

https://www.santafenewmexican.com/pasatiempo/art/an-open-book/article_e3a39286-7e5a-11ee-81e4-ff19b5d30a6a.html

ART

An open book

Spencer Fordin

Nov 17, 2023

1 of 4



Jess T. Dugan, *Oskar and Zach (embrace)*, 2020

It's all right there, on video: everything you could possibly hope to know about Jess T. Dugan.

There's hope, fear, vulnerability, and ambition. There's a yearning to be understood. And there's an extended timeline of disappointment and, perhaps, an irreparable break from family.

Six years ago, Dugan, who identifies as queer and nonbinary, blazed a new chapter in their art with *Letter to My Father*, an unflinchingly honest video account of estrangement and a lifelong struggle to communicate with a parent. And now, Dugan is opening up about the alternately arduous and joyous process of becoming a parent for the first time with a companion piece titled *Letter to My Daughter*.

details

Jess T. Dugan's *I want you to know my story* runs at CONTAINER Friday, November 17, through January 5, 2024.

An opening reception is set for 5 p.m. Friday, November 17, at CONTAINER; Dugan will attend a book signing and conversation at CONTAINER with Christian Waguespack at 1 p.m. on Saturday, November 18.

1226 Flagman Way. 505-995-0012; cwontainerc.org, jessdugan.com

They tell the story of how hard it was to conceive, sharing intimate photos of Vanessa, Dugan's wife, and her pregnancy and how they dealt with setbacks along the way. Dugan delves into how being a parent has changed their life, and how it has caused Dugan to re-evaluate their own childhood.

Nothing is out of bounds; Dugan's courage comes in their candor, and all will be on display at an exhibit at CONTAINER starting Friday, November 17.

"My work is the way that I really understand myself and my relationship with other people," Dugan says. "I've always shared my own story, and over the years I've come to value the kind of intimacy that's created when I share that story with other people. By me sharing something so personal, it really allows people to reciprocate and share themselves with me."

Dugan earned an MFA in photography from Columbia College Chicago and worked with renowned photographer Dawoud Bey during their time in the Windy City.

The new exhibition at CONTAINER is titled *Jess T. Dugan: I want you to know my story*; it will mark the debut of *Letter to My Daughter* and will include photos from the artist's ongoing series, *Look at me like you love me*. In that series, Dugan explores the intimacy of committed

relationships, and they say that the CONTAINER exhibit serves as an oblique self-portrait and catalogue of friends and loved ones.

“In the last year, I’ve been thinking a lot about how to create more immersive installations,” says Dugan of the arc of their work. “The installation at CONTAINER will be the first time I have an audio soundtrack.

“It will be photographs on these dark gray walls with an audio soundtrack of my voice reading texts from my book called *Look at me like you love me*; the texts are very personal. They come from my own life, and they’re kind of meditations on various aspects of my work and aspects of relationships and living.”

And there, as Dugan notes, is the emotional heart of their work.



Jess T. Dugan, *Mary*, 2021

In *Letter to My Father*, Dugan relates the hurt and trauma involved in not being able to relate to their parent. It’s 16 minutes of tightly written and edited family history, an argument they’ve been making in their mind for years.

I have a long history of writing you letters. Our relationship is based on half-truths, on a fantasy version of ourselves and our relationship in which we both play a role we learned innately but don’t fully understand. ... I have always written letters about the difficult things; and you have sometimes written letters back. Sometimes short. Sometimes long. Often painful either in their outright rejection or simply in their omission.— Jess T. Dugan, Letter to My Father

A flood of images rolls by; there’s Dugan as an infant and in childhood. You see their father and mother in days gone by, and, fearlessly, Dugan lays out a lifetime of missed connection. Dugan tells of their hurt as they discovered their identity and began to manifest it in the world.

That pain comes across palpably in one childhood anecdote told over two photos; Dugan's parents got divorced and re-married, and the images convey how Dugan saw themselves at the time. At their dad's wedding, Dugan uncomfortably wears the last dress they'll ever wear. And at their mother's second marriage, they seem comfortable in shorts and a button-down shirt.

But it's not about the clothes; it's about the way their parents made them feel.

I know it is not productive to compare the two of you. You both struggled in different ways and were broken in different places. But I do look at these two images, and it seems clear that you weren't able to make space for me then, and you still aren't able to do so now. And I, as an adult, am only now beginning to learn to make space for myself. — Letter to My Father

The video took a year to make, and Dugan was uncomfortable showing it to the world at first. They just weren't sure if it would be relatable to people with different histories or family structures, but a funny thing happened once the work was out there: Suddenly, Dugan says, any fear of revealing intimate details of their life evaporated. Making the video was cathartic, and showing it proved to be equally profound.

“So many people expressed to me that they related to the central tension of wanting to fully be yourself,” Dugan says. “And also wanting love and acceptance from the people in your life and the sort of struggle that happens when those things are pitted against one another. I had cisgendered white heterosexual men in their 70s telling me they related to the work. People from all identities could relate to that struggle. Realizing that was healing for me.”

It was therapeutic, but it didn't resolve their family dynamic. Dugan had gone two years without communicating with their father following the release of *Letter*. And now, six years later, Dugan and their father have begun speaking again, but Dugan doubts he has seen the video.

“We haven't spoken about it since we've reconnected,” Dugan says. “I have a sense that he must know it exists; it's on my website. But my work is one of the things he's not comfortable with, so we don't talk about it a whole lot.”



Jess T. Dugan, *Self-portrait with Vanessa*, 2020

Dugan's father is still a presence in *Letter to My Daughter*, but mostly through his absence. Dugan tells the story of their marriage to Vanessa and the long process that brought daughter Elinor into their lives. Bringing a child into the world didn't come easy; a sperm donor backed out after several months of involvement, and that was followed by years of frustration on the journey to conception. Dugan delicately and memorably tells the story of Vanessa's miscarriage, and the years of struggle set the scene for the triumphant end. The video tells the story

through a torrent of images mined from Dugan's stash of thousands of snapshots.

Each try brought so much hope. And each failure brought so much disappointment. So many questions and moments of doubt. I felt like I was living my life in the potential of the future, yet somehow the present still had to go on. — Letter to My Daughter

Vanessa ultimately gives birth to a healthy baby, and Dugan and Vanessa have to learn how to advocate for her. Dugan articulates their fear it may be hard to raise Elinor in a world that can be cruel and indifferent, and they vow to shield her from it as long as humanly possible.

Dugan's work isn't about just telling their own story — the viewer sees through Vanessa's point of view, including photos of her pregnant belly. So how do they decide what is for all to see and what stays private? That's an ongoing dialogue, but not one they worry about in the moment.

"Vanessa and I had a lot of conversations about what we felt comfortable with," Dugan says. "She looked through an initial edit; once I had a proposed final edit, she looked through that again to make sure she felt comfortable. I think the more personal the work, the more complicated the negotiation can be. ... We also had a separate conversation about what it means to make Elinor's images public. And with the video, it's a different kind of vulnerability, because I was mining my snapshots; they weren't made with consent to be an artwork."

Dugan currently lives in St. Louis, Missouri, and is planning for an exhibit next August at the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida. They've had pieces in a number of places, including Washington, D.C.'s National Portrait Gallery. *Letter to My Daughter* is also a time capsule. Someday, Dugan hopes, it will give Elinor a look into how deeply her parents love her.

For now, Elinor, who is 5, is busy being a child, and Dugan hopes someday they can sit down and watch it together.

"It's got a lot of adult themes," Dugan says. "I had it in my mind that she would watch it later, either as a teenager or as an adult, and have this look into how I was thinking about parenthood when she was little. I made it with her in mind, but strangely she probably won't see it for a very long time."

Spencer Fordin

Writer