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SLATE

‘The Real Artist Behind *The Americans*’ Fictional Painter Talks About Her Experience on the Show’

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APRIL 06, 2018



Alyssa Monks.
Stephen Downes

In Season 6 of *The Americans*, Russian spy Elizabeth Jennings (Keri Russell), maintains an operational disguise as “Stephanie,” a home care nurse to Erica Haskard (Miriam Shor), a dying artist. (Erica’s husband has a role in an upcoming arms-control summit.) Erica’s art, which is on display all over the Haskard home, was made by artist Alyssa Monks. I visited her studio in Brooklyn, New York, to talk about her experience creating art for the show.

[NOTE: This partial transcript of the interview, which appeared on Episode 602 of *The Americans* podcast, contains spoilers for the first two episodes of Season 6 of the show.]

June Thomas: Tell me how you came to be the artistic voice of Erica Haskard. Was there an audition process?

Alyssa Monks: No, they found me. The story that I heard was that [showrunners Joe Weisberg and Joel Fields] had a friend who is a gallerist, and when they spoke to him about this project, the gallerist was familiar with my work and recommended me. That's how it all started, and from there, they just came over.

Joe and Joel have tone meetings, in which they talk with the actors and all the other people involved. They indicate the tone that they're looking for, the character beats that they're trying to bring out. Did they do something similar with you?

Absolutely. At first, we started with words and language to try to get there, but I took out my catalog, and I just said, "Let's look through what I've done, and tell me what resonates with you." That's how I can understand what they're actually looking for. There were a few paintings from the past that resonated with them, and specifically the painting of my mom, which is on the set. That was here in the studio. That painting was never supposed to leave the back of my eyelids, let alone the studio. It was just such a personal piece, and I thought no one would ever, ever want this, but I felt compelled to make it, and so there's a lot of vulnerability in it, and there's a lot of raw energy and a lot of grief and passion.

A few others that we looked at in the catalog also resonated—not just the look, but the feel of what they wanted to convey. From that conversation, we started to pick work that I'd already made to dress the bedroom with. Not just what work looks like Erica's—though that was a big part of it—but also what an artist's studio would kind of feel like.

When they were here, there were a bunch of paintings on this wall over here, which were just kind of works in progress, little small studies, ideas, and I had this habit of just putting small things up, like you can see all around, that are not quite going anywhere but maybe they will. It's just a process. They were attracted to the idea of this collage kind of thing on the wall, so that was a fun project. Kind of a tricky one to re-create, you know, because it happens organically. You just hang one thing, and then there's three things, and then there's 10, so to kind of back out of that and re-create this very organic-looking collage wall was really fun. And it wasn't just me in the room doing it. There's like 100 people there, putting things up and moving things around. That was kind of thrilling.

I'm surprised to hear how much of the art that was used is stuff you'd already created.

Only a few drawings were created on the set or here for the drawing process, like when Erica's actually drawing. Those were done specifically for the show, and there's a painting that I re-created that I had done in the past, and I put a little edge on it.

Erica and I are kind of kindred spirits in a lot of ways. She loves making art. She's truly an artist, and she's struggling with this huge loss of her own, her own life. For me, that was the loss of my mother. There are so many things that align with us in terms of what we care about and how we feel so strongly about things. I feel like Erica is saying things that I couldn't say. She's so much more direct than I am, but some of the lines she says, I'm like, "Yeah, that's so true."

But I have to say, it was a really surreal experience to walk into the set the first time and see this room of a dying person. There were so many little details, like there's a toothbrush in a cup near the bed. It just reminded me so much of what my family and I went through.

When you're taking care of somebody who's very ill, you end up with all of these weird things around the room, just out of convenience, and they're not things you would think of unless you've been there. There was something so specific. Only a person who's been through it would know. There's a toothbrush by the bed, because you're brushing the person's teeth in bed, and that's just where it goes now. It's something you totally forget about when it's over—until you see it again.

Let's just pause for a moment to say that you have a very famous TED Talk, in which you talked about the loss of your mother, and her diagnosis, and how knowing that she was going to die, preparing and coping with that, changed your art.

Changed my mind. It just changed my personality, I think. There's a complete shift of understanding that we can't control so many things.

To bring that back to Erica, this is a woman who knows that the end is near, who is trying to hold on because she wants to do more work. Did you conceive of her art changing as she came to terms with the diagnosis?

Yeah. I think her work gets a lot looser and a lot more immediate and less fussy, and there's less of a need for it to be good. It just has to be real. The way I think of her and her need to keep drawing and making art so furiously, even at these dying moments—when you make art, you get to leave your body, almost, and it feels like you're alive. You really are just alive in a way that you're in direct presence with the moment that you're in, and you don't have to think about anything in front of you.

It's energizing. It's life-affirming to be creating something. That's why I think she's doing it, and that's why I think she's teaching Elizabeth, because this is a way for her to keep connecting in the way she's always done and not think about what's coming.

I was wondering about that. Given that she knows her time is limited, she's spending time and really pushing Elizabeth. That surprised me, but it's interesting to hear that that feels real to you.

Absolutely. She's like, "I want to have real conversations. I want to have some kind of finger on the pulse of life." So instead of just sitting there in a sick room, she's bringing everything that she cares about into that room and making Elizabeth be part of it. It makes total sense to me that she'd be doing this.

We also know, though, that her art kind of shakes Elizabeth. It really freaks her out. Obviously, it's always hard to read Elizabeth, but as an artist, what's your interpretation of why that would affect Elizabeth, a woman who can rise above many, many things?

I think it's not just the work; it's Erica. It's being next to someone who cares this much about something and who's so determined to do it. There's just this abundance of it everywhere.

Elizabeth recognizes a fellow true believer, somebody who's got a real commitment to something bigger than herself?

Yeah. It's not frivolous. It's not a joke. It's not a hobby. This is a dead serious woman who, even in her dying moments, is still determined to keep going. I think it's the seriousness of it, the commitment.

<https://slate.com/culture/2018/04/artist-alyssa-monks-on-creating-the-paintings-for-the-americans.html>