Millie's COVID Fever Dreamscapes

Millie Kutz

Jean Kirsch

Tom Singer

Introduction

We all have had some awareness of how difficult it has been for younger school age people and their parents during COVID. But, now we are incredibly fortunate to get a look at what this stressful time has been like through the eyes of Millie Kutz, a young artist who is both visually articulate and finely tuned in her sensibilities. Like all her peers, Millie was only able to attend school virtually for most of her senior year of high school. Social contact outside the home was severely limited and interaction with peers and the world was conducted almost exclusively via the internet. In the midst of this prolonged, enforced time at home, Millie experienced a three-month creative burst from March 31 to July 9, 2021, during which time she produced an extraordinary series of over eighty vivid images that give expression to the altered inner and outer world in which she found herself during the collective COVID quarantine from school. This article features twenty of these images that Millie calls *Dreamscapes* since some of them appeared to her in dreams.

These are not just the images of a most talented young woman but an extraordinary glimpse into what many young people might have experienced during the pandemic. The combination of social isolation and increasing dependency on the internet and its burgeoning social media poses a great danger for young people who are increasingly vulnerable to the seductions of an alternate virtual reality. Millie is giving us a picture not only of her own psyche but an artistic vision of what is already present in her generation and on the horizon for the collective psyche of future generations. Millie's drawings were done in a kind of personal and collective metaphoric fever induced by

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COVID 19. Whether or not we actually had COVID, the whole world was caught in this fever.

We begin the tour of Millie's work with an overview of the context in which she found herself immersed during this creative outpouring. As with the tour of the images themselves we rely on Millie's own words to describe her process in two interviews with Jean Kirsch and Tom Singer.

Emotional Intensity:

I think looking back at it, it was quite intense. I didn't realize how emotional the drawings were until I was out of it and realized how isolated I was and how engulfed by technology I was. I have come out of that now and definitely don't feel the same anymore. I was not very hopeful about technology and our human relationship with it. Now I think I'm more hopeful.

Primary Feelings: Isolated, overwhelmed, and stuck

The main feeling was definitely isolation. Feeling overwhelmed was another really huge emotion. I also felt stuck. It's hard to put into words, exactly. But I feel like there was definitely a sense of chaos, too. Yeah. Kind of like an isolated chaos, like one that you couldn't share with other people.

Personal and/or collective experience

It almost felt like it wasn't me doing the drawings. I don't know how to explain it, but it was just like this weird sense that it wasn't actually that personal for me. It felt like I was

trying to show a feeling that we were all having. It felt like something we were all experiencing. I don't think it was a solo experience.

JK/TS: Maybe you were possessed by a kind of collective disturbance or distress. And you had to give expression to it. It was you and it was collective as well or something like that, although it probably felt intensely personal?

Meaning of the images:

I did not think about them or their meaning at the time—they just came out. You know, it's weird because while I was doing them, I actually wasn't really thinking at all. I was just kind of doing them. And it was only later that I began to think about the meaning of the different images. It was strange how I didn't really think. I was kind of just doing.

The Style and Content of the Images:

I've always done art and I've always drawn and stuff, but never in this style. I have never done drawings like this before. They took their own form and style. Now I don't do stuff like this anymore. It was like a weird blip that this one style emerged and it only lasted for a few months and then it went away again.

The Pace of Making the Drawings:

It just poured out over a three-month period. It was one of those weird periods when I was just doing it all the time. I was doing it straight, every day for three months. I don't know if it's just because I was feeling so overwhelmed and it was my only outlet for

dealing with the pandemic and being inside. Or was it the fact that I had so much free time to do this kind of stuff, just sitting in my room? It was a lot of art.

It usually took three or four hours to make a drawing. I would do it all in one go. I don't think I ever stopped in the middle of making a drawing and then came back to do more on it. I would start a drawing and then I would have to finish it in that time period. I would just go straight for four hours and do the whole thing in one sitting. That's usually how I do art. I feel like once I get into the flow of it, I don't really want to stop. I have trouble stopping and coming back and getting into that same groove again. So for a while, every day I would spend three or four hours making and finishing a drawing.

Where did Millie do the drawings?

There were seven people living in our house, all at home most of the time during COVID. I usually did the drawings in my room. I always have to listen to music when I make art. I think a couple of times I would go down to the kitchen and sit there and blast music when there were other people sitting around. There's something about the chaos of my house and having all those little kids around that was almost like feeding my drawing in a weird way. I like having that energy around. It was so chaotic. But if I was doing them in my room, I would close the door so people wouldn't bug me. But I always did them inside the house. I never did them outside even if I was sitting in the backyard. For some reason I didn't do them out there. It was only indoors.

Medium

I start off with a pencil sketch and then I go in with pen and outline everything. For some, I did them with watercolor like pencils. Usually, you add water to them and they

spread out. But instead of adding water, I would use a kind of blending marker that's clear and you can blend things with it. So I would use color pencil, then use this blending marker to blend it all out. But for most of the other ones, I would just use a marker. So I would do a black and white pen drawing. And then I would go in with marker and color it all in almost like a coloring book.

The paper I used is a mixed media paper. It's a little thicker than normal paper, so it can handle watercolor and layering because it's thicker. I did them all in the same sketchbook of mixed media paper. After I finished a drawing, I'd just rip it out and put it in a portfolio.

Individual Drawings

Figure 1

JK/TS: You placed this as the first one in the series. It's the only black and white drawing. It looks like a contemporary, feminine Art Crumb. And, since all the following drawings are in color, it brings to mind Dorothy at the beginning of the Wizard of Oz when she is in Kansas and the film opens in black and white.

Millie: I think this was supposed to be like my reality-- my mind-- during those months of COVID isolation. It's sad now that I think about it. My reality was a lot more bleak than the imaginative worlds I was creating or dreaming about. That's why when I put all the drawings in a book I chose this as the first page. This is what reality was like. It was really bleak. A lot of people my age are getting addicted to this online world just because reality can be so bleak sometimes. When you have access to this very colorful, bright world that's at your fingertips, why would you choose to stay in bleak reality when you can do all this instead?

I started these drawings during the pandemic. At the very beginning of the school year, I wasn't really doing much. I was just going to classes online and sitting in my room. I had a lot of time to dive deeper into my dreamscapes and visions that I think about a lot. A lot of these drawings are about technology with the warped, messed up computer screen thing. I was trying to expand on the whole idea of an alternate reality being all online.

Figure 2

This was the first one I did in this color series. So I think I kind of went crazy with what's happening in it. I started with my warped version of myself. And then I just started adding whatever came into my head and dreams. The smiley face computer screen figure looms over everything. That's also when the hat first appeared. I had this whole hat theme going with my main character in the paintings who was kind of my alter ego self. It's the inner me who often showed up in dreams wearing this hat.

I think most of these drawings are about technology and how it towers over us. I think COVID has definitely had an impact but I think the bigger part of it is about how now so much of our life is online. COVID really pushed technology forward because for a whole year, school was online. Our entire life was virtual. And I feel like it's going to be hard for us to step out of that again. I fear that we're moving in the direction where we no longer want to participate in reality. We'd rather just be online.

Figure 3

This was during all the political unrest in the country and that is why the "Vote" sign hangs off a figure that I based on Donald Trump. Politics and COVID and the vaccine were all mixed up in the news. That's why my alter ego is holding a face mask and a needle.

This was my way of interpreting all the unrest that was going on at the time. It was very disturbing, especially seeing it all online. I would go to my phone in the morning and see everything that was going on outside my room in the real world. That's why I started doing these drawings as a way to cope. It was my way of documenting everything as I experienced it. I was trying to make something of it rather than just letting it engulf me. I could take control of the narrative a little more than just letting it fall over me.
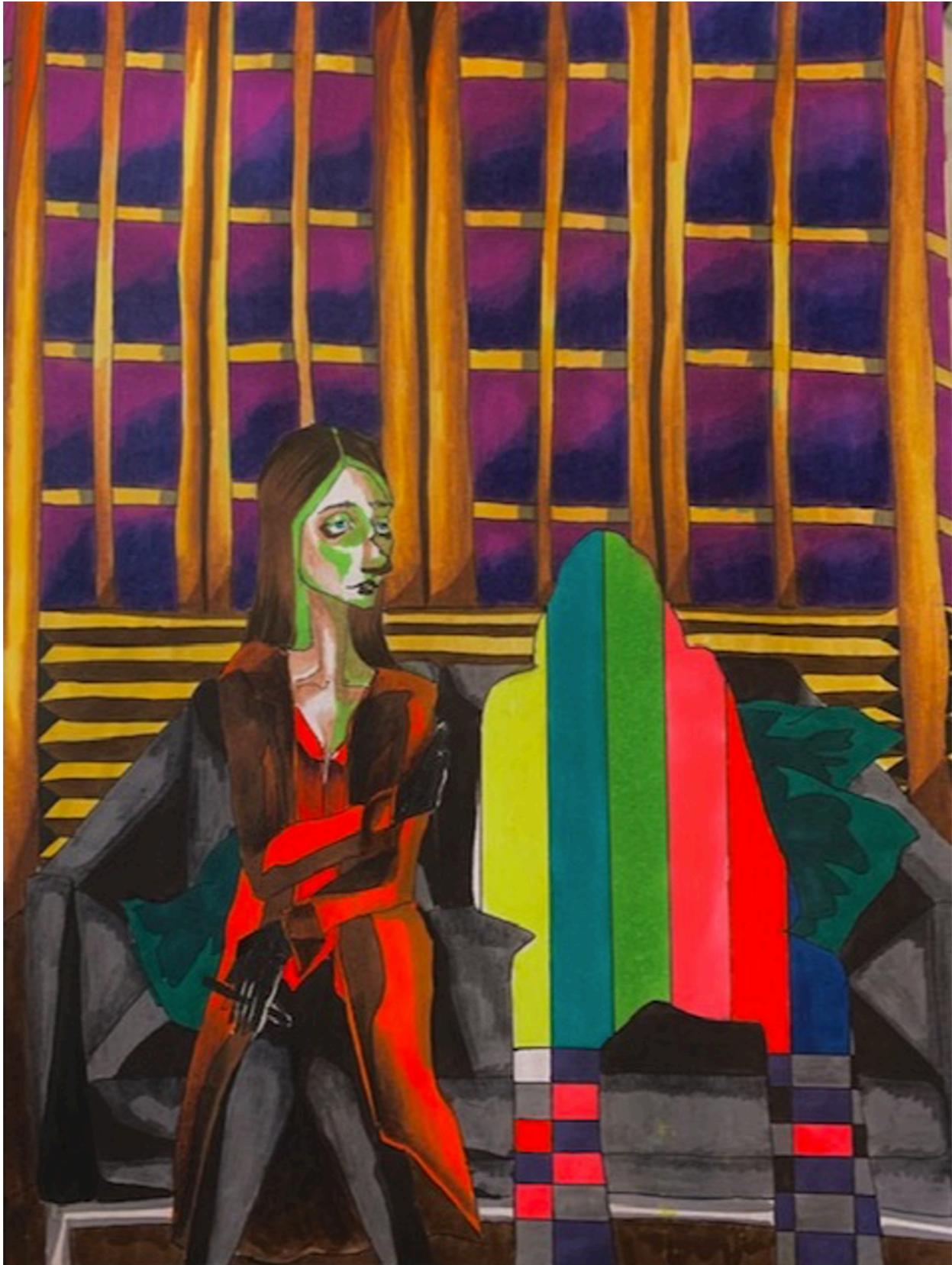
Figure 4

This drawing is about how the real self and the online self are always sitting next to each other. I think especially with people my age, I feel like we have these two versions of ourselves. There's the one that's real and the one that's online. And during the pandemic the online self became more prevalent and bigger than the real self. The bar code figure represents the online me. It's like another version of me, a technology version of me.

At the time of this drawing, I was realizing that I needed technology in order to exist in society. It felt like a very equal relationship. We needed each other, almost like a co-dependency. I could say to myself that I need the computer to do work and to go to school and to see my friends. The computer world wasn't overwhelming to me yet because I felt like we are in this together. I need technology in order to continue living.

My alter ego character is always wearing either red or orange. I don't know if that's just because I wanted to create consistency with a character so she would stand out and be recognizable. In most of the drawings, she's wearing either a red coat or red pants. Maybe the warm tones are a little closer to reality as opposed to when I'm wearing the fluffy hat. When I am wearing the hat, my character is very far removed from my actual present reality. Maybe I'm a little less my alter ego and more of my actual self when I'm not wearing the hat. The bar code represents the whole world of technology, including me in it.

JK/TS: It looks like the real flesh version of yourself is looking towards the technological version of yourself as if you are deferring to the virtual self. You look sad and drained of energy. You literally look like you "are beside yourself", as if you have been overtaken by a powerful emotion or alternative reality

Millie: I think of the bar code version that I use to represent myself and the world of technology as being retro. Maybe it's just because I like to escape into other time periods rather than looking to the future. The color bar code goes back to the origins of color tv and was a way of calibrating the color on the tv.
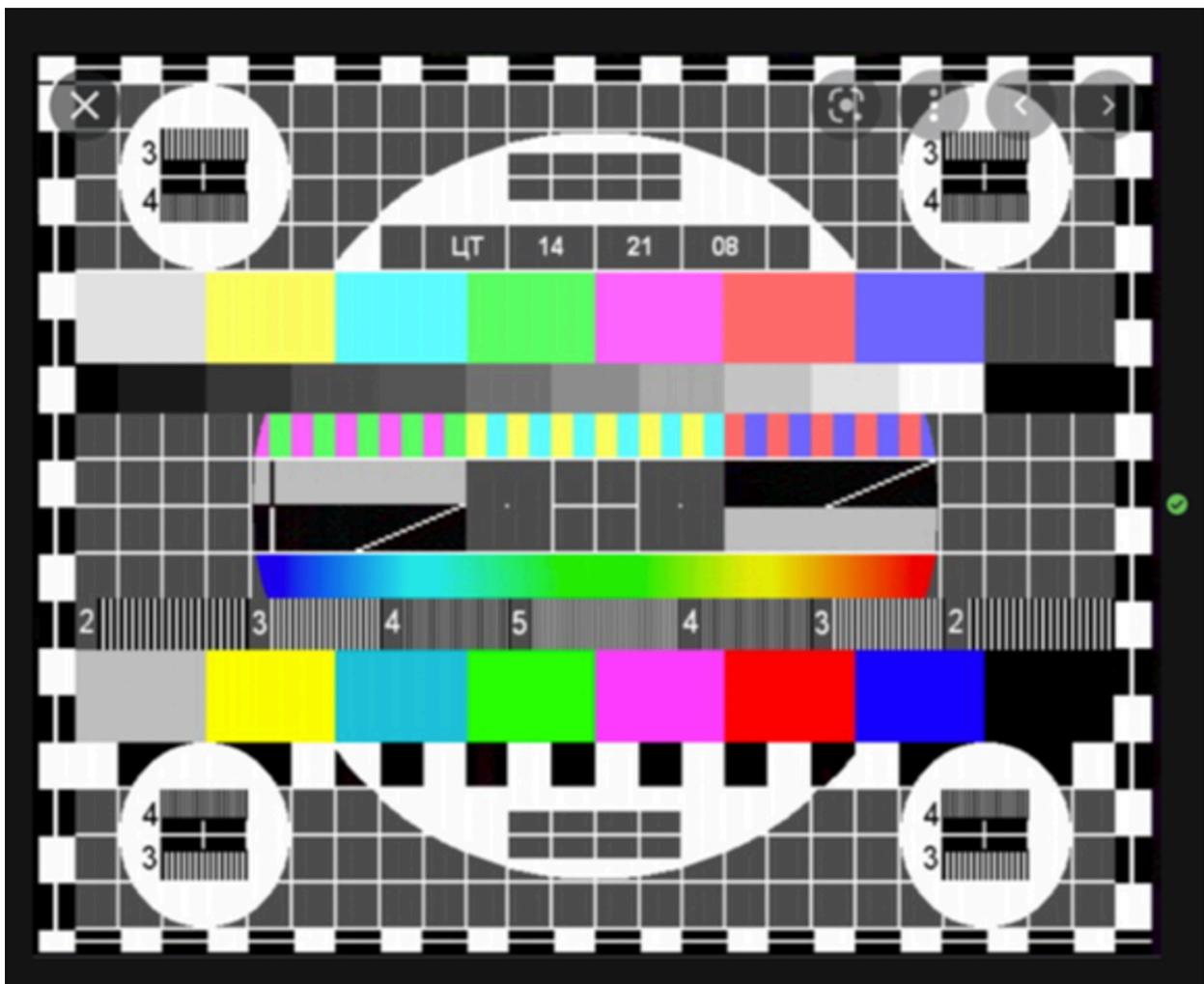

Figure 5 *TV Color Test Pattern Screens,* *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ayf1sYiNLhQ*

Figure 6

In this one, the eye of technology is beginning to reach out with an octopus like tentacle that is beginning to entangle me. It's starting to infiltrate the real world, but it's still behind bars. But my dress seems to be digitized—so maybe it's more in or on me than I think.

Figure 7

This one shows technology infiltrating and taking over the world. Technology is blocking the path forward. We're stuck in this in-between space where the arms of technology are blocking the road. The sky seems more real and organic than technology. It's a really dark sky but it is almost reassuring in relation to the more structured screen pattern.

JK/TS: It reminds me of those advertisements for Toyota and other cars where they take you out into nature and you get to the edge of a cliff as if technology can deliver you to the wildest places.

Figure 8

This is when I started to realize that maybe all this technology and virtual worlds wasn't as good or easy as I thought it was going to be. This was the first time I was feeling very overwhelmed by technology.

JK/TS: Technology in the form of the color bars is fragmented and spread all over the place. Wires and knots are falling out of places and are everywhere. It's a lot more chaotic. This drawing introduces the feeling of being broken. The alter-ego you is huddled down in the corner.

There are multiple eyes in this one rather than the one eye in image 6. This represents the whole idea of being perceived through technology, which is very different than seeing and being seen in real life. You feel like you're being watched by millions of other people because technology is so vast and there are so many people connected to the internet. They can all watch you. It's a scary feeling.

Figure 9

This drawing represents my fellow classmates and everyone I know who was engulfed by technology. There are so many people and they go off into the distance but you can still feel their presence in a sort of infinite regression. They are not all the same person but many different people. We are all wearing the same colors as a way of saying that we are all in the same situation. But they are not all me. For instance, there are different kind of hairstyles and they are not all wearing the hat. This time it is a single eye rather than many eyes and I think the single eye in this drawing is about technology as a whole.

I think this drawing is about how overwhelming technology can be, about how tiny and insignificant you can feel when confronted with this entire online world. With social media, there is a sense that you're constantly being perceived online by thousands of people. It is crazy to think that so many people can look at something at the same time. it's just so huge.

I have Instagram and recently I got Tik Tok where I've been posting my art. It's weird to think that so many people can look at one thing, that you can be seen by so many people. I posted one video that got a hundred thousand views. It's weird to think that so many people can know you exist and perceive you in a certain way.

Figure 10

I think this green eye blob is about all the people online who are watching you, who can

see what you are doing.

Figure 11

This image and number 4 mirror each other--but in very different ways. In the window image (number 4), there is an equal relationship between the real me and the cyberspace me. We are clearly separate beings. This one feels a lot more chaotic and reflects the feeling of losing myself and not knowing.

The purple color, which I think of as the technology world, has now totally infiltrated the room. It's no longer just outside the room as it is in the window image (image 4). where it remains separate from the interior of the room.

I also think of the purple as representing the unknown. It is not necessarily bad, but is also not good. I feel like it's a neutral unknown about what's going on outside of my home. During the pandemic, there was this sense that you could look outside and you didn't really know what was going on. In this image, though, the purple has finally come into my own house, and now I feel an unknown presence everywhere.

Figure 12

I have trouble explaining this one. It seems more like a dream situation to me. It still features the eye and refers to the whole question of perception. But the eye is no longer in the blog form. It's become some kind of vessel that is going to take me somewhere. This is especially true because in the next image, I am on some sort of vehicle and it almost feels to me like it is a view from inside the spaceship. It is now as if I am on a journey.

JK/TS: It reminds me of a landscape that might have appeared in the very popular Carlos Castenada's shamanistic writings about Don Juan from the late 1960's to the mid 1980's

Figure 13

My alter ego and my technological self are once again sitting side by side (like image 4)
They are equal again and they are both looking at an unknown landscape that is
signified by the purple color. It's like the online self is leading me to the online world.
It's a very strange landscape they're looking at and this time, they are traveling on a
journey.

When I look at this image again, I am reminded that I started watching a lot of Star
Wars and Marvel movies during the time of COVID. It looks like a scene from Star Wars.
It's almost like other forms of media such as film is circling its way into the art. I do
think that art is influenced by TV and movies. It's all influenced by each other. You can
feel like you are in control, but in reality you are not at all in control. I think that is how
we all feel about technology and especially social media. You tell yourself you are only
going to spend so much time online and that you are in control. But, you are usually not
in control. COVID has definitely had an impact. So much of our life is online now. I feel
like it's going to be hard for people to step out of that again. Like my alter ego in this
image, we are being taken for a ride by technology. (Tom's sentence)

Figure 14

I think the red tree trunk like structure was supposed to represent technology cords. All plugged in like the Matrix. When I was doing this one, I was thinking more about the positive sides of technology. It can be awful, but at the same time, you can escape from everything into this whole other endless world. I get to go somewhere without really having to move at all. You can witness all these different worlds just by staying in one place.
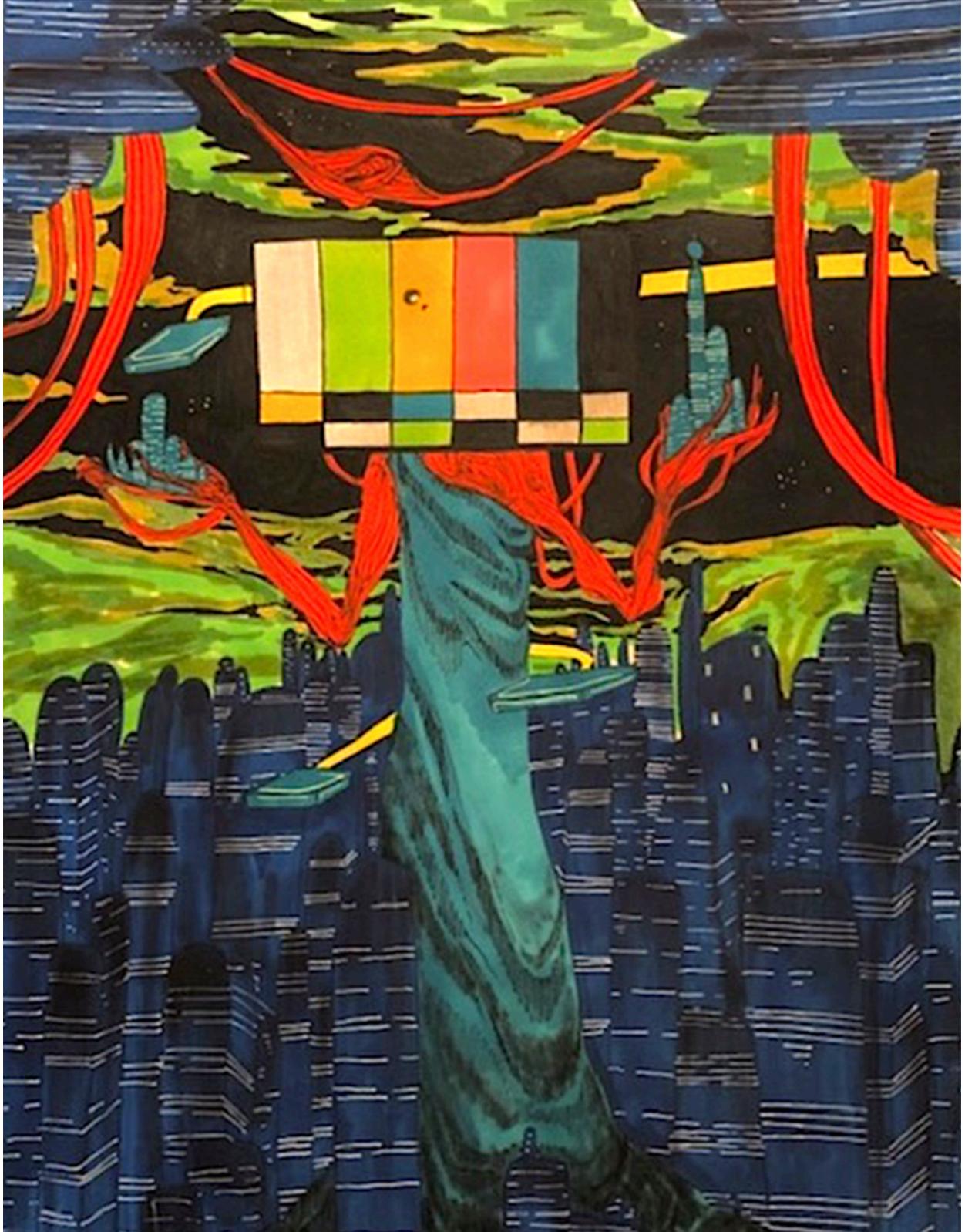
Figure 15

I relate this drawing back to image 7 with the notion that technology is taking over the outside world. It's a large city like New York and technology has taken over the face of the city and has replaced the face of the Statue of Liberty with its own face. It's a huge screen with wires coming out of it and it's actually picking up buildings. Technology is overtaking everything.

There are yellow horizontal lines connecting computers or phones. This follows the idea that tech is a vessel that goes all over the place, even up in the sky with red cords connecting everything.

Figure 16

This one feels otherworldly. I don't think it's meant to be on Earth. It's quite isolating and it definitely feels cold. I was exploring the idea of what it feels like to be separate from technology. There is a fear of being isolated from technology, just as there is a fear of being overwhelmed by it. It's like you're looking at it, but you're not a part of it. When you are not a part of technology then you are not a part of this huge world. You are just isolated in this unknown landscape. The vast sky suggests outer, outer space.

Figure 17

In this one, my alter ego is confronting the eyes rather than hiding from them. She is at a panel, exercising control. In taking control, she is able to hypnotize or mesmerize the eyes and turn them into spirals.

I don't know if I can actually control my relation to technology. I try. There have been times when I tried to go days without my phone and I deleted social media. But I always go back to it for some reason. I don't know if that's because so much of the world now is online that to keep in touch with news and friends you have to be on the internet whether you like it or not. I don't know if I'd say I have control of my being online. But in my mind, I like to play with that possibility that maybe I can gain control.

There is such a tension between the orderliness of the technological world and the less orderliness of the human world. The orderliness of the technological world is seductive.

Figure 18

In this self-portrait, I am finally being fully engulfed by technology. It's sad. It's like giving up and falling to its power. The technology has overtaken me. You can see it in the eyes. My pupils now have that broken technology screen in them. I'm no longer separate from it all. This drawing was almost like the acceptance of letting it overtake me and just becoming this technology persona.

Strangely enough, there was a very powerful feeling associated with this drawing. I don't know if it was a positive thing to think that I was no longer a real person and had become just a technological creation. This was in the middle of the quarantined school year and I wasn't seeing any of my friends. Everything was online. So it was almost like acceptance of the fact that I just need to be online. I need to surrender to this technology self because it's the only way I'm going to be able to connect with everyone. It was weirdly empowering, knowing that I had that option.

Figure 19

This one was based on a dream I had. I feel like it's a little more removed from the other ones I've done because all the other ones have been pretty conscious decisions and this one was definitely more subconscious.

Figure 20

JK/TS: This almost has a priestly Zen temple quality to it. It's different from the others.

Millie: Yeah. So this one was supposed to represent technology as a religion. Technology comes in and takes over, replacing human connection. Rather than relying on other humans for entertainment or comfort or anything, we're relying on technology.

JK/TS: It has a wonderfully centered feeling to it. There's an altar and it's almost like a mandala and it's very centered. And then there's that seated figure who has a spiritual feeling. But I guess the feeling of it is not wonderful. But, it has the quality of a spiritual practice in it, of making a connection with something that's transcendent. In a way, you're implying that technology in and of itself is transcendent.

Millie: Yeah, because I feel technology is almost like religion in a weird way. It's this very unknown world that's greater than ourselves.

JK/TS: You weren't thinking of a transcendent spiritual centeredness when you were drawing this? You were thinking more in terms of technology taking over.

Millie: Yeah, like technology replacing religion,

JK/TS: Well, if it's about technology taking over religion, it looks religious. So technology can wear the guise of religion, but one needs to be careful about it then.

Millie: Yeah, especially because there's a crowd at the bottom.

JK/TS: So you're really consciously playing with a spiritual image in a way that says technology can replace religion and worship. People can worship technology. So the drawing is sardonic?

Millie: Yeah. Because I think there is something seductive about technology. The online world is very structured and grid like as symbolized by the retro color bars. There is a tension between the orderliness of the technological world and the less orderliness of the human world. You can see how patterned and ordered the technological world is in this drawing.

Image 21

I did this one in the car while driving to Oregon with my family after school was over. I was surrounded by people and starting to feel more hopeful because it was early summer. I knew I was going to be back in person at school next year. I was around other people including my family and other people I hadn't seen in a while. I wanted to show the death of my dependence on technology by showing it lying on the ground.

The gas mask figure is another Trump like or government figure and represents the dystopian feel of the pandemic. In addition to the government figure, you have me and my technology self as a bar code. It's a closing out drawing of the series because all the previous characters are there, staring down at the ground at the dead technology screen. I was trying to suggest that technology had runs its course and been defeated with the arrival of new hope of human connection, even though it's quite cold outside.

It's like the end of a fever or the fever breaking.

Commentary by Jean Kirsch and Tom Singer

We have taken a journey into the interior of a young artist suffering the consequences of a raging pandemic which had ruthlessly severed her from the path of social and intellectual development that had been promised her, as it had been promised to those of her generation who grow up with the natural expectation of a college education, which in turn would have launched her into an unknown, but productive and probably comfortable future. The path of her life as she had known it was quietly, yet violently, disrupted. She was pitched into her interior space and, as she tells us, she was

compelled to document her inner world. The underworld, which had snatched Persephone from below, arose to meet Millie, perhaps even before the rest of us were aware of something threatening on the horizon.

Relentlessly, it occupied her city and ultimately her personal space, even as she was surrounded by "little kids" and the routines of a chaotic household. Not until there was a brief respite in the springtime, with the arrival of vaccines against the Coronavirus that allowed a cautious global opening to a more ordinary outer life, could Millie's family venture a visit to relatives in another state. This simple action, a continuation of life as she had known it, seems to have released her from the grip of the Daimon that had seized her.

We dare call it Daimon, and with that word a new perspective opens, shedding another light on the tour we have made of Millie's paintings from her COVID fever dreams.

Perhaps it is the presence of the Daimon in her work that so draws us to it with an uncanny sense of awe and inspiration.

Dare we go further and speculate that the fever dream was the *coniunctio*, a union of spirit and matter? The carelessness with which Millie tells us she "ripped" the page on which she'd painted one of her images then went on to generate the next one illustrates her urgency to render a manifestation of what she knew not, of what we now might speculate was Spirit seeking union in Matter.

No matter what we name it, she has transported us through the medium of her intellect and her sizeable talent to a place of greater appreciation of what the British essayist

Erich Heller calls "the pure inwardness of human subjectivity." We mortals with lesser talent suffer inchoately that which the artist can render into images with transcendent power. We gaze with amazement at Millie's work and are pitched into our own subjectivity, receiving the paintings each of us separately, finding individual meanings, yet we are united in awe. Perhaps even Millie, looking back at what she made in a fever of inspiration, stands mute and amazed, one of the darkened foreground audience of Figure 20.

With the global pandemic brought about by the Coronavirus and its numerous mutations, the now rampant wildfires of California, and almost daily news of calamity abroad, we have left all traces of Classicism and Romanticism in the arts behind us, we are no longer idealists of any political or economic ilk, and we feel with Yeats that, indeed, "the centre cannot hold." (Yeats, 1919) Yet, we draw back from the nihilism which seems to beckon and we seek meaning as our guide and protector. We count upon a certain resilience of being. We are struck by some manifestation of matter inspired by spirit – a sunrise or a symphony, a painting or the way a drop of water hangs at the tip of a blade of grass – and we are held in awe. Such is our experience of the rare burst of creative genius that Millie so casually handed to us with her fever dream paintings. A once in a lifetime event, a way of painting she tells us is unlike her other work.

Perhaps Millie's struggle to put technology into its proper place as a tool, rather than succumb to its colorful allure, was lifted by wings of hope, that quintessential factor in our primal nature, and though we stand in the cold alongside her, we find ourselves in a new situation through her art and with her can struggle on, as the pandemic gives way to

an endemic. Maybe we are released from the most dire prospects for tomorrow, but surely nothing more. Still, we give thanks.

Millie Kutz is a young artist from San Francisco, California. She grew up drawing as a way to express both the interior and the exterior world. She is currently a freshman at the Rhode Island School of Design majoring in illustration. When not in school Millie enjoys watching movies, going on long walks, and spending time painting on the beach.

Jean Kirsch is a Jungian analyst practicing in Palo Alto California. She is a member of the C. G. Jung Institute of San Francisco, where she consults and teaches analytical psychology. Jean has a keen appreciation of the creative arts.

Thomas Singer is a psychiatrist and Jungian analyst who is intensely interested in the relationship between the individual and collective psyche. This interest has led to many studies of peoples from different cultures. In his spare time, he likes nothing better than witnessing the creativity of young people.

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