years. Even though of the goddess and the idea, we can get into that, is way longer. But something I've been thinking about for six years, and it was just this idea where I was like, "What if we always think of goddesses in a certain way, what if there's another side of the expiration?" I did nothing with the idea. I let it gestate and incubate.

I just put it on the shelf until, I'm going to call her out, Caighla Manchester, with a hell of a name.

Caighla, who I've photographed before last year around sometime mid summer. She was like, "I want to get together for a photo shoot, photo shoot." And I'm like, "Okay, how do I do this in the middle of a pandemic?" And I always shoot outside. I've come to terms into grips. I prefer to collaborate with mother nature as a set, code set designer. So we did it. And when I got home and looked at some of the pictures, I said, "Oh, I think this is the start of Dark Goddess."

**Desmond Peeples:**

Oh, it pulled back and touched on that thing that was on the shelf [crosstalk].

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yeah. Unplanned. It was something that I would think about. And sometimes I'm in a ditch or I'm just like, "Oh yeah, to do that, I'd have to make up hours. Okay, let me just put that on a shelf." And

it just yanked itself back out. And I would say thanks to Caighla, starting with Caighla.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Thank you, Caighla.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Thank you, Caighla.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Well, so let's talk a little bit more about this idea of the goddess and the sacred feminine and the different sides of that.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yeah. So it's funny because one of my main points about the layers of my photography and some of the things I'm still learning about my photography and how I shoot. So when I was about 19 or 20 years old, I took this class. I should remember the name. I do not remember the name, but I came in

contact with Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés' book, *Women Who Run With Wolves*, and what fasc... I still, I have a copy of it. It's all tagged up. Every so many years, I go and pull it out and reread different parts of it, or just do a full reread of it. I like how she talks about the sacred feminine. I love how she pulled stories from all around the world from different cultures. And I believe she also uses it in her practice, as like you know psychologist, therapist, et cetera.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

And so for me, I was thinking, "Wow." I think this was also the same class where we went through this whole history of the Paleolithic, Neolithic, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And going from agrarian to industrial as a society and what happened to women and the female figure, and it's giving me goosebumps thinking about it, because it's the whole idea of looking at this shift where all

those home girls got demoted. A lot of them just straight up got demoted. And then you have these male air gods. They come, they take over and...

**Desmond Peeples:**

Like from hunter gatherer to agrarian society.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yep. And then from that all the way to the industrial and how you have these female figures who get moved or misplaced. Even in our vernacular, we think about the goddess. So I think this was sometime last year in the news. Someone was referred to as Athena. It was a white bodied woman who everyone was saying, "Well, she's Asian," but her body reads as white in this society. A trans person and/or a person of color or anyone like that wouldn't have been able to do what that white bodied woman did. And she got all these headlines about Athena, right?

**Desmond Peeples:**

She climbed up a statue or something?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

No, no. All she did was sit and spread. She disrobed, remember that, yeah?

**Desmond Peeples:**

Sat in the street in front of a...

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yeah, sat in the street during the protests. And again, it was yet another reminder, when we think of goddesses, usually we overly rely on the Greek Pantheon, which I can't talk. I became inspired by it, but to do something else with it. So, usually very white bodied. Also, we think of, even though Athena is very fierce as a goddess, but we think of goddesses in general as, oh, well, benevolent and

maternal and this and that. Well, we're not thinking about Kali.

**Desmond Peeples:**

That's right. I was just going to say.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Unmake the universe, or some certain goddess figures or certain figures in other countries where they they crawl in, they may steal babies. They may steal men. They may do all these things, or whoever, right, and so that's what I was interested in, the darker side. The exploration. Yeah.

**Desmond Peeples:**

So exploring that aspect of the feminine and the feminine divine with your particular subject, what was the process like with each different person. How were you drawing that out or helping them to...

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

That's a very good question. So yeah, that's my next way and point about this exhibition, but also how I learned to work with people through my photography. So, when I collaborated with Liz LaVorgna on Perfect Imperfection, at that time, I was more used to shooting...

**Desmond Peeples:**

Perfect Imperfection?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Aha. And...

**Desmond Peeples:**

Qu'est ce que c'est?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yeah, yeah. I like qu'est ce que c'est. Perfect Imperfection was a project where we looked at individuals, either could be physical, could be a characteristic, anything that they either were still

struggling with, or they perceived as an imperfection. Before the John Legend song "Perfect Imperfection," or before that became [inaudible], there was a song. But before that, we did this exhibition, I want to say 2014, 2015 together. And it showed at the Vermont Center for Photography. We had it at the river garden.

### **Shanta Lee Gander:**

And during that process, because it was dealing with what people may perceive as trauma, a range of things like domestic abuse, parental issues, anything could have been. One person for me said, "Well, I'm disorganized or whatever." So they threw up all these papers, and I shot them throwing up all the papers. One person said their feet was their perfect imperfection. Let me shoot their feet. But there are a couple of instances in particular. I had shot a couple for this. I was like,

"Oh, it'd be great to get a couple, and what they perceive together as their idea."

It was the first time I started really showing people the photos. And seeing what spoke to them also in the process, it was a growing pain because to me, it was like, "This is supposed to be my vision, my idea," but actually, it humbled me. It also forced me to really challenge the history that we know of photography of the object, right, and objectifying. It actually forced me to say, "You know what, actually, this should be this way to ... You're literally taking someone's image. They're allowing you to do that. And so treat this as a collaboration." So with this project, I treated it the same way in terms of working with someone you ... Sometimes it took about a month, month and a half for a while to just work on the look. With Caighla, that was different because I wasn't even expecting it to be that, but it was like she brought

all her stuff and we just shot and she did her makeup, it was like really rad. Going forward when I realized I was working on Dark Goddess, I was like, "Okay." So working with individuals on who or what they wanted to be.

It's very easy to say, "I'm looking for a Kali." I kind of am, that would be great. A Kali or a Baba Yaga. Because when we get to that, there are gaps missing in some of what's presented. But, what I did is really for the individual, what did Dark Goddess mean for them, how did they want to portray that? And getting things ready, like costuming, all that stuff. Once that was done and once we shot, then showing them. So, it took some power and shared it as opposed to me just saying, "Okay, here's the stuff, you're going to do this. This is where we're going to shoot." It was a question of where do you want to be, where are

you drawn to, or what location should we choose, and what of these I would choose? I chose the exhibition picks, but also showing people and saying, "Okay, do you have any favorites or are there any that speak to you?"

And they're people just keeping their photos and using them for whatever they want to use them for, but mainly just being able to say, "Hey, this is what I'm planning on showing. Do you have ..." I remember with one model in particular, she was like, "I'm uncomfortable with this, this, this." Just the angles and things. I said, "No problem."

Because that's someone's body and they happen to be sharing that with me in that space. And yes, it's my art, but it becomes a collaboration when you involve another person, even another thing, actually. I would say in an abandoned place, it has to let you in.

### **Desmond Peeples:**

I was just going to bring up how you said you also co create with mother nature. So, could you talk a little bit more about that? Yeah.

### **Shanta Lee Gander:**

Absolutely. It's funny because a couple of months ago, someone was asking me about environmental writers or something. I said, "Well, I'm not really an environmentalist. I'm a writer." Then the more I thought about it, I was like, "Wait a minute, you idiot." I love, I don't like the bugs in nature, they're part of it, but I love nature, and have a deep appreciation for it. And also just the way that you don't need to do much with nature. If the lighting is right, the background is there, you can bring some extra stuff to it, but it feels there's just

something about it, you don't need to do much with it. That's my aesthetic, even with, I'm not a Photoshopper, I'm not somebody who is like, "Okay, if the wall was blue and someone wants it to be white..." I don't do that. I don't really do that. It's just, it's just not my thing. And I'm not dissing anyone who does, but it's this mother nature and the wildness of it jives with how I want things to just be, if that makes any sense.

### **Desmond Peeples:**

So, back to the collaborative aspect, when you're working with each person and you're also in tandem working with the setting. I heard you use this word in a previous conversation, worldbuilding. What does that mean to you in relationship to this process?

## **Shanta Lee Gander:**

That's a good question. Because as you know, you're a fellow writer, you write and you write in fiction, which I don't yet. Hopefully, maybe one day. And it's a term used for fiction, but I really do the more I've thought about the term and the idea of making something believable and bringing people in into characters, into setting, and the feeling and how it has to do with that world, whatever you're trying to present, I think that holds true for a lot of things. We do it with stories. You have to bring people in. I didn't want it to be artificial, but I also wanted it to be hence shooting outside, right, not building a set inside of a building, but maybe going to a place where some of the set is there within mother nature and then maybe adding some other pieces to it. And so for me, worldbuilding was all about bringing the viewer into that world of the goddess.

## **Shanta Lee Gander:**

Also, I don't really like to pose my models. Yeah, I'm a hypocrite because all my pictures, a lot of pictures taken of me, I prefer to be posed. I don't want to be caught off guard. That's an unpacking for another time, but for my models, I prefer if something's working, I will say, "Hold that, that works, whatever." And sometimes, I may say, "Try this." But usually I like to let people feel around and see what comes to them. And people will always say, "Pose me." And that always feels uncomfortable because they're not my clay. Do you know what I mean?

## **Desmond Peeples:**

They're not the object as you say. They are the subject.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Exactly. They're collaborators. They're equals for me.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Well, there is another word that you've used to describe this exhibit, it's cultural anthropology.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yep.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Yeah. You were also talking earlier about the different kinds of goddesses that are represented, the different stories that you're telling. Can you talk about that?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Absolutely. Yeah. So for me, the process, I like to use a lot of creative, artistic processes for me to be a student again. And actually it's funny because I

was just talking to Rita Banarjee about this. And she was saying that too, if you work across different mediums and things, you get to become a student again. And for me it puts me right back into revisiting some things and journey interiors I may not know much about. For example, there are a couple of triple goddesses up there. There's Hecate, which has a triple element. There's the Morrigan who can have a triple element, very old Celtic ancient figure. Then in some cases, people created their own identities. So, Bailey for example, she wanted to be killer of bad men. And I was like, "Okay, we don't ..." Because in doing this, I did tell people they didn't necessarily have to be goddesses that existed. Could be another inner something you wanted to tap into, if that makes sense.

## **Shanta Lee Gander:**

The Obeahs, that was something I did say too... So those two individuals Elisia and Quanda, I've known them since middle school. And I went to their cousins and I went to them, I said, "Actually, would you both be ... I want to shoot you both together." Part of that had to do with they've been speaking Pig Latin since I don't know when. They speak Pig Latin. And every time they start speaking it, I'm just like, "Stop it and knock it off. I don't know what you're saying," right, so they have their own language together. And I thought, partly because of that and because of their bond, I was thinking, "Oh, what if I shot them together and what if ..." They're both Jamaican and have Jamaican heritage. And so I was thinking, "What if we do something that links to the Obeahs and do that?" That was probably one of the rare...

**Desmond Peeples:**

The Obeahs are?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So it would be that culture's version of a witch, but it's much deeper than that. That's the layman's terms. The deeper piece might be that it's something that's passed on to you, something that's taught to you. Don't trust what you read on the internet and don't trust anybody that went in there and wrote a book about whatever. It's actually something that you ... I get the sense of it. The little bit of scraping the surface that I know about it that you'd literally have to go into the culture and learn more about what a Obeah is. But someone maybe associated with voodoo is someone who actually is powerful, very powerful. And so I said to both of them, this was one of the rare times I said, "Oh, I would love to tap into that, that heritage of the Obeah and

working with natural elements and conjuring kind of thing but within that cultural milieu, even though we're shooting..." We were shooting in New Hampshire.

**Desmond Peeples:**

What can you do?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

So, that was some of it. There's still more to be done with Dark Goddess. So I'm still stepping back and looking at the work and looking at the gaps, looking at who or what is missing in terms of representation, but also thinking about some of the stories. Because I do want to get more words into the work when it's presented like more storytelling or more of a ... This someone was telling me, who came to see it, said, she was like, "I don't know about a lot of these goddesses." And some of them don't exist. They were within the imagination of

the person who got in the photo, which is amazing to me.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Yeah. There's one photo I believe of Caighla that is accompanied by a story of what it was actually like to shoot the photo.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

You want me to tell the story?

**Desmond Peeples:**

Yeah, sure.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

That was funny because, okay, so someone actually said that too, because they would love to see some of the backstories with that. So we were like, "Oh, we're going to bring candles." So we did some building ahead of time, even though, again, I didn't realize it was going to be for Dark Goddess.

It was just like, "Oh, this is a shoot and this is what we're going to do." And so we're like, I said, "Oh, there's my favorite place, what do you..." like at Stickney there's this area that a lot of people may not know about or go to. So we get these little tea lights. When you see photos of fabric and water, it's gorgeous. The fabric is doing exactly what you want it to do. Maybe there're sticks underneath the water holding the fabric, I don't know, but on that day it was like ...

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

In some cases, she actually said to me, she said, "Hey, it looked like the hunchback of Notre Dame." It would bubble up. Then like, "There she is." And we're like, "Yeah, that's not cute. That's not working." So it's a bubble, air bubble, coming up or the candles be floating away as they're trying to shoot. I also emerge myself in the water. And so I had two cameras wrapped around my neck and I'm

like, "Okay, these are not waterproof cameras." And at one point I was like, "Hold on a second." So I tightened them. And then when I went to take the picture, I couldn't even lift it because it was so tight around my neck. I was like, "I'm about to choke myself in water." And I'm emerged in water with her to take that photo. And then there are these two boys who were just walking around across on the top, they're looking down, and they came.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Perfect.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Perfect, right, and there she is in this nightgown that's wet and I'm just like, "Okay." And then they were asking, were like, "What are you two doing, is this for a movie?" And we were like, "Oh, we're just doing a shoot." But it was like, hilarious in

terms of ... All to say, when you collaborate with nature, anything could happen. Things do not go as planned necessarily. And I think that's part of the beauty and the surprise of it too.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Earlier you talked a little bit about your penchant for abandoned places. Let's go into there. Take me there.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yeah. I should have had a better spent youth because usually it's the young people who were breaking into places. My parents were really strict, so I didn't ... They didn't let me out of their sight to do that, luckily, but as an adult, so it's almost like living my life backwards when I discovered, "Oh, there are abandoned places." And you go see them. Vermont is actually, for all the challenges that I've talked about, even as a person of color

living in Vermont, there's a lot of beauty and there's a lot of discovery I've had here also.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

And so it's also given a lot back to me or has been a place of wonder. Abandoned places has been that way for me. So it was in Vermont. I remember yet again, we were doing something for Perfect Imperfection and Liz LaVorgna and I thought it would be a great idea to first shoot each other before we started working with other people on this topic that would be maybe a little bit touchy for people to think about their flaws really and allow us to photograph it. So we did it for each other. There's this place, I think it's in Vergennes, Elgin Springs. It used to be a spot for a water cure back when it was the rage, in what, the late 19th century to like, "Oh, we're going to come bathe in water. It's going to be healing waters."

## **Desmond Peeples:**

Up and down the state.

## **Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yes. And there's something about it. So it's Elgin Springs and it's this place that's just there on this, I forget what route, but again, around the Vergennes area. And that's the place where I said, "Oh my God, it's just abandoned." There're other places. And I started to just search for them, got hungry for it, went to some abandoned asylums in Massachusetts. All places that say do not enter, you enter anyway, that kind of thing. It all links back to whether I'm writing, whether I'm interviewing people, whether I'm photographing, it all links back to this way that I love looking beneath the surface. I like asking questions. I like challenging myself with the questions or inspiring others to ask their own questions.

### **Desmond Peeples:**

There is something really beautiful that you said in our own private conversation. What was it? "I think in each of us we have abandoned places." Yeah.

And I think that your work, your co creation of the space in which we can uncover what we hide, what is hidden in ourselves, that's really beautiful.

### **Shanta Lee Gander:**

And we're now in a place in our culture where what is hidden ... Like that saying, what's hidden or what you try to hide comes to light. And the ways that we forced people even into hiding and the way to encourage things to be up on the surface, even for myself, there are lots of uncomfortable things I write about in the memoir I'm working on. Pushing it into the surface even at the risk of a lot of things. Even with some of the asylums, we don't want to face as a country what we did to people in

those places. And so I love seeking things like that out.

**Desmond Peeples:**

I was wondering, have you been the subject of any of a Dark Goddess shoot or have you thought about how you would want to be represented?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

That's a very good question, oh my God. I have not. One of the models, actually DonnCherie McKenzie, wants us to pose together and wants us to do something. And she has this vision. It's funny because I keep trying to think about, well, I think you would know, my husband often takes pictures of me. He does a really good job of it. And I've thought, "Okay, what would that look like, who would I want to be?" And I'm still thinking about that.

## **Shanta Lee Gander:**

I do identify with Kali, even though that's obviously in another culture. And I spent five months in India, not nearly enough time to claim it as mine at all, but there's this very powerful ... Something powerful about, you can undo the universe and undo time and what any goddess has associated with that. Because also with that undoing, there also is the power in creating and making and doing and bringing together too, because it sounds destructive, but I think you need both for the balance. But again, that's not really an answer because I'm still thinking about what that would be if I were to do that, what that would be. I think I would need to sit with that for a second. That's a good question. You stumped me.

**Desmond Peeples:**

My pleasure. Well, your writing has come up several times of course. You have a book that's come out very recently, GHETTOCLAUSTROPHOBIA from...

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Diode Editions

**Desmond Peeples:**

Diode Editions, yeah. And it's just been shortlisted for an award, has it?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Actually, it got an honorable mention. The title is a mouthful, it's GHETTOCLAUSTROPHOBIA:

Dreaming of Mama While Trying to Speak Woman in Woke Tongues, GHETTOCLAUSTROPHOBIA for short. The New England Poetry Club, I just found out this week that it got honorable mention for the Sheila Margaret Martin Prize, which was awesome.

Diode has been a great publisher and they submitted it for the prize. And I got the note that it got an honorable mention, and I'm like, "Yes." Excited.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Well, I know you have a lot of other book projects in the works, and I'm just wondering the relationship between your photography and your writing, there must be some ... How do they feed each other or inform each other?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

That's a really good question. It's funny because working on different projects at the same time, again, I'm borrowing from my conversation with Rita Banerjee because I just interviewed her for my newsletter, and ...

**Desmond Peeples:**

Rita Banerjee is?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

She's a writer, novelist, taught at VCFA, is continuing to do lots of amazing things. I would say check out her website.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Yes. Shout out to Rita.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yes, shout out to Rita. But she said something that felt true for me as well. Well, one, I feel like if you feel like you're getting stuck one place, you definitely, or it helps to keep you fluid. Also, I would say it forces me to always challenge myself, which I try to do in both the writing and the photography. I also have belly danced. I'm working on something with a friend. We've been working on it for like three years now, slowly coming together, thinking about what we would present in dance.

And I would say I'm a big believer in letting things sit with a lot of the writing even though it doesn't seem like that on the surface, it seems like all this stuff is always coming out behind the scenes. I've got even more stuff like working, writing, doing, photoing.

### **Shanta Lee Gander:**

And I would say for me the streamline, it would link to story, the depth of story, the depth of also exploring the realms of humanity. Even if it happens to be a thing or place, not a person in the photo, the depth of humanity. Some of the abandoned asylums, it's like the monsters we become with each other, or the histories we've created or done or things like that. So I would say that those ... I'm a horror fan, you know this. And so part of my attraction and stuff like that is how do you get, again, underneath the surface of what you think you know about a person or what's going

on or the horrors that have happened in this landscape, and how do you then take that and then visually reflect it? I would say the visual also is a text. So having the visual as a text or having text as text, and how do you then get beneath the surface? And I would say that would be the connecting piece.

### **Desmond Peeples:**

I think one thing that you do in particular is show how those monsters or the traumas that happen in history or in our personal histories, how those are also sources of power and can redefine your narrative. I think what we were talking about in the beginning of how the sacred feminine has this commonly benevolent harmless connotations of fertility, even though everybody knows Athena was the goddess of war. So, I think there's work to be done in freeing what we don't ... Freeing what is

uncomfortable and freeing us from these ideas of what is appropriate and what is a safe truth or not.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Oh, that's so true. And I'm glad you said that because I've had people comment and tell me my stuff is heavy, my writing's heavy. And I'm thinking, "Well, I don't know what ..." Even if you wrote about something in nature, and nature in and of itself, if we're using the word heavy, it's heavy. You wouldn't ...

**Desmond Peeples:**

There's nothing more heavy metal than nature. That's right.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yes. And so I was just reading something about the representation of polar bears throwing rocks at walruses. It's in the Smithsonian magazine, and they looked at it and wondered if it was true

because it was represented in this etching or something. And it turns out it's rare.

**Desmond Peeples:**

In like a cartoon?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yeah. Someone, they etched it. I guess there were explorations of Inuit legends or tales or stories.

And so there's this image, this literal image, it's not a photograph, of a polar bear hurling rocks at walrus and...

**Desmond Peeples:**

Etched on a wall somewhere?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

I would have to look and see where it is, but it's like they basically ... Some, I think, current scientists looked at it and they were like, "Oh, it's a rare occurrence, but it does happen." They were

wondering how true it was to that representation. And it's just like even in nature, even for something to sprout up against dirt, do you know how violent that is and what's all involved? Or if we talk about butterflies, all this crazy stuff. Maybe someone could accuse me and say, "You veered towards the dark or you veered towards things or whatever," but it's life. I don't think there's anything more traumatic than a planet that came to be from a bang, do you know what I mean in that? And we're hurling around in space and our Velcro is gravity. So it's life. And I think to me, that's the richness of life that you have this continuum. And I think all the more, the argument for joy too, like guarding one's joy, being fiercely protective of the joy, of the happy, but also that can come out of some of the darkness as well.

## **Desmond Peeples:**

So, let's go back a little bit into the collaboration process with these subjects. You talked a little bit about how you were picking props, working together on how you want to present in the set and [crosstalk] pose and stuff. Did folks have to plumb a little bit of their personal experience, did you get into ... How psychological was the process?

## **Shanta Lee Gander:**

That's a good question. I think that's the next level of the process, to be honest with you, because for this, it was planning ... It was just feeling my way around to say how do you envision yourself, or when you think of Dark Goddess, what is that like for you? And leaving it bare bones. I think now that shoots have happened, I think that one of the things that I'm thinking about in terms of light direction is how do I get some audio clips, how do

I talk to each person for thinking about their further thoughts on this and how it feels for them or what it was like or what they connect with or what it is about? Because I think that's going to be, in addition to the photos, that's going to be the additional fascinating layer, is for how people felt kindred with it. Yeah, I think that's going to be the other layer to get people's actual voices to think about what was this like for you.

**Desmond Peeples:**

And that really draws on the aspects of cultural anthropology and ethnography that you were talking about earlier, bringing the project into a multimedia presentation of this whole idea. What was it like talking with the subjects about their ideas of the goddess in the feminine?

## **Shanta Lee Gander:**

That's a good question because most of the time it would be us trading messages back and forth. And again, it was so focused on the shoot itself. The more that I've thought about it, the more that ... This process, the process isn't done, right, and the project isn't done. So it forces me to really hone in on what's the question I want to ask them because it does go back to the sacred feminine.

## **Shanta Lee Gander:**

And for me, it even goes back to... I'm laughing at myself because coming out of Trinity College and undergrad, my focus was women, gender and sexuality. And so the intersections of how societies thought of gender and class and race and all these different things, that was my foundation. As I was leaving Trinity, I was like, "Okay, what am I going to do with this, what am I going to do with this, what am I going to do, how am I going to apply

this?" One of the first jobs, I was juggling a couple of different things. One of them was at Planned Parenthood and creating their first statewide internship program, which I believe is still in existence today in Connecticut. But as I was thinking about this project, I was thinking, "Wow, I went full circle back to that and doing more of a deeper dive that gets me into ethnography, gets me into people's personal stories, gets me into some journalism." And so...

**Desmond Peeples:**

Because you're also an award winning journalist.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yes, yes. Thank you. Yes. So it gets me into circling back to these individuals and talking to them. And as I was thinking about the next iteration of the exhibition, because it just I can't necessarily say where yet, but it is traveling

someplace else, but in a different iteration. And so in that different iteration, I do want to add multisensorial. I do want to hopefully collaborate with dancers, but also have the voices of these women talking about it. I want that, whether that's going to be a short one podcast, I'm not sure yet. And you're the podcast guru, so it's like I, hats off to you. That's what I see as the next layer, because I want to draw from them what that feels like and get some storytelling and that's going to be the next phase of things.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Yeah. It seems like a really natural direction for something that's so collaborative, allowing other people not only to bring their ideas, but their mediums and stuff.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yes.

**Desmond Peeples:**

And that leads me to my next question. This being such a collaborative process is obviously very different than I think most people's writing processes. Yeah, how have you worked with other people in your writing?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

That's a good question. That's a good question.

**Desmond Peeples:**

And I would love to talk about your reporting as well. I think those would obviously be two very different approaches to the writing, your poetry versus your reporting. So let's start with your poetry.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Okay. Well, so you're actually one of my readers, one of my esteemed readers that I trust. And so I consider myself as having a community of people

who I would say keep me humble, but also their insights matter to me and their intelligence I value. Like I said, you're one of them. So, the work happens. I don't know, I think it's a little bit ... Some of it's hogwash. The whole idea, the writer and they're like, they are at their desk by themselves, and it's like, "Sure." But what you didn't know about what they're writing is they probably got the idea from talking to a friend or maybe there was something that happened and inspired them within a social context, or what does someone do? Well, there are many stories, writers, where it's like you have these buddies or these pals where it's like, "Okay, what do you think of this? Please tell me if it's garbage, because if it's garbage, I go back to the drawing board," right, that way or even...

## **Desmond Peeples:**

Kind of what you do with the subjects with the photos... a little, I mean totally different...

## **Shanta Lee Gander:**

But like that, right, where you're just like, if someone were to say, Sean said, "I don't look good in all those, so I don't want that up." And I have to be like, "Okay, okay." And so it's like when we think of how Frankenstein came to be. And there they are like. Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, and these other individuals challenging, I think it was Lord Byron issuing a challenge, and them all writing whatever. But it happened in community, the Romantics, a lot of them happening in community, that whole idea.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

And I think that it takes also a lot of people, or midwives, whatever their genders are to be helping something come into the world. You need your editors, you need the readers who are going to say, "I don't think that poem works in that collection." You need all these different people. And so I would say in that way, even though it's a lot of time in my head or becoming obsessed with something, like my second poetry book is totally me becoming obsessed and entering into this relationship I didn't expect to, with a dead man. He's like 2000 years old.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Can we say who?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

We can say who.

**Desmond Peeples:**

See, that's what I also think is so funny. With your writing, you are in collaboration with other people, you are working with these other voices. Definitely. Go on, go on on Ovid.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

And some of them are dead. I think it was like 2017, 2018, somewhere around there, before entering VCFA.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Vermont College of Fine Arts.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Thank you, Vermont College of Fine Arts. And I had Metamorphosis, Ovid's Metamorphosis, on my shelf for a while. And finally, I was like, "Hey, let me read this. I want to really hunker down." It's like, this was 600 pages or something like that. And I read it and I became so obsessed. I was like,

"Oh my God, do you know how cool it would be if this were Black metamorphosis, if this were the Black body, the Black psyche, the Black body, the Black spirit, the Black soul doing all these things or more?" And so that's what became Black Metamorphosis, the second manuscript, which I can't say. I have to get permission whether when it's announced, but it will be out in the world. And so that's what became, alongside GHETTOCLAUSTROPHOBIA and alongside all these other things, that's what became my thing of how to think about ... Also getting to know Ovid as an exile, as someone who pissed off authorities at the time and all this.

### **Desmond Peeples:**

Ovid as the Dark Goddess?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Disruptors, I think that's also another thing that my work might have in common with my photography too. Disruption, even if it doesn't look like disruption and what I'm doing, I could be writing a poem very formally but the disruption part may be with the subject matter that I'm dealing with, or what I'm photographing maybe the disruption.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Yeah, definitely. I think that that's a deep root of the Dark Goddess exhibit definitely. We talked a little bit about your vision for what's next for Dark Goddess, do you have any other photography projects that are deep in motion?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

I wouldn't say they're deep in motion. So you may know about this one already. So Fly is very close

to my heart. Started shooting for that probably between 2017 and 2018. Everything is always happening at the same time. So, Fly. So I've been enthralled with Song of Solomon, Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon and this whole mythology or story or truth, or however anyone wants to perceive it about within the African diaspora about African Americans having the gift of flight and some stories with the Freedmen's Bureau Project, 20th century, early 20th century, and individuals going and collecting stories from individuals who were previously enslaved or descendants of the enslaved and sharing these stories. And so you would hear these stories, all these. Some of those stories also were very influential in my second poetry book too. Like people talking about haints, which are ghosts and spirits and things like that, then the other strain of flight and which you could say, oh, it's a metaphor for liberation.

## **Shanta Lee Gander:**

To me, I think it's like deeper than that. And so I thought in passing it's like, what would that look like to capture that on photo? And I don't mean someone skying on the basketball court, but I mean, what would that mean for someone to fly? And that, I also started interviewing people and asking people and recording them. Obviously, I'd like me to redo some of it, but I started getting some sort of few stories about flying and people's connection to flying. And people told me that they did fly in their dreams and things like that. And so that's also the project that I'm working on bringing into the world in some way, shape or form. I'm working on it.

## **Desmond Peeples:**

Yeah. I remember we did a little shoot.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yeah, exactly. We did a shoot. I'm looking into funding for it. And so it will have its time, so it's not abandoned, but it's something I often think about. And I often think about, especially the play on the word fly as a slang for I look good, I'm working it. And so I like the double entendre meaning of it in addition to its deep cultural roots within the African diaspora.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Yeah. I love that idea. Like, "Oh, where did he go?"  
"Oh, he flew away."

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yes.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Absolutely.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yes, yes.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Shanta, is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

No. I would say, think about pushing your own boundaries. For me, this exhibition and a lot of my work is about pushing my own boundaries too, which is maybe selfish, but the pushing my boundaries of skill because you always have to grow your skill, but also pushing boundaries of what we think we know, what we presume, what we assume, all those things.

**Desmond Peeples:**

How is that selfish?

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Well, because it's like, doo-dee-doo... but you know what I mean...

**Desmond Peeples:**

Definitely, self improvement...

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Yeah, exactly. So I'd say, think about pushing your own boundaries and if you happen to wander into Manchester, Vermont, see the Dark Goddess. If you don't get a chance to see it, that's okay.

There's more to see, more to come and I'm doing an artist talk on Tuesday, September 14th virtually. So information will be on my social media about that too.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Excellent. An online artist talk you said.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Online, yeah. Virtual.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Cool. Cool. All right. Well, it has been a real pleasure.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

It's been a pleasure. Thank you Desmond for having me on Vermont Made. I'm your fan. Thank you.

**Desmond Peeples:**

Likewise. Samesies.

**Shanta Lee Gander:**

Thanks. Yay

## **Desmond Peeples:**

That my friends is our show. You can learn more about Shanta, her photography and her writing, there's so much to enjoy, in the show notes at [vermontartscouncil.org/podcast](http://vermontartscouncil.org/podcast). Vermont Made is a production of the Vermont Arts Council, the primary provider of funding, advocacy, and info for the arts here in Vermont, which is the stolen land of the Abenaki people. Thank you very much for listening.