

WILLIAM MONK

SEVEN LEAGUES TO POMPEII

GRIMM 202 Bowery, New York

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WILLIAM MONK'S LUMINOUS REMAINS

by Jay Merrick, 2017

"The seven," wrote Syd Barret in his lyrics for Pink Floyd's song Chapter 24, "is the number of the young light / It forms when darkness is increased by one." Minus the music, the bare poetry has the feel of a murmured alchemical fugue, and it's one of the touchstones for William Monk's creative process, in which, as Barrett wrote, "Things cannot be destroyed once and for all."

They can only change – in Monk's case, by evolving through a mesh of subject-matter and imagery which, over the last 15 years, has informed paintings which often radiate a sizzling colour-voltage, like tapestries about to burst into flame; others have the organic, hyper close-up quality of an electron-micrograph; some are like freeze-frames in a pulsing mescaline vision.

More recently, the triggers (or perhaps incantations) for his paintings have included Pompeii, the I-Ching, the winter solstice, Palm Springs, Frith the sun god in Richard Adams' *Watership Down*, Californian forest fires, and cinematic sources such as Michelangelo Antonioni's quasi-apocalyptic film endings, and Stanley Kubrick's hyper-realities.

These source materials, like his compositions, are not fully informative, never literally expressive of his essential subject-matter, which concern cycles of life, death, and transcendence. Monk is cryptic rather than conceptual. "I hope to paint my attitudes and ideas," Monk explains. "But I don't try to force it. I let it happen naturally. They seem to come through better when I glance sideways rather than straight ahead, I'd fail if I tried to force onto the work what I might think of as myself. Or, worse still, what I might think I should say about the world."

Monk's ideal creative condition is an only-just-conscious awareness of the way painted form, colour, texture, and specific figurations develop into compositions that seem to be knowable or decodable, but are essentially fugitive; the titles and subject matter of his paintings are never precisely connected. A correlation in music would be the Beatles' *Revolution 9*, which

quickly abandons its hypnotically repetitive spoken opening and becomes something else entirely; or in film, the unsettling pace, over-long scenes and back-projections in *A Clockwork Orange*, and the foregrounds and backgrounds moving at different speeds in classic Warner Brothers cartoons.

In Monk's latest paintings at GRIMM's 202 Bowery show we encounter the luminously cryptic remains of his processes of imagining and painting. The canvases carry irregular intensities of detail, line, foreground and background. We know what the individual figurations represent, but we don't necessarily know why they're combined in the way they are – even though we occasionally see certain shapes or perspectives that reappear in his work.

Some of these 'familiar' originate in paintings of the sun that Monk made as a child: a red or orange circle inside larger yellow circles (which recur in paintings such as 2014's *Untitled (atomic flower power)*). Those early, clearly defined circles may partly explain his instinct to make some compositions that are vividly divisional, giving them primitive or even obsessive art brut qualities. We see starkly divisional compositions in newer paintings such as *And the Seventh Brings Return*, *Pompeii I*, *Alone in the Clouds All Blue*, and *Exhale and the Kingdom*.

The *Pompeii* series, painted in Monk's Brooklyn studio, has an apocalyptic subtext. He equates the ancient ruins with a potential alternate future for Palm Springs: "I can't help imagining people visiting this utopia in hundreds of years' time, and finding ash-casts of the Rat Pack." -

But he also quotes Pliny, who wrote in AD 79: "Then there fell a shower of ashes so dense that at the distance of seven leagues from the volcano, one had to shake one's clothing continually, so as not to be suffocated... At lengths, the light returned gradually, and the star that sheds it reappeared, but pallid as an eclipse. The whole scene around us was transformed: the ashes, like a heavy snow, covered everything." There is something of that atmosphere in new paintings such as *Smoke Ring Mountain*.

The transformational light that Pliny witnessed beneath Vesuvius is essentially no different to the "young light" that replaces

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darkness in Syd Barrett's lyrics – and no different again to the flames and morning glows on William Monk's canvases at 202 Bowery.

Jay Merrick is a critic and essayist for publications including The Independent, ICON, and Architectural Review.

About the artist

William Monk received his BA at Kingston University, London in 2000 and completed his studies at De Ateliers in Amsterdam in 2006. Monk was awarded the Koninklijke Prijs voor Vrije Schilderkunst (Royal Award for Painting) in 2005 and the Jerwood Contemporary Painters award in 2009. He recently moved to Brooklyn, NY where he currently lives and works. Monk's work has been exhibited at Fries Museum, Leeuwarden; Gemeentemuseum Den Haag; Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam; GRIMM, Amsterdam; James Cohan Gallery, New York; Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles; Norwich University, Norwich; PSL, Leeds and Summerfield Gallery, Cheltenham, London. His work can also be found in the collections of The Gemeentemuseum, The Hague; AKZO Nobel, Amsterdam; David Roberts Art Foundation, London; Fries Museum, Leeuwarden; ING, Amsterdam, and in many international private collections.

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