

ALYSSA MONKS

HIRAETH



“The flesh is at the heart of the world”

*-Maurice Merleau-Ponty*

**A**lyssa Monks began painting in oil at age eight. She grew up in a nice upper middle class neighborhood in Northern New Jersey. She was the only daughter in a family with seven brothers. Each sibling had their own unique thing, it was clear from the start that her gift was art. Her mother supported her artistic endeavors, and from an early age Alyssa was regularly taken to art classes in New York City (sometimes her mother even joined her in these classes). By age fourteen Alyssa was making solid plans for how she could sustain herself in a life of the arts. But when it came time to go to college both parents put their foot down and insisted on a liberal arts degree. Monks is now glad that they forced this route. It broadened her horizons and gave her a more grounded education.

By the time she got to The New York Academy of Art (where she graduated with an MFA in 2001) she was ready to absorb all it had to offer. She studied with Vincent Desiderio while at The Academy. She has written about this tutelage, "Vincent had a huge influence on me while I was there. He showed me techniques and colors and even just a kind of "touch" of the brush that changed everything for me...slowed me down and made me more sensitive to the paint and surface... that was a game changer... he also gave me much to think about in terms of not being too traditional or old master focused... he suggested lots of books about abstraction that changed how I thought as well.

Vincent also helped me understand narrative painting - not necessarily illustrating an idea - more about a narrative of the paint process and application itself... that stays with me and I've developed that a lot... the paint itself, in its stroke - thickness or sensitivity, delicateness or strength - creates the same effects the way a chord or notes are played on an instrument - the way something is painted is more impactful than what it is that is painted."

American painter Eric Fischl was also a mentor to Monks. He provided insight and encouragement which helped build her confidence and gave her new ways to see and use paint.



From her first efforts at The New York Academy Alyssa Monks painted flesh, often using herself, her nude body, to draw attention to her own sense of vulnerability in the world. There has been no doubt from the start of Alyssa's prodigious talents. Her ability to articulate her subjects in full chromatic color with a paint surface that has veracity, an innate integrity, that is luscious, not fastidious or rendered, is unmatched in contemporary realism. The contemporary art world into which she was hatched sang the praises of the painterly realism of Eric Fischl and Lucien Freud and others, along with the emergence of major female painters using their own bodies as primary subject matter, such as Lisa Yuskavage and Jenny Saville. Alyssa's work too garnered a loyal following as evidenced by any number of imitators and widely influenced students employing hyper-realism in art schools around the country.

There are three distinct periods of Alyssa's work. The first period being the work she did during and upon graduating from NYAA, single female figures in bathrooms, on hard surfaces, or soaking in tubs of water. In subject matter one may be reminded of Bonnard and Degas, but there is nothing decorative, oriental or romantic about these pieces, which portray a heightened psychology seen through a modern eye. There is a sterile analytical mood to the cold hard surfaces that is at odds with the suppleness of the flesh. This discord engages the viewer and enlists our empathies. These paintings, meticulously rendered, almost photographic, are crying out for us to help.

By 2007, the figures in her works are fully submerged or struggling at the surface of water or obfuscated behind the shield of a shower curtain or glass stall. This marks the second period in her development. There is a barrier in many of these works, protecting the naked body from the direct gaze of the viewer. Monks is explicitly aware of the body politic. She plays with the concept of objectification, with the concept of the observer and the observed, her peep-show is an earnest attempt at revelation. She demands that we see beyond the surface beauty of her paintings, water droplets, steam on glass, oily water films, all create an urge in us, a desire to see and know more, our dopamine is teased and we succumb. These

paintings are unsettling in their psychologically disturbing scenarios. Monks has moved from crying out for help to being on the verge of drowning. Each figure represented struggling to survive.

The latest, third phase in her work has been a complete transformation. She is no longer attempting the almost photographic realism that marked her earlier career, she is instead now engaging on a more emotional level in the work, a visible process of transformation in communion with the paint itself. The first tenet of Buddhism's Four Noble Truths states that "there is suffering". No one can escape it. When Alyssa's mother passed away after a year-long struggle with cancer, Alyssa's work underwent a marked transition. Initially, she began to completely abstract her surfaces, throwing, scrapping and slapping paint in an emotional release, but eventually forms began to emerge. It was as if the artist was looking to make sense out of the chaos of death. In her latest series of paintings, the fear, aquaphobia and claustrophobia have given way to open spaces, which provide a way out for the viewer. It is as if the artist has pushed through her own devastating loss and seen a larger reality. She presents this to us in airy tableaux combining portraiture and figures and landscapes where we can breathe without fear of drowning, where the air is fresh from foliage of trees and the light comes from within the picture itself, from the beyond as if from the edge of some metaphysical forest. The existential dramas that filled Alyssa's earlier work with angst have given way to a more unified vision, filled with complexity, but where form breaks down and the particles of this earthly body meld with the light of the great mystery. There are few precedents for work like this. One may be reminded tangentially of Jules Bastien LePlage's "Joan of Arc" in the Metropolitan Museum, the future saint almost melding with the tree branches and the armored figure floating other-worldly, defying gravity. But, Monks' new paintings go beyond any kind of Symbolist or Surrealistic works, they have a personal inner logic, which nudges us toward the place where phenomenological meaning is found. The courage of these new works is in their absolute originality. Monks willingly sacrifices her facility for a greater dexterity, letting go of the fascination with the physical body and releasing into the larger connective tissue and web of the ever-expanding world. Monks has said, "I love starting a new idea and being full of curiosity and wonder as to where it's going

to take me. That's the great feeling... I feel like "home" is a place of true belonging, without needing to impress or prove or try... perhaps it is a kind of hiraeth for me... I think of my family, and growing up with them, and the relationships we have now... I think home is belonging to other people... painting was my way to connect as a teenager and young adult when I didn't feel that sense of belonging anywhere... things are much different now... painting is a language I speak, that I feel is understood by many who want to listen... which makes me feel belonging - or home... what I love about art is that it levels us and connects us... your favorite song feels like it is yours alone and written just for you... and so many can connect that way... art sees us, understands us, feels us... it makes us less alone... it gives us strength through understanding... it wakes our senses and stirs our curiosity... it opens us... it lifts us out of ego... and it creates possibility."

As Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes, "Humanity is not an aggregate of individuals, a community of thinkers, each of whom is guaranteed from the outset to be able to reach agreement with the others because all participate in the same thinking essence. Nor, of course, is it a single Being in which the multiplicity of individuals are dissolved and into which these individuals are destined to be reabsorbed. As a matter of principle, humanity is precarious: each person can only believe what he recognizes to be true internally and, at the same time, nobody thinks or makes up his mind without already being caught up in certain relationships with others, which leads him to opt for a particular set of opinions. Everyone is alone and yet nobody can do without other people, not just because they are useful (which is not in dispute here) but also when it comes to happiness.... We must therefore rediscover, after the natural world, the social world, not as an object or sum of objects, but as a permanent field or dimension of existence." In her new work Alyssa Monks does just this, through flesh and light and paint she eludes to the oneness of all. She reminds us that we are all connected, not just physically, in the flesh, but beyond this realm as well, in the invisible spaces of the unutterable heart of the world.

Bo Bartlett

Columbus Georgia

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*Absorb*, 2015  
oil on linen  
56 x 56 inches





*Cipher*, 2010  
oil on linen  
60 x 90 inches





*Return, 2017*  
oil on linen  
32 x 32 inches





*Warrior*, 2019  
oil on linen  
62 x 90 inches





*The Race*, 2007  
oil on linen  
72 x 96 inches



*Nexus*, 2019  
oil on linen  
68 x 47 inches





*Deference*, 2015  
oil on linen  
66 x 56 inches





*Kiss*, 2011  
oil on linen  
72 x 48 inches





*Angst*, 2017  
oil on linen  
34 x 34 inches





*Soft*, 2010  
oil on linen  
48 x 72 inches







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