

Art in Review



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"It Begins to Snow" is among several of Philip Monaghan's recent works inspired by a poem by Tim Dlugos, who died in 1990.

Tim Dlugos and Philip Monaghan

'At Moments Like These He
Feels Farthest Away'

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In 1983 the poet Tim Dlugos, a bright presence on the Lower East Side literary scene, was commissioned by the Grey Art Gallery at New York University to create an installation using one of his poems in the gallery's Washington Square windows. He, in turn, asked the painter Philip Monaghan, an ex-boyfriend, to handle the visual side of the project.

The poem Dlugos chose was one he'd written in the mid-1970s, "Gilligan's Island." Its main images were taken from that television show, popular when he was entering adolescence, to which he added others remembered from the same time: the John F. Kennedy assassination, Alfred Hitchcock's film "The Birds." He concluded the poem with an erotic fantasy spun around three of the show's characters, the Marilyn Monroe-esque Ginger, the eligible-bachelor type known as the Professor, and (barely) Gilligan himself.

Grey Gallery found the poem too sexually explicit for its purposes and, to Dlugos's bitter disappointment, called off the project. He died of AIDS in 1990, at 40. Four years ago Mr. Monaghan decided to complete the collaboration on his own as a tribute to his friend. The result is a narrative sequence of 54 photo-based paintings, each about the size of a vintage television screen, collectively titled "At Moments Like These He Feels Farthest Away."

The series opens with the "Gilligan's Island" logo, then, storyboard-style, follows the poem's surreal intermix of characters and plots: Ginger meets Kennedy; Gilligan and Jackie share a frame; no image is more important or dramatic than any other. An assassination, an attack by wild birds, a tropical picnic: they are part of the same cast-adrift, polymorphous-perverse American show, and Certs mints sponsors them all.

Mr. Monaghan is admirably faithful to the poem's text. His layering of painted and printed images reflects its fractured structure. His light-touch,

straight-faced brushwork is perfectly suited to its plain-style language and affectless, though dimly foreboding, tone. I don't know if the artist produced the paintings in sequence, but they get clearer and simpler as the series goes along, with increasing expanses of sea and sky. The climactic erotic fantasy is chaste, even ethereal. The final image in the poem is of snow falling over the island. Mr. Monaghan's concluding painting is of the poet's smiling face.

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