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## EXHIBITION PREVIEW: I Can Not Be Me Without You - Library, Covent Garden

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By Maryam Philpott

Often the world surrounding the creation and discussion of art can feel elitist and forbidding; it's full of elaborate terms, impenetrable explanations of meaning and confusing symbols that seem to exclude the majority from understanding it. Sweep all of that aside, however, and what you're left with is the work, and whether you have art history degrees or have never set foot in a gallery in your life, if the art is good it will make you feel something.



Private members club Library in Covent Garden is hosting a small exhibition of work by Robert Morris Monroe, which admittedly its elaborate description may deter people from attending. Situated in its two-floor bar, it contains over 20 pieces produced in the last two years and, with many labelled 2016, this is as fresh as art gets. Entitled *I Can Not be Me Without You*, it explores contemporary themes of individuality in a compliant society, touching on forms of masculinity and physical expression of emotion. While the exhibition blurb may confuse you with its talk of 'opposing energetic states of being', just start with the art, because this tiny exhibition is well worth seeing.

Monroe's work is beautiful and fascinating, combining a variety of impressive oil paintings with more classical sketches that depict male figures in various states of contortion, that reflect the drawings of Michelangelo and Reubens. New artists have long drawn

inspiration from Old Masters, so Monroe's work, while his own form of expression, sits comfortably in these wider art history traditions that add a timelessness to his engagement with human form and emotional expression.

These works are primarily on the second floor and utilise differences in scale as the thrown-around male shape, all with faces obscured, is buffeted by an unseen energy or force, nicely reflecting Monroe's theme of the individual being a combination of the internal and external. Pieces include the simply-titled *Study of the Figure* (2015) or *Fragment of Self* (2015), where you're never quite sure whether the central figure is writhing in pain or thrown-back in ecstasy, adding a level of unease that separates these drawings from their classical forebears.

The obscuring of faces, either through the position of the body, or occasionally explosion of lines and scribbles, gives an everyman quality to the work that suggest everyone is affected by the pull of opposing forces, while also hinting at a separation of mind and body that strips the central figure of its individuality in the tumult it is experiencing.

Some of Monroe's most impressive work is in the oil paintings displayed on the ground floor of Library that, while as admirably skilled, create a more tangible reaction in the viewer. Here the predominant use of bluey-green has a calming or serene effect despite the almost sinister blurry black shapes. Best among them is *Direction Dimension* (2016), which shows two lines of black tree-like shapes with two receding white tram-lines drawing the eye, which could be the bank of a river with a reflection in the water. These ideas appear again and again in Monroe's oils and a sense of symmetry is formalised by these crossing lines as in *Frequency Vision* (2016) that looks like a pointed castle reflected in water, its sinister forms soothed by the shade of blue.



These two types of work also come together in the final group of paintings which insert the cradled male nude into a series of swirling clouds of colour such as *I am Energy* (2016) that have a much darker colour scheme of black and red with dabs of green, or *White Light on Black* (2016) which as the wall notes explain combines geometric shapes with a bright white beam pouring from the face that has a religious inference.

Curatorially, there are some display issues as low lighting in the bar makes it hard to see some pieces properly and visitors must lean over resident drinkers to get close. It should also be noted that access to the exhibition for non-members is by day pass only which should be requested from the website. As an exhibition, *I Can Not Be Me Without You* is an interesting and meaningful collection of very new work that, if you overlook the overly 'arty' description, is a valuable experience.

Runs Until: 18 March 2016 | Images: Courtesy of Robert Morris Monroe

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