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Uncanny Reality



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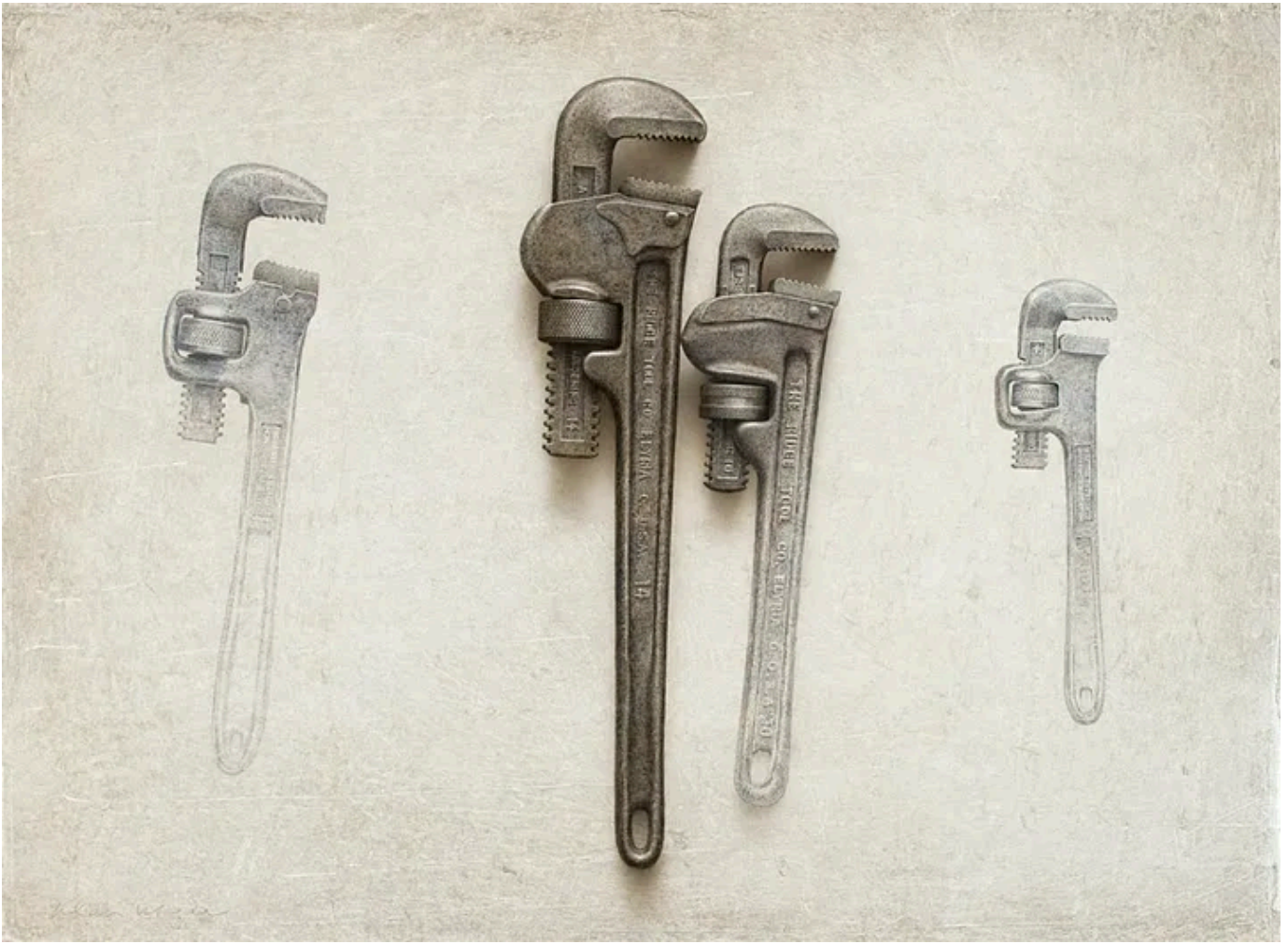
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a review of “Natural History” at Forum Gallery by by Kim Power



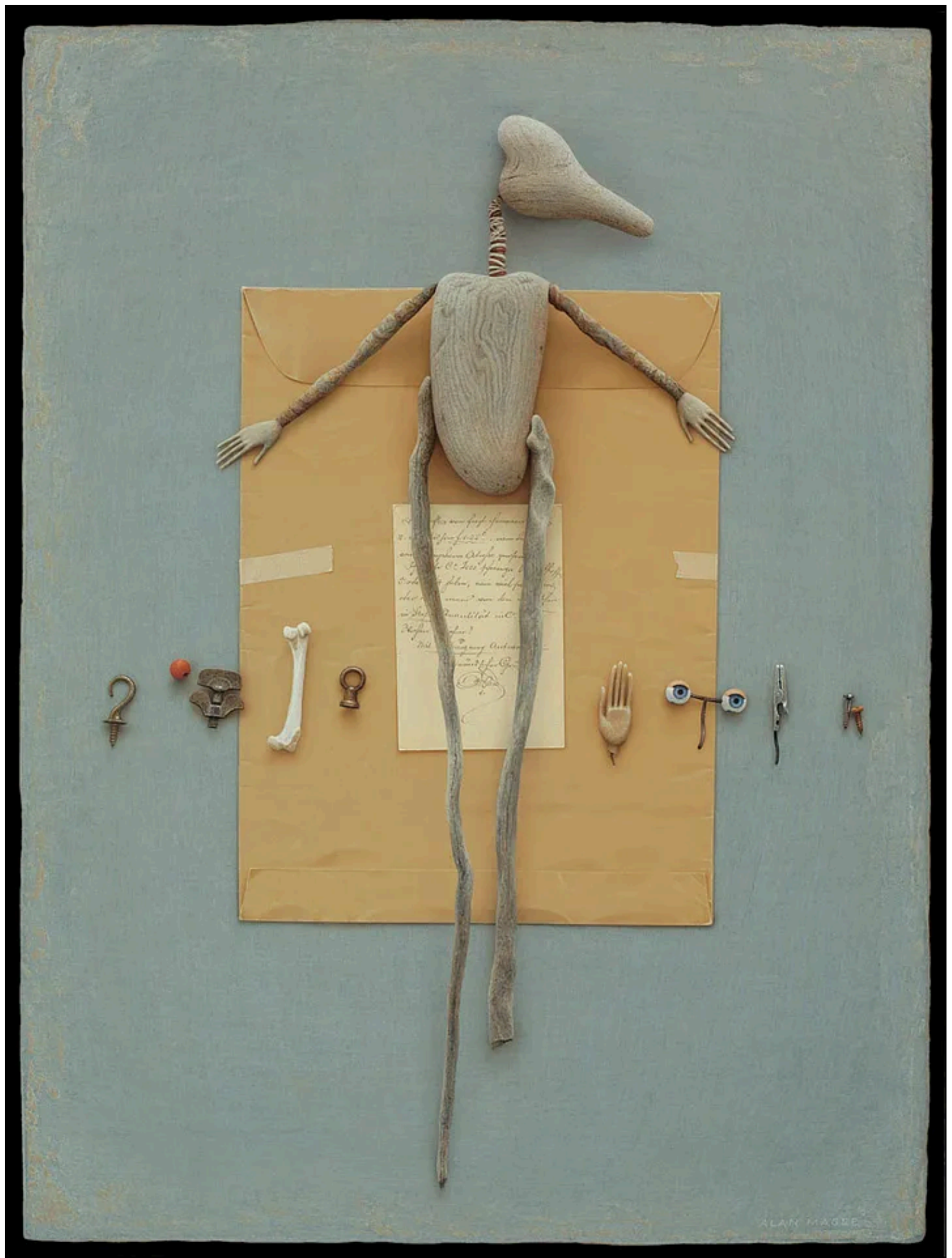
“Natural History” by Alan Magee, acrylic and oil on panel, 16×22”

“It is essential for genetic material to be able to make exact copies of itself; otherwise growth would produce disorder, life could not originate, and favourable forms would not be perpetuated by natural selection”. (Nobel Lecture (11 Dec 1962). In Nobel Lectures, Physiology or Medicine, 1942–1962)

Natural History or natural selection? Forum Gallery has chosen a select few of the artists from its impressive roster of talent for their current exhibition. Robert Bauer, Linden Frederick, Alan Magee, Alyssa Monks, Guillermo Muñoz Vera, Brian Rutenberg

and Stephanie Wilde, have adapted well to their environment, the fecund and fickle art market, by producing impressive and sophisticated paintings that are linked through their common characteristics of skill and steadfast ambition.

Three of the seven in particular stand out to me as having a strong affinity for the use of nature in expressing the presence of larger forces at work, both elemental and transcendental. They are: Alan Magee, Alyssa Monks and Brian Rutenberg. Ranging from a primal abstraction to pure representation, their works both inspire contemplation and excite the visual cortex.



"Treasury" by Alan Magee, acrylic and oil on panel, 23×17"

The title of the show itself comes from Magee's painting of the same name, *Natural History* (1997) that displays an arrangement of plumber's wrenches of varying sizes and opacity. While this painting itself does little to relate to the subject of nature; it is nonetheless a key to understanding Magee's choices when representing the object as an iconic talisman of ephemeral beauty. As the wrenches disappear into the ether, in varying degrees of solidity, the lines of reality become blurred and prepare us for the subtle relationship to the uncanny further represented in Magee's gravity-defying river stone paintings, *The Hurlers* (2015) and *Chord* (2015). In these two acrylic paintings, he again relates proportional sizes in a seemingly random arrangement. The paintings themselves are easily interchangeable but as objects of meditation that detail is not necessarily an obstacle. The stones are represented as solid forms, yet they seem to be filled with light and weightlessness, an effect that is achieved through the contrast of their pale, neutral tones of grey, rose and orange set against the darker grey and brown surfaces upon which they rest and the muted contrast of the shadows beneath them. Their meticulously painted and flawless surfaces belie any relationship to crude materiality.



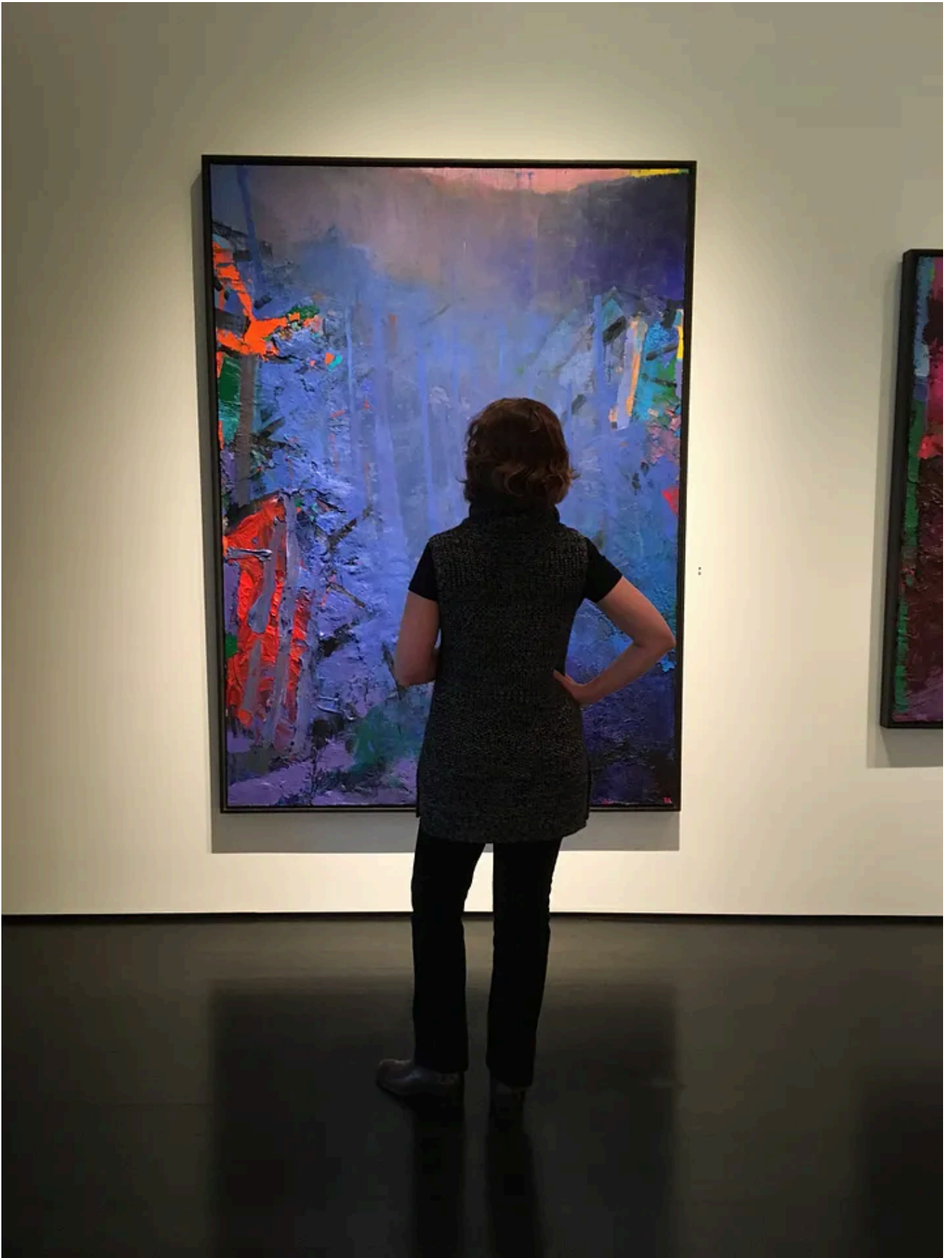
"The Hurlers" by Alan Magee, avrylic on canvas, 40×50"

On the opposite wall, Brian Rutenberg's paintings stand out in stark contrast to this quiet, calm moment of Zen. *Corsair* (2017), *Finder* (2018), and *Hyssop* (2017) explode in intense synthetic hot pinks, luminescent blues, fiery oranges and dioxazine purples with a splash of chartreuse here and there. Equally as interchangeable as Magee's paintings of stones, Rutenberg's paintings feel more like an ongoing and evolving tapestry of visceral and elemental, sensory ecstasy rather than individual contemplative koans.



“Corsair”, by Brian Rutenberg, oil on linen, 60×82”

Rutenberg introduces us to a voluptuous malleability of paint that verges on sculptural relief. Scumbled, scraped and thickly applied swathes of encrusted paint give way to ethereal mists of color. Roughly hewn impasto applications, contrasted with a more subtle sfumato technique, enhance the feeling of movement through space. His paintings become topographic maps of memory and sensory experience. There are no smoke and mirrors here, only pure expression and a sense of joy and discovery not unlike a kid who gets their first box of crayons.



"Hyssop" by Brian Rutenberg, oil on linen, 82×60"

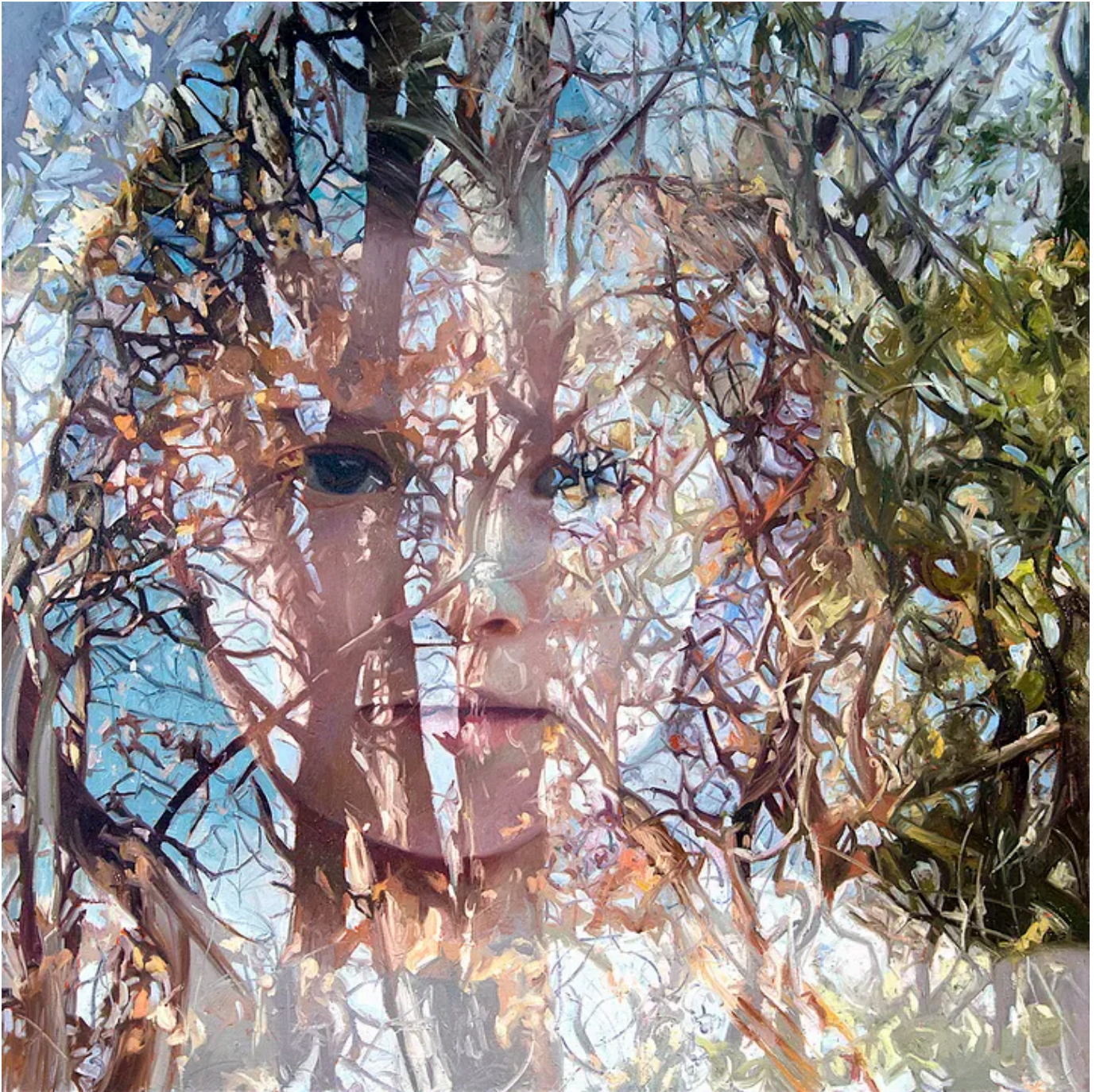
The oil paintings of Alyssa Monks lie in the realm somewhere between these two worlds of Rutenberg and Magee. The entwining forest and flora share strong similarities in pattern, structure and palette (pale blue skies and assorted greens, purple and warm earthy trees and branches) that could themselves be repeated in numerous iterations are set apart by the representation of the human face, unique in and of itself. The portraits *Spring* (2018) and *Hiraeth* (2016) have a ghostly transparency layered within and upon the forest greenery. In this way, they are not unlike Magee's plumber's pipes. I am reminded of a favorite painting by Jules Bastien-Lepage entitled *Joan of Arc* (1879). In Lepage's painting we see Joan of Arc gazing skywards surrounded by the overgrown verdure of a country garden. Secondarily, we observe that a ghostly image of a knight and a damsel hang in front of a cottage in the background. It seems that Monks is bringing that "spirit" forth as well, but almost in a memorial sense, as if the soul has left the body and is embedded in the paint. There is a sense of loss but also catharsis, as if these "ghosts" inhabit not only the painting but also the artist herself and by representing them externally they can then be released.



"Hole" by Alyssa Monks, oil on linen, 66×56.6"

All three artists seem to be in the act of liberation, whether lightening the weight of the represented object itself, setting free the wild and chaotic nature of the elements untethered from the constraints of representation or, as in Monk's paintings, separation of the spirit from its corporeal vessel. How

each artist has translated and transmuted their connection to nature as a vehicle for expression no doubt has origins in their own natural history, which in the viewing becomes a part of our own and emancipates us, if only for a moment from that which encumbers us on our path to understanding and growth.



"Hiraeth" by Alyssa Monks, oil on linen, 56×56"

Natural History is up at Forum Gallery through May 31st

address: 475 Park Avenue at 57th Street, New York, NY 10022

hours: Monday through Saturday from 10 AM until 5:30 PM, and closed Sundays and holidays.

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Written by Trek Lexington

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