

## FrameWork 11/23

### Ana Ghookassian on Kevin Yates

Walking through the front door at Susan Hobbs, I'm faced with an absence of colour, yet somehow presented with an abundance of life. The sizable figures, floating in their deserted Vantablack 3.0 worlds, though captured in a helpless state often with their eyes closed and palms open, are clearly still alive. Perhaps this is thanks to our shared contextual knowledge of the 'Damsel in Distress' tropes and our innate familiarity with that subtext from a once overused crescendo in pop-culture. The layered ink on the surfaces of the mat paper *feel* velvety; just like the charred frames they sit inside. The photographs on their own seem like heavy objects. While they're digital prints on mat paper, the textures look like uncured fields of ink. It feels like I could gently slide the tip of my finger on the surface of one of the photographs, and the layered ink would powder and leave a charcoal trace on my skin. They seem like objects because their subjects are floating in the center of the compositions, all alone. You know she wasn't alone at some point, but here she is now.

They're not violent images, but the threatening aspect of their frozen expressions certainly suggests a looming threat, or the passing of one. We don't know if she's passed the worst of what could hurt her, or if a more menacing moment is approaching. Does she have any agency? Could she potentially be in control? Yates's work has always had this effect. The ability to stress the inconsiderate capture of a moment—an intrusion into a time of crisis or bloating of tensions—suspended and presented to the viewer for analysis. In *FrameWork 12/20*, Alejandro Tamayo even posed the question, "...in what time are Yates's sculptures located?"<sup>1</sup> Of course, the images are asking us to fill in the gaps for these 'moments' and the details for what are missing from their compositions. But perhaps, we're pushed further to consider entirely different monsters all together. The reinvention of the images incites us to reinterpret these classic scenes, bridging the gap between the past and present.



There is a peaceful aspect to the images as well. I'm going to call it the 'snow globe affect,' where it feels like the women are not only floating in their own little worlds but are also suspended in a never-ending instant of peace and solitude. All that's missing is a generic lullaby and maybe some fake foamy snow. Their ethereal, horizontal suspension heightens their presence, transforming the images into meditations on quiet vulnerability and agency. The intervention by Yates also invokes

an uncanny feeling, estranging the familiar, and interrogating the conventional notions of fear and gendered representations within the horror genre.

The gendered aspect of the images is front and center in the exhibition. But the supporting objects in the show—like the charred negative spaces of the bird cages on the ground, and the moldy bouquets of fruity ceramic flowers, decomposing and losing all life in their fight with gravity—push the viewer to consider subjects beyond the lonesome women. The objects, and of course the title of the exhibition, *No Room for Monsters*, together ask the viewer to consider fears that can't be located, invisible monsters.

Which of course leads me to ask, are internalized anxieties, those borne from our imagination, more unsettling than the externalized 'monster' we can readily place our fears on? The absence of a visible threat allows viewers to confront the enigmatic, amorphous nature of fear itself, perhaps resulting in fears that are deeply personal, reflecting individual anxieties and traumas. The viewer's subconscious fills this void with their unique interpretations, fears, and emotional baggage. In contrast, when a tangible 'monster' is present, it can be a more superficial and externalized fear, one that can be easily identified, labeled, and placed at a distance.

Stitching ambiguity and uncertainty into the narrative—like what if the monster was never there? —instead of encountering a helpless damsel and a menacing monster, there is also a challenge to consider alternative narratives and question preconceived notions about heroism, victimhood, and monstrosity. While the images highlight the evolutions of storytelling in film, they also highlight how exacerbated fears can become when the source of anxiety remains concealed.

The 'damsel in distress' motif today serves as a window into the prevailing attitudes and anxieties of the past—a manifestation of societal fears surrounding vulnerability and the *desire* for heroism. The imagery becomes a visual emblem, reinforcing a hierarchy where the female figure exists primarily as a symbol of peril, awaiting salvation by a male counterpart. This narrative construct, while reflecting the anxieties and societal perceptions of the era, also raises pertinent questions about agency, control, desires, and the perpetuation of stereotypes within the visual storytelling medium. The reinterpretation of the photographs also fractures the expected resolution of the narratives we're familiar with, leaving the damsel suspended in a state of solitary vulnerability, detached from the anticipated salvation.

Within the images there is a successful blurring of the boundaries of reality and imagination, showing how fragile our dependency on images, and as a result, facts, can be. The process perhaps also critiques the influence of storytelling and art on personal fears as well.

We should also consider the potential humanization or sympathy elicited by the missing monstrous figures. Does the absence of the monster challenge the stereotypical portrayal of monsters as pure villains, inviting viewers to engage in a more empathetic exploration of their motives? Does the absence of the 'monster' invite viewers to empathize with the removed figures? This progression brings to light the potential transformation of fear into understanding, and whether the pieces seek to challenge conventional portrayals of monsters as purely menacing, evoking more complex emotional responses.

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“To consider our current monsters is to reflect on how we think about ourselves and our relation to the world.” (Weinstock, 2016)<sup>ii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Tamayo, Alejandro. “*FrameWork 12/20*.” Susan Hobbs Gallery, December 2020.

<sup>ii</sup> Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew, et al. “Chapter Invisible Monsters: Vision, Horror, and Contemporary Culture.” *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, 1st ed., Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, 2016, pp. 275–289.