

ALYSSA MONKS: AN INTERVIEW

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Alyssa Monks, *Bait*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist and Ava Feldman.

SAN LUIS OBISPO MUSEUM OF ART TO PRESENT ALYSSA MONKS:

BE PERFECTLY STILL, A RETROSPECTIVE

Alyssa Monks First Museum Retrospective on View Aug 28–Nov 13, 2022

This show is the first time you've had a museum retrospective that spans your career. Can you tell us a little about the trajectory of the work on view?

This selection of paintings touch on all the experiments I did with water over the years. I loved trying new ways to make an image so that it would affect how I would paint it. I love that translation process, from flat image to painted surface and all the choices along the way. Experimenting with different elements and filters allowed me to think more about paint and how it behaves (and mis-behaves) as the images got more abstract and more sensual.

What you're looking at is a woman trying to tell her story, but never really showing herself fully. The tension is all about who the world wanted her to be vs. who she is and she doesn't yet know who that is exactly. She is daring herself in each painting to reveal a little more, and pulling back a veil of obfuscation for protection. In other words, the work is autobiographical, pages from a diary without words, not sure how much is ok to say. And these 13 pieces are only a small sample of the 300 or so works out there over the last 20+ years.

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Many of the works included in the exhibition seem to deal with complex emotions, including loss and grief. How do you conceive of these paintings? How deeply connected is your personal life to your subject matter?

My personal life is deeply reflected and my work. I draw upon my own emotional processing. However I don't really do this intentionally. It just sort of finds its way into the work. What I do intentionally is look for moods, atmospheres, colors, filters, surfaces, paint strokes, etc. that I think are interesting and appealing and visually stimulating, mostly for me. And then I try to mix them and stretch them and put them in sort of a conversation with each other visually. I try to sand out of the way of creating an overt narrative as I find it very obvious when some narratives are contrived. So instead I just let that find its way into the work. Oftentimes it happens because when I take a series of photographs, oftentimes over a thousand in a single sitting, and I go through them later and pick out the ones that feel most charged or resonant; it's

not so surprising that they tend to reflect my own emotional state. In a way the photographs are images are kind of an empathic witness to my own emotional state and so I connect with them. I try not to question it too much or overthink it. And the interesting part of it to me is that if I go back years later, even a decade later, to the same photo shoot reference material, I would pick different images to paint. This is kind of what I did during the lockdown. I went back and looked at old source material with the lens of the current circumstances, and came up with different images, with different services, with different levels of a need for precise detail. I think the end result therefore is something a little more honest hopefully and a little less didactic.

We would love to hear about your creative process. What is your inspiration and starting point for a work?

I do some sort of informal meditation/yoga basically opening practice often in the mornings. I like to just pay attention to what stimulates my senses, visually and and mentally but also musically and even through touch. That's really what triggers an idea or curiosity about how certain colors or textures might work together visually.





Alyssa Monks, *Be Perfectly Still*, 2021. Courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York, NY.



Can you speak to some of the individual works included in Be Perfectly Still, and how they came to be?

Skin is the oldest piece in the show from 2006. It was during a time when I was experimenting with different filters through which to find the figure or portrait in addition to the filter of water itself. I think it was the first one that I use the vinyl shower curtain. This piece is most memorable to me for many reasons but the first that comes to mind is how it was made. I tend

to work for many different photographs and this one is no different in that I collaged a few different parts of the body together to find exactly the right posture and expression and energy in that body. I wasn't however very satisfied with the way the final was behaving, although I loved it as a filter and how it distorted the portrait especially. So I ended up improvising quite a bit with how it's stuck to parts of the body and where I wiped away the steam and revealed parts of the portrait. I was so engaged in this one. It felt very raw, very honest, and now it haunts me as I see it again after all these years.

The painting *Be Perfectly Still* is a new piece from last year's solo exhibition called *It's All Under Control*, relating to the nightmare of the pandemic and also to a family member's diagnosis with brain cancer. However, the reference was taken from an old photograph as I was in lockdown looking through old reference material and finding new ways to use it. In this circumstance, I had dissolved flower in a bathtub of water to make it quite cloudy, and then floated cooking oil on the surface of that water. With the use of very bright lights that oil became illuminated and ribbons of light. I put the model in the water and had her moving slightly as I photographed her on a continuous shot. I was able to pull many moments from this photo shoot, and ended up repurposing these elements again a few more times with different models in different bathtubs, one of which is *Charade*, also in this exhibition. I loved how the more I moved away from the expected visual impact of a figure in water, the more the paint could expand and I could explore how the paint wanted to lay and move. And the oil in the water made the skin even feel more like paint itself. The idea of this work was very much about the importance of not struggling against a reality that is out of our control. And how struggling creates suffering and exacerbates the pain of an experience that is out of our hands.



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The painting entitled *It's All Under Control* was an experiment I did during the lockdown using myself as a model but using film as opposed to still photographic images as a reference. The prices felt a bit more fluid and less constricted.



Alyssa Monks, *Charade*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist and Ann M. Williams and Frank M. Edwards.

What artists and writers have been most foundational to you? How have they impacted you personally and professionally?

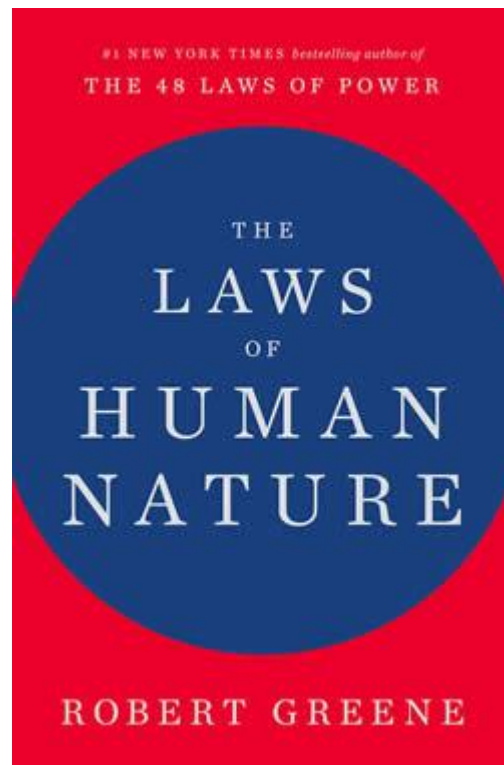
My art heroes are Vincent Desiderio, Eric Fischl, Jenny Saville, Betsy Eby, Bo Bartlett, Egon Schiele, Gustav Klimt, Alex Kanevsky, Rothko, Willem DeKooning, Robert Motherwell, Cy Twombly, Jackson Pollock, Gerhard Richter, and photographers like Nan Goldin, Diane Arbus, and Sally Mann, David Lynch.

They have clarity of what they want to do in their work. I think they are finding it as they go and trusting their intuitive flow to lead them exactly to the most interesting place or idea. It's so powerful to witness that much clarity and focus and conviction. They know how to get out of their own way and work it out in the studio.

What are you reading right now?

The Laws of Human Nature, by Robert Greene.

A Biography of Egon Schiele.



What are your interests outside of art? What else inspires you to create?

Music is a big factor in my work. Film also. And psychology, but more neuroscience than psychotherapy. I cook and bake a lot. Connecting with creative people is probably the most important part to keep me engaged the way I want to be.
