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Life Is But a Dream: Alyssa Monks at Forum Gallery



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On view from November 11th, 2021 through January 8th, 2022 at [Forum Gallery](#), *It's All Under Control*— a solo exhibition of paintings by [Alyssa Monks](#)— explores how the pandemic brought illusion and interaction full circle in her recent works.



Alyssa Monks, "This Is Not What You Wanted," 2021, oil on linen, 62 × 90 inches

Brooklyn-based artist, Alyssa Monks, is known for her paintings portraying dark-eyed women often making eye contact with viewers through misted, droplet-covered glass. Their environments imply showers and intimacy and voyeurism, rendering the necessity of a direct gaze back out towards the viewer so that the subject still retains some control over their interaction. The subjects aren't in gilded cages as much as they stand behind lacework spun with condensation, and the *coup d'état* is that, despite all the implications of women as cosseted prisoners throughout history, perhaps Monks' subjects — if ascertained through their frankness and eye contact — voluntarily stepped behind the glass themselves.



Alyssa Monks, "Edit," 2017, oil on linen, 32 × 32 inches

A few years ago, Monks began depicting her subjects amidst different settings: her Alices traded their looking glasses for vistas of forest trees, a showerhead's spray replaced by

mist settling across mossy floors. Flora and fauna didn't find their way into her subjects' world, but rather the opposite, as her subjects found themselves amongst the foliage instead. An arresting dance ensued between Monks' two bodies of work: in the former, subjects gaze out from behind the transparent walls of their glistening, tiled kingdoms — whereas in the latter, her subjects *step* out. In doing so, they don't just step out onto a bath mat or into a hallway, but rather into woods replete with filtered light and crunching leaves underfoot.



Alyssa Monks, "Synthesis," 2015, oil on linen, 56 × 84 inches

That brings us to Monks' new work currently on view in her solo exhibition, *It's All Under Control*, in Manhattan's Forum Gallery. She created all the paintings in response to Covid-19, and they echo her works depicting subjects behind glass — albeit with an ominous twist. "This barrier underlines the personal and community-wide preoccupation with virus-laden respiratory droplets and the isolation it creates," she writes about the shower doors and obscured subjects. And the subjects are now brittle: they seem too preoccupied to prioritize interaction with either glass or viewer, their faces anguished, mourning, aloof, and wary. Suspicion replaces their verve. The sheer beauty of their luminous skin is still intact — yet that which catches their vision isn't the viewer standing opposite them, but rather some headline or ticking number in their periphery.



Alyssa Monks, "Watch The Only Way Out Disappear," 2021, oil on linen, 54 × 54 inches

In the paintings on view in *It's All Under Control*, the glass is a metaphor, a symbol: Monks' subjects aren't just held captive behind the glass doors, but also by their own mental states. Whereas Monks' subjects deliberately interact with very tangible, external environments in her other paintings, that relationship shifts yet again in this body of work: their environment merely reflects their harried worldview, with the internal transformed into external walls of their own making. Here, in these paintings, Alice comes full circle. She hasn't just fallen through a mirror into another world, but finally realizes that her journey has been nothing more than — and every surreal hellscape encapsulated within — a dystopian dream.

And Monks provides insight into what provoked her subject's grief: loss of control. In a volatile, virus-riddled world, "The phrase 'it's all under control' is said mostly when things aren't under control," says Monks. "Psychologically speaking, humans are

comfortable when we can predict our circumstances to a mostly accurate end. When we cannot, we feel ‘out of control,’ and this causes us anxiety and a lot of discomfort. But it occurred to me that a pandemic, a cancer diagnosis, a car crash, an accident of some kind could always be just about to happen. The idea that we have any real control over our circumstances is a construct we create to relax ourselves and move forward. But in truth, we are not in control of much. I would speculate some days how much free will we even have.”

In *Watch the Only Way Out Disappear*, pictured above, everything about the subject twists in her disquiet: from her knuckles and wrists up through her neck to her half-gaping jaw. The title is from the song “Goodbye” by the German electronic musician, Apparat, and also serves as the theme song for the Netflix series *Dark*, which also greatly influenced Monks’ recent paintings. “The song is about someone who is terribly haunted by their own mind and thoughts,” explains Monks. “Much like that, during the isolation and being alone so much, there was no escaping my own sometimes-terrifying thoughts.”





Alyssa Monks, "Selective Perception," 2021, oil on linen, 54 × 54 inches

Arcing trails appear where Monks' subjects ran their fingers over the glass' humid surface. Besides spelling out an abstracted SOS, these trails provide Monks with an outlet to maximize her painting skills. She's a painter's painter, and the punchier chromas with which she fills these arcing pathways are neither preciously nor skimpily applied. Her gray tones never verge into neutral, but retain their pre-mixed identities as brighter hues with distinct temperatures. She seems to revel in paint, as both a noun *and* a verb, both in its viscous movement across the canvas *and* in the act of moving it. The paint even parallels the water droplets depicted: not because her paint feels runny or watered down, but rather because her paint seems to possess a kinetic life of its own—it's not placed upon the canvas in dull, flat patches, but rather each swatch of color sits on the canvas' surface like its own tiny, glimmering pool.

And so, while the paintings exhibited in *It's All Under Control* balance Monks' overt joy of painting with newfound emotional content, they also engage the viewer in a new capacity. Now detached from both the subjects' gazes and their forest habitats, the viewer can simply *relate* to the subjects, empathizing all too well with the visions and emotions of their pandemic-induced confusion and isolation. "We are only even conscious of a tenth of our brain's activity, and our brain only has access to so much information, and how it is all created by our experiences and circumstances anyway," says Monks.

"So to what extent is our behavior almost predetermined?" she continues. "In any case, these were the questions I thought about and tortured myself with, until I found there was great freedom and liberation in accepting that I do not have control."

After all, "life," asked Alice, "what is it but a dream?"

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Lauren Amalia Redding is an artist and writer living in Naples, Florida. She relocated to the Gulf Coast from New York City to co-found H&R Studio with her husband, the sculptor Brett F. Harvey, in 2018. You can learn more about her work by visiting www.laurenredding.com.