

Robert Fishko, *Director*

The New York Times

'The Americans' Goes Dark(er), With Help From a Painter'

By ALEXIS SOLOSKI

MARCH 23, 2018



Paintings by the Brooklyn artist Alyssa Monks are integral to the sixth (and final) season of "The Americans."
Credit: Christopher Gregory for *The New York Times*

Want to know how "The Americans" ends? Head to Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Walk toward the East River. Disarm a couple of security doors. Climb a flight of stairs. Find an open door, and enter the studio of Alyssa Monks.

Ms. Monks, 40, isn't a writer. She isn't a director. She definitely isn't an actress. "I'd be way too embarrassed to do that," she said.

She is a painter, and her canvases are integral to the sixth season of the acclaimed FX drama, about Elizabeth and Philip Jennings (Keri Russell and Matthew Rhys), married Russian agents working deep cover in a suburb of

Reagan-era Washington. The series returns March 28, and if you want Ms. Monks to spoil it for you, you'll need to use interrogation techniques more persuasive than mine. "I can't possibly" was all she would tell me.

When the showrunners [Joe Weisberg](#) and [Joel Fields](#) were plotting out the final season, they created an artist character, Erica, played by Miriam Shor ("Younger"). The wife of a nuclear arms negotiator, she is bedridden with cancer. Elizabeth, typically unrecognizable in oversize glasses and a curly wig, infiltrates her home as a health aide.



This season, Keri Russell's character, typically unrecognizable in oversize glasses and a curly wig, becomes a health aide to the artist wife of a nuclear arms negotiator (Miriam Shor). Credit: Eric Liebowitz/FX

To round out Erica's character, the show needed some paintings. "Because we just felt that if we found the right real art, the character of the artist would feel true," Mr. Weisberg said, speaking at his offices near the Gowanus soundstage where "The Americans" shoots. But not any paintings would do. Elizabeth needs to discover more than nuclear secrets in Erica's home.

As fans of "The Americans" know, Elizabeth keeps her emotions closer to her chest than any spyware. In this final season, the showrunners wanted to explore what would happen if Erica's art "breaks through Elizabeth's exterior and provokes her," Mr. Weisberg said. As Elizabeth sees art as a bourgeois frivolity, the paintings had to work on her unconsciously, like sleeper agents, suggesting the kinds of intense emotions that she will never let herself feel. They had to be realistic, but not too realistic, passionate, but not over the top. They had to look as though they could have been painted in the 1980s. And they had to be, as Mr. Fields said, "really good art."

Mr. Fields and Mr. Weisberg called their friend, the gallerist [Jim Kempner](#), with a request: Find a painter who ticks every box. Mr. Kempner returned with a shortlist. Ms. Monks's name was near the top. As soon as the showrunners saw her canvases, they wanted them.

A painting of a woman slumped on a hotel bed looked like Elizabeth after a honey trap. A screaming face seemed to embody the pain she repressed.

"Some of the work seemed like it could literally be a representation of Elizabeth's psyche," Mr. Weisberg said. So they proposed what Mr. Fields called, "this weird creative partnership where we wanted to appropriate her real, beautiful art for our fictional character." Ms. Monks agreed.



The showrunners of “The Americans” were drawn to Ms. Monks’s more dramatic works, seen here in her Williamsburg apartment and studio. Credit: Christopher Gregory for *The New York Times*

I first met Ms. Monks in the late fall, in the Williamsburg studio that is also her apartment. She was wearing her uniform: boots, jeans, dark top, so much liner it looked like her eyes had fallen down twin holes.

Born in New Jersey, she earned an M.F.A. from the New York Academy of Art. She is an admired painter who worked in a more or less realistic style until the 2012 death of her mother pushed her into a more abstract form that emphasized imperfection and chaos.

In her home, the open-plan living room had been completely given over to painting. Drawings and paintings in various stages of completion covered the walls. Tubes, palettes, charcoal sticks and flammable solvents were arranged across carts and tables.

Ms. Monks has lent her painting out before — an album cover here, a movie there — but the idea of an ongoing collaboration that would bring a character to life, “that was exciting, attractive,” she said. The compensation worked out to about what she’d make on the sale of a large painting, the kind of canvas that takes months to create.

She pointed out some of the paintings “The Americans” had requested. “They were drawn to the more dramatic pieces,” she said, “because not all my work is this intense, right?”

She led me to a small one of a smudged face, a larger one of a woman shrieking behind a shower door, an even larger portrait of her mother, painted after her death, where the face seems to recede into a dark background. (That one made an FX publicist cry.) Though the images are more or less legible, they are often distressed — with solvents, with impasto, with various techniques that worry the painting. “Anything that makes the surface complex,” Ms. Monks said.

Some collectors wouldn't part with pieces the show wanted, so she had been working 14-hour days recreating them. As she painted, she often played episodes of "The Americans." "I'm learning a little Russian," she said.

She could have tried it out an evening a few days later when she went to "The Americans" soundstage to help a team of set decorators with Erica's bedroom. The room itself unsettled her. The hospital bed reminded her of her mother's final illness. "This is very evocative," she said, "very surreal." While hammers struck a syncopated beat, she spread some drawings on the bed and arranged paintings across three of the walls. "That one on the bottom is upside-down," she said gently to a crew member.

Finally, the crew stood back to admire the work. "I think we were able to get a good range," Ms. Monks said approvingly. "They're not all screaming faces."

A few days after that, she was on the set again. The first two episodes were shooting, and Ms. Monks had been tapped to provide Erica's sketch of a sleeping Elizabeth. One producer had tried to stash her in an unused quadrant of the stage — the set of a safe house — but Ms. Monks felt lonely in there, so she arranged her materials near a bank of monitors. She was worried she wouldn't have enough time for a decent sketch. "My grad-school teachers will be so mad if she doesn't have feet!" she said.

Still, she knew she shouldn't make the drawing too perfect. She was drawing as Erica, after all. "There will have to be some jagged moments where she's seizing with pain," Ms. Monks reasoned. "I imagine the charcoal would break."

Once she'd taken a photo of a sleeping Ms. Russell, Ms. Monks went back to her table, covering the paper with charcoal, then using an eraser to pull out lines and shadows and shapes. "Bloody hell, that's fast," the director Chris Long said.

Meanwhile, Ms. Shor, dressed as the dying Erica, sat up in bed, brandishing the charcoal fiercely for the camera and trying to make use of what Ms. Monks had taught her during a recent lesson. "It changed how I look at art; it changed how I thought about myself drawing," she said. Ms. Monks is a good teacher. In the first episodes, it's Ms. Shor's hands you'll see moving over the paper, not Ms. Monks's, though both were shot.

The sketches and the paintings are the most obvious evidence of Ms. Monks's collaboration with "The Americans," but her influence is felt throughout the season. She's had an impact on the design, arguing against some bold blue-and-gold wallpaper as an overly busy background for the paintings and substituting rubber bands for store-bought clasps on Erica's drawing board. She has given notes on the scripts, too, nixing a moment when Erica's husband covers up a sleeping Elizabeth while Erica is in mid-portrait. "Alyssa said, 'He's been married to her all these years,'" Mr. Fields recalled. "'If there's one thing you know, it's don't screw with the model.'"

And while Ms. Monks hasn't altered elements like who lives, who dies or who wears which wig, she has indirectly suggested new scenes and stories. "These paintings started almost infiltrating the imaginations of the writers and also the characters, something started to grow," Mr. Weisberg said by telephone as the season finished shooting.

During a chat in January at the Forum Gallery, the Upper East Side space that represents her work, Ms. Monks said she didn't know if the show would change her life or her sales. But it has given her renewed faith in her work. Before she'd joined up with "The Americans," she'd felt afraid of the direction she was taking — "darker, more abstract, more emotionally evocative, a little riskier." Her time on the show, she said, has "given me permission to go deep into it and find that there's a lot of beauty there."

I passed this tribute on to the showrunners. "That's just the sort of backhanded compliment that we here at 'The Americans' like to get," Mr. Fields said. "Here was an artist who was wondering whether or not things were too dark. Then she spent some time with us and realized she could go darker."

A version of this article appears in print on March 25, 2018, on Page AR13 of the New York edition with the headline: The Plot Is Fake, but the Painter Is Real. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/23/arts/television/the-americans-fx-final-season.html>