

# HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

## Alyssa Monks Captures the Energy and Anxiety of Being in Paint

With the numerous self-portraits Monks has painted throughout her career she offers her “self” to the viewers while also generating a sense of dissolution.

by John Seed  
September 21, 2022



Alyssa Monks, "Squid" (2006), oil on linen,  
48 x 32 inches (courtesy the artist)

SAN LUIS OBISPO, Calif. — As artist Alyssa Monks and curator Emma Saperstein stood together outside the San Luis Obispo Museum of Art (SLOMA) waiting to speak at the Member’s Preview for Alyssa Monks: Be Perfectly Still, a Retrospective, they radiated the easy camaraderie of good friends. Saperstein was just 16 years old when she first contacted Monks after seeing her work online and being captivated by what she saw. “It resonated with me personally,” Saperstein recalls, “and I have been following her work and staying in touch for more than ten years now.”

Appointed SLOMA’s chief curator in 2021, Saperstein has drawn on her deep knowledge of Monks’s oeuvre and assembled an exhibition that primarily showcases the artist’s characteristic subjects: paintings that disrupt and veil the nude female figure with water droplets, vaseline, shower curtains, glass, and mirrors. Observing the public response at the exhibition’s opening — where she counted seven people brought to tears — has validated Saperstein’s own confidence in Monks’s ability to expressively render human vulnerability.



Alyssa Monks, “Skin” (2006), oil on linen, 42 x 56 inches (courtesy the artist)

The 13 works at SLOMA are on display in a single room, the 1300-square-foot Gray Wing. The earliest (“Skin” and “Immersion”) date from 2006, and the most recent, “It’s All Under Control,” from 2021. A 2001 graduate of the New York Academy of Art, Monks is a skilled realist who has managed to both embrace and work past the possibilities of hyperrealism. Her art is energized by the paradoxes and tensions generated by her uncanny hybridization of refined and abstracted visual elements. Her paintings, in which she often appears, have a kind of anxious and revelatory glamour.

Painter Betsy Eby — a close friend who has also posed for Monks — has thought deeply about her friend’s themes, moods, and imagery:

“Alyssa’s paintings are about confronting the disquieting space of vulnerability. There’s a solitude of struggle within the subjects, betraying lost innocence or an evolution that can only come from being on the other side of anguish. Sometimes through eye contact, sometimes through flesh, they seduce. But that seduction comes from behind a veil of water, dew, steam or foliage so at one with the figure that we get the sense that over time, it’s become a second skin, a protective barrier warning, “come close, but not too close.” This veil between the viewer and the subject is integral to the allure. Alyssa isn’t interested in a perfected beauty; instead, through her subjects, she’s searching for beauty through brokenness, the crack where the light gets in.”



Alyssa Monks, “It’s All Under Control” (2021), oil on linen, 62 x 90 inches (courtesy the artist)



With the numerous self-portraits Monks has painted throughout her career she offers her “self” to the viewers while also generating a sense of dissolution that moves toward a kind of collective consciousness. As Monks transforms her self-portraits through abstracting and obscuring them, the falling away of specifics invites broader interpretations and associations from her viewers who can then more easily identify with her. This breadth also works against the tendency anyone might have to objectify what they see. When I asked Monks how it felt to see her own retrospective — which includes a number of these self-portraits — she responded with some very personal thoughts about the self-consciousness that animated her work 15 years ago:



Alyssa Monks and Emma Saperstein (photo John Seed/Hyperallergic)

“I was truly surprised at how strangely emotional it was to be confronted with my older work. “Skin,” in particular, from 2006, has been sort of haunting me since I was there in front of it. I was self-conscious in my 20s, after the paintings were made, of the sheer volume of self-portraits. I did it anyway. I felt self-consciousness should be blasted through and found it important to expose for some reason. But the truth is, I was so self-conscious. No painting revealed that more than this one, perhaps.”

The most recent painting on view at SLOMA, “It’s All Under Control,” was exhibited at the end of 2021 in a show of the same name at Forum Gallery in New York. Responding to the disruptive set of events that preceded the show, including the COVID-19 pandemic, Monks set out to explore “the human reliance on control and predictability, and how our deepest suffering comes from our attachment to security, virtue, identity, and the logic of cause and effect.” The canvas presents a nude, spectral figure who raises her fingers to her mouth behind the steam and drips of a glass shower door. When seen in person, the striking variety of Monks’s brushwork, such as broad impasto strokes, becomes evident. In terms of both narrative and technique “It’s All Under Control” is a flexible metaphor for the artist’s own efforts to reconcile herself with the world and for her attempts to represent its energies in paint. Over time, Monks has found that painting herself — and others — with an eye toward obscuring form has corresponded with a greater sense of inwardness:

“As I am in my mid-40s now and there have been so many life-changing moments wherein I realize the idea of a “self” is just an idea, that I as an egoic being don’t really matter, and that the overall connection between us all and our collective consciousness is the more meaningful and interesting idea anyway, I am less and less identified with my appearance.”



Alyssa Monks, "It's All Under Control" (2021), detail (photo John Seed/Hyperallergic)

[Alyssa Monks: Be Perfectly Still, a Retrospective](#) continues at the San Luis Obispo Museum of Art (1010 Broad Street, San Luis Obispo, California) through November 13. The exhibition was curated by SLOMA Chief Curator Emma Saperstein.