

261-265B Essential Hospital Workers

I began this small series of hospital workers in March of 2020, when quarantines were new and scientific knowledge limited. As the COVID-19 virus spread globally, and Delta and Omicron raged, every new wave stretched our medical system and its workers to the breaking point. Now the series is simply emblematic of the uncertainty and fatigue we all face—healthcare professionals or not.

Several of these figures wear or carry likenesses of plague masks, worn by healers in the Middle Ages. These masks, with long beaks stuffed with spices and herbs, were thought to purify poisonous air and kill the stench of death, thus warding off the plague.

In the early days of the COVID pandemic, little was known about this modern plague. We now have a better handle on personal protective equipment, vaccines, and treatment protocols. However, at times it feels as if we are still in the Middle Ages, with our overcrowded hospitals, insufficient mask mandates, and anti-science vaccine refusals and disinformation.

One of these figures is blindfolded, perhaps unable or unwilling to see the tragedy that is unfolding daily; another sprouts impotently small angel wings. Nurses are NOT angels; they are well-trained, under-resourced, exhausted professionals. Other figures represent ancillary hospital staff, rarely acknowledged employees who risk their lives to feed and care for patients and keep facilities clean and functional.

The last figure in this series was born from accidental violence. She slipped off the work table and smashed on the floor. I call her Jo “Done.” I could never have designed a better representational form to express the futility of treating people who refuse basic preventive steps to protect themselves and their communities.