

ON THE COVER

Self-Portrait During COVID-19 by John Bonner

Portions of the following are based on an interview with the artist on May 8, 2020.

For traditionally trained clinical psychologists of a certain era, projective testing became a standard element of one's subsequent assessment armamentarium. Henry Murray's Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) was one such test. Among TAT's provocative or evocative paintings are some by well-known artists such as Burchfield and Daumier.

This month's cover art, *Self-Portrait During COVID-19* by John Bonner, can be viewed as something of a projective test itself. To some degree, its content is quite obvious and universal. At the same time, it speaks to our individual experiences and understandings of the pandemic of 2020.

The TAT instructions inquire about a story, past, present, and future. We can make some pretty good guesses about what has led to his donning a homemade mask. Future? That becomes both more individual . . . and, at many levels, unknown and unpredictable (to the extent that we tend to live with the working assumption that life has predictability).

What is this man thinking and feeling? For that, we can find out directly. Bonner, of Marblehead, Massachusetts, was painting recently while wearing one of his wife's homemade masks. He comments, "I thought, 'Oh god! This is what it's going to be.' I wanted to mark the moment."

And what was Bonner feeling? "I painted it in a fit of temper, painted it quickly out of frustration—the frustration of having to stay home and cease most social interaction."

"Seeing the painting now, I find it unsettling: an oil portrait, with all the tradition that that entails, yet where the most important part is partially hidden."

Bonner and his sister (well-known British visual/verbal/textural quilter Sara Impey) grew up on a farm in the County of Essex in England. Their father came from a farming family; after World War II, he started his own seed farm, though Bonner thinks that he should have become an engineer or even an academic. His father had a number of interests, fine arts among them. Along with painting, himself, he regularly let artists, such as sculptor Barry Flanagan, work in one of the barns on the farm for free. Bonner comments that he "grew up in an atmosphere in which art was not taken for granted nor seen as silly."

His mother's ambition was to become a farmer's wife. "She had a talent for math," Bonner notes. "She did the books on the farm and received plaudits from the bank for the accuracy of her work."

Having both a practical and an artistic side like his father, Bonner attended St. Martins School of Art in London and then came to the United States for graduate work at Syracuse University. He moved to Boston, Massachusetts, obtained a green card, and has primarily made his living as a graphic designer and illustrator ever since, in the Boston area.

Bonner's wife, Michèle Fandel Bonner, is a mixed-media and textile artist. When coronavirus hit locally, she decided to make masks, the green one in the self-portrait being one of her early ones. By the beginning of May 2020, she had made about 450 of them. A nearby town has been particularly affected and many of the masks were distributed through their public health department. The International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, and Transportation Workers sent her metal nose inserts to use in making the masks. They were highly appreciative of her (volunteer) work.

Although he has been in the United States for many years, Bonner feels that he retains some of the curiosity of the foreigner, noticing and taking an interest in subjects that others might take for granted. Among artists, he feels influenced by are those who were also illustrators like himself, such as John Singer Sargent, N. C. Wyeth, and Edward Hopper. Indeed, it was not until he contacted the artist George Nick, a venerable New England painter who was educated at Yale, that he began to take his own work seriously. "It seemed to me that George and I had similar artistic sensibilities. Bonner came to my apartment, without payment, and critiqued my work. Just the act of him visiting gave me the confidence to exhibit."

Although illustration and graphic design continue to be his "day job," Bonner now is invited to participate in exhibits throughout New England. In this time of uncertainty, perhaps his impulsive act in contacting George Nick can serve as a model for carving out aspects of our future.

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