



ADAM MARNIE The three new paintings you have on view with Halsey McKay Gallery are unlike the previous paintings you have done of the World Trade Center monster, in that as a group they depict a nearly continuous moment: we see in these three paintings three views of the monster under the same moody sky, as if from moments in the same day. What these paintings do is make me think for the first time about the person with the supreme view, the eyes of the painting. I haven't thought of this person as you, but maybe I should. And if I think about which day it is that's in these paintings, I place it in the months you were painting them, when the New York City streets were almost entirely desolate, except for the protesters, marching and riding bikes in the tens of thousands across these bridges.

MATT KENNY The mirrored skin of the building is really great at absorbing the atmosphere of sunsets, sunrises, and the magic hour: when the sun is not visible but still filling the sky with light and there's darkness on the ground. There is a view from the Manhattan Bridge that I often see as a regular Q train rider that is one of my favorite views of lower Manhattan. The painting that features Frank Ghery's Beekman Tower is taken from just near an on-ramp to the Brooklyn Bridge. Clare was born a stone's throw from there. The Beekman Tower rose up in the years after 9/11 and I avidly followed its rise. It was a great looking skeleton and the Beekman got me started on watching towers go up. The West Street view is not far from where I worked on Laight Street for a few years, where I watched One World Trade claw its way up into the sky. I took tons of photos from there, where the tower's bearing was so obvious and oppressive that it was almost mundane. From a place like Fulton Street the tower reads like a real obelisk. So, yes, the vantage points end up being autobiographical. Walking around the city, especially lower Manhattan, is one of my favorite things to do. In some ways I think people who have really walked New York City will get more out of the paintings.

AM This new group reminds me of another series of yours, the *Meadowlands* paintings.

MK Yes, the *Meadowlands* paintings were from a view out the train window on the way to visit my parents in Jersey. The image is always from the same moment just before the Secaucus stop before Newark Airport. That vision of One World Trade in far space beyond a farmhouse awaiting execution under the gaze of the Goya distribution center was too enigmatic to ignore.

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View From the Man-
hattan Bridge, 2020
Oil on panel
10 x 8 inches

One of the real gifts of the monster paintings was opening up an interest in cityscape and landscape painting. Coming upon this stage-like site was a real opportunity. After making the first set of WTC monsters, I wanted to come at the tower from a different angle. Contemplating time and change through that view from the swampy margins of Jersey City broadened my sense of what I was up to with painting.

AM Do you remember the first time you painted the World Trade Center monster? It must have been a drawing, or in a series of drawings, I would imagine.

MK It was in 2014 somewhere between a trip to Houston and my first solo show at Halsey... I had been closely watching developments at Ground Zero. I knew I wanted to do something with the rebuilding of the World Trade Center. The tower was finished that year.

2014 was also the heyday of the Stop-the-Ashby-High-Rise protest lawn sign movement in Houston, TX. The Ashby High-Rise was a proposed condo tower to be built in a wealthy low-rise neighborhood. It seemed like Marshall Wilson's anthropomorphic cartoon tower was lurking on every lawn inside the loop. I had an epiphany looking out a car window at these signs expressing strong feelings about the future of the city. I didn't get a chance to combine the two until I got back to New York. It was a joyful moment.

AM What was the work you were making just before that? Where did he come from?

MK I had a couple of irons in the fire. There was a series of paintings rooted in an interest in Picabia's later abstract works, Richard Tuttle's foamcore paintings, John McCracken's planks, Elizabeth Murray, Marsden Hartley's officer paintings, Stuart Davis, 80's Frank Stella, and Bushwick club posters. Those paintings evolved into a series of shaped oil paintings of illusionistic forms: mainly of planks and tubes. At the same time I was making mock "self-help" drawings that combined similar forms with text. These were satirically anxious illustrations of emotional feedback loops. Those drawings were collected in a zine called *Feelings of Control*. Before all of that were the shaped paintings of the bullets from the Kennedy assassination. A lot of the work I've done can be traced back to those bullet paintings.

AM You've been obsessed with the JFK assassination for over two decades, and now you've studied al Qaeda rigorously since 9/11. How does one affect the other?

MK The first Kennedy assassination book I read was called *Oswald and the CIA* written by a former intelligence officer named John Newman. It was not written for beginners and I was in high school! I got it for Christmas in 1995 or 96 and it's lived with me wherever I've gone. Newman's angle was to strictly analyze government documents about Lee Harvey Oswald. In this book he literally only writes about documents. Considering how cautious and rigorous the book's approach is Newman's findings are incredibly damning. The book opens with a young marine who would one day become the accused assassin of President Kennedy appearing at the American Embassy to announce his defection to the Soviet Union. Every point in the story seemed to bleed out into the larger world, implying massive forces at work in the global landscape of the Cold War. It helped that Newman's book was provocative, impenetrable, and serious. I wanted to be fluent in the material. Newman may believe there was a conspiracy to kill Kennedy but he is not really a conspiracy theorist in the popular sense of the term. The better designation for Newman is as a skeptic. Before *Oswald and the CIA*, Newman wrote *JFK and Vietnam* about Kennedy's struggle with the Pentagon and the Vice President over Vietnam. Newman argues that when Kennedy was killed, he was actively working to pull out of that war. The Vietnam book is more the more controversial of the two. The stakes are really high in Newman's work and it got me hooked. I have a rare first edition of *JFK and Vietnam*.

9/11 turned reading about international relations, spy services, and politics into a dedicated pursuit. I do distinguish my 9/11 readings and JFK readings though. I believe there was in fact a plot to kill JFK and that the nature of that plot had enormous ramifications for this country. The Warren Commission was tasked with presenting the public with an explanation for what happened in Dallas. Kennedy's alleged assassin was a former defector to the Soviet Union who was shot by a nightclub owner in a police station. The Warren Commission's job was to convince the public that it was offering the final word on the assassination. It is a fact that the FBI never endorsed the Warren Commission's magic bullet theory. It is a fact that the Commission was unaware of the CIA's program to assassinate Fidel Castro using organized crime and Cuban exiles. The

Commission's report was so flawed that Congress had to revisit the crime with the House Select Committee on Assassinations in the 1970s and then again in the 1990s with the Assassination Records Review Board. Even the state is conflicted about the Kennedy assassination. It wasn't just skeptics keeping the story alive. You had CIA contractors like Johnny Roselli talking to Washington Post columnists sending the nation's security establishment scrambling. The story was alive for years, unfolding and unresolved long after Kennedy's death.

My take on 9/11 is not so far off from the mainstream narrative. I have read a chunk of 9/11 truth literature and while some of it is worth reading, most of it is terrible. The most compelling works on 9/11 have been written by mainstream authors such as Steve Coll and Peter Bergen. Coll's two books on the Afghan conflict and his history of the Bin Laden family are incredible. Bergen's *American Jihad* is great. But some 9/11 truth material has pushed me to research areas I wouldn't have otherwise. The questions posed by Kevin Fenton's *Disconnecting the Dots* had an impact on my research even if I cannot agree with some of his conclusions. My motto is "Read all of it." It's Sisyphean. I'm drawn to the literature of it. Part of the pleasure of reading all of this material is sifting through the multiplicity of narratives. I was fortunate to get my start with writers like John Newman, where the controversy is coupled with criticality. I'm sifting through the material looking for as true a version of the story as I can get.

There were certainly cover-ups surrounding 9/11 — the EPA at ground zero, the FAA versus the Pentagon, the CIA versus the FBI, the FDNY versus Motorola, questions around what Saudi Arabia and Pakistan knew — cover-ups that were seized upon by mainstream journalists and fringe journalists alike. But I haven't read anything that convinced me that the CIA let the attacks happen, or that a secret team of American conspirators managed the attacks. In terms of American political conspiracy, the most egregious crime is the invasion of Iraq. The Bush administration's use of 9/11 to justify that invasion and the media's complicity in that disinformation campaign was completely abominable. The suffering caused by the Iraq invasion is still with us and will be for decades to come.

AM We've recently been talking about the primary characters of the War on Terror narrative you told in your book *Coercive Beliefs*: Omar Abdel-Rahman, Lynne Stewart, and Ramzi Yousef. With the first two, you've said

you are drawn to their ambiguous quality. What do you mean by that? Why are Lynne and the Blind Sheikh so important to you?

MK The thing with Omar Abdel-Rahman and Lynne Stewart is that their lives were long, eventful, and consequential. With Abdel-Rahman you have a cleric that got his start in the origins of a very extreme strain of political Islamism in Egypt, whose influence extends not just to the assassination of Anwar Sadat, but through the globalization of his political ideology in the Afghan-Soviet war to New York terror and all the way to the Arab Spring, and beyond. The Egyptian contingent of the Arabs who went to Afghanistan in the 80s were a crucial influence on Bin Laden's path to terrorism. When al Qaeda was essentially a defunct group of former paramilitary trainers, the Blind Sheikh was contemplating attacking the United States for sponsoring Hosni Mubarak. When Mohamed Morsi assumed the Presidency of Egypt in 2012 he spoke before thousands of people, many of them holding banners with Abdel-Rahman's image on them. Abdel-Rahman's imprisonment in the United States deepened and broadened his appeal. So while plenty of normal Egyptians admired Abdel-Rahman, there were also terror cells in Libya who named their group after the Sheikh. It's hard to think of a corresponding figure in American life. The Blind Sheikh touched many facets of the world's present condition.

With the lawyer Lynne Stewart you have an under-acknowledged yet towering force in American counterculture who became a victim of both the War on Terror and her own crusading romanticism. Her defense of Abdel-Rahman landed her in jail when she was not only reasonably old but also suffering from cancer. The tragedy of Stewart's hubris, and the pathology of the prosecutors she was dueling with, is almost mythic to me. Not so much biblical, more like Aeschylus or Homer.

Stewart's crime was passing messages from the Blind Sheikh to his followers in Egypt. Which was just an incredibly stupid thing to do. Stewart was recorded talking about sending Abdel-Rahman's secret messages while visiting the Sheikh in prison, in what sounds and smells like a crisis in our legal system. Did Stewart believe she was playing a role in overthrowing Hosni Mubarak? How did she come to be so devoted to her client that she was willing to accept the consequences? One thing is for sure, Stewart did not believe she would get the amount of jail time they

eventually gave her. The prosecutors wanted to make an example out of her. For Stewart, a radical leftist, to devote herself as wholeheartedly as she did to a theological populist like Abdel-Rahman is fascinating. It is not a cut and dry story.

When I say that they were ambiguous I meant that both Stewart and Abdel-Rahman, despite their strong personalities and hardened beliefs, seemed to stumble into their futures, caught up in the grip of forces that were way beyond them. I wonder how much agency either the Blind Sheikh or Stewart had. Certainly, Abdel-Rahman preached political violence and there are enough corpses in his wake to constitute a pattern. But Abdel-Rahman required an action man. I'm not saying Abdel-Rahman was innocent but I would say that there are questions around whether or not he was actually running the show. He was very useful for people underneath him who themselves had designs on the direction of events. Abdel-Rahman was also useful for rivals like Ayman Zawahiri and his agent Ali Mohammed.

This is in contrast to Ramzi Yousef, who I believe had absolute agency in his activities. Yousef made the 1993 truck bomb that went off in the World Trade Center. He experimented with methods of political murder in Pakistan and Manila. Try to imagine the logistical challenge of experimenting with timed explosive devices while traveling through South Asia in the early 1990s. Yousef was an extremely dangerous individual. It was his cousin, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who was the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks. The 9/11 story is full of very dangerous, very determined people. In the 93 story Yousef is unique. He was surrounded by idiots.

I think the story of Omar Abdel-Rahman and Lynne Stewart deserves more attention. There are many great works on 9/11 and the War on Terror, but there is not yet a great 93 WTC bombing book. There is a lot to learn from that story to this day.

AM I've imported this idea of ambiguousness into my read of the WTC monster, and it has deepened my understanding of him while also focusing my grasp on your intent. Obviously he is a big huge baby, gnashing his teeth and throwing a fit with his little clenched fists, and that is, on the surface, not a complex character at all. But of course that is not true, he's very complex, possibly even schizophrenic.

MK In a way the WTC monster is a false observation. He's infantile but he's got these battered yellow teeth and bulging adrenaline inflated eyes like an angry old man. The tower isn't really like that. The "Freedom Tower" is a compromised, conservative, restrained figure who would've more accurately had the look of middle management. The false observation seemed emotionally more provocative. He's burdened with being a symbol of the American resurgence after a terrible attack but he's also an office building on the site of mass murder that was designed to not offend. They officially don't call it the "Freedom Tower" anymore. It couldn't live up to itself. Both the building and the monster paintings are stand-ins, symbols pasted over a terrible event. I've actually grown to love the building and I sympathize with all of the pressures applied to him.

I think it's important that the monster exists in a cityscape that is specific. It's not a pizza box skyline—it has a particular range of light circumstances, and distinct neighboring buildings. Putting the monster in New York, a familiar "real" New York, excited me.

MATT KENNY
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F
4225 Gibson Street
Houston, TX 77007

All inquiries:
office@fmagazine.info

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