

The cryptic factor

BY JAY MERRICK

Is William Monk the Ken Kesey of British art? The 33-year-old painter, almost unknown in Britain despite being collected by major European art buyers, is producing riveting canvases whose hallucinatory qualities would surely have intrigued the legendary author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. "Yeah," Kesey might have murmured. "Further!"

Monk's paintings are densely physical, anti-conceptual explorations whose figurations and abstractions morph in and out of one another. His riddled imagery is kinked with shifts in perspective and pitted with *objets bizarres*. Some radiate a sizzling colour-voltage, like tapestries about to burst into flame; others have the organic, hyper close-up quality of an electron-micrograph; a series called *The Institute* suggests freeze-frames in a mescaline vision.

Monk studied fine art at Kingston University, then at De Ateliers in Amsterdam. He won the Royal Award, got taken on by the city's hip Grimm Gallery and, working from a studio in Paris, was soon selling his big paintings to collectors who already owned works by major artists such as Gerhard Richter. Now, Monk has moved back to Britain, to a studio in a converted laundry near Clapham Junction; not surprisingly, he's pinged on to the radar of two or three London galleries.

At the heart of Monk's work is a game he used to play with his brother: "One would do a doodle, the other would make something else out of it. This is how I make my paintings: putting paint down and then finding something. I camouflage the content of my paintings. I want to be cryptic." As cryptic as some of his inspirations: Jasper Johns, the surreal back-projections in *A Clockwork Orange*, Francis Bacon, Jim Morrison's *American Prayer* poems, Philip K Dick's novel *Martian Time-Slip*.

"The answer is never the answer," said Ken Kesey. "What's really interesting is the mystery." Cue William Monk.

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