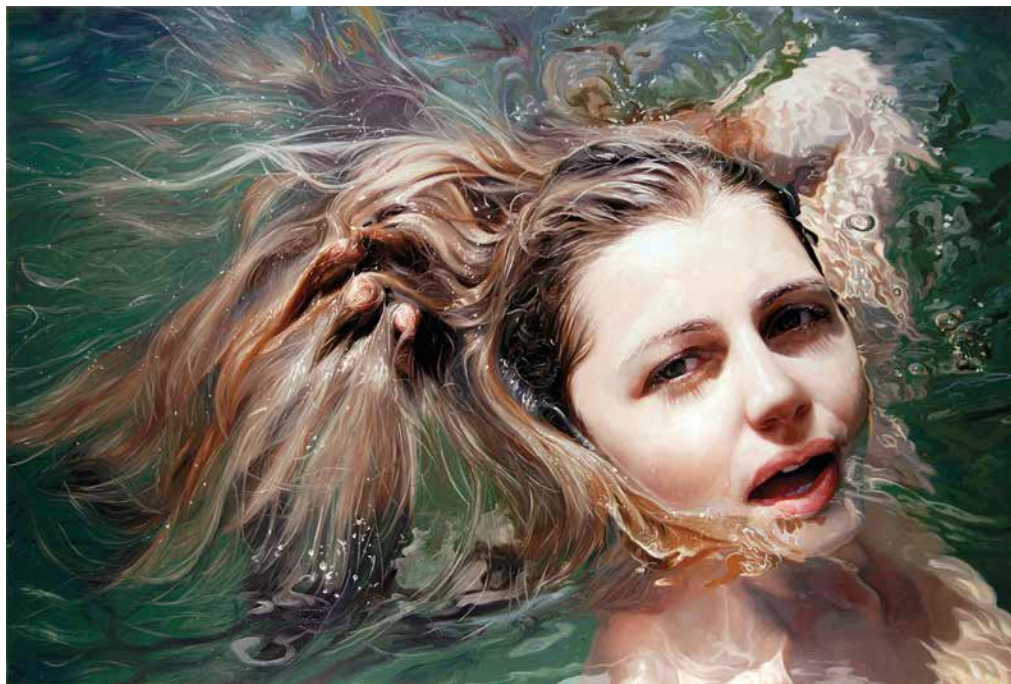


ALYSSA MONKS

# More than Skin Deep

By Meg Daly



The 13 paintings by Alyssa Monks on view at San Luis Obispo Museum of Art focus on the artist's obsession with watery surfaces. Spanning two decades, the paintings in *Be Perfectly Still, A Retrospective* trace Monks' stylistic developments as well as her inner world.

"Alyssa Monks' paintings capture something very essential about the human experience and which we can all relate to on some level," says SLOMA chief curator Emma Saperstein.

Monks' figures are caught in moments of visceral and even disturbing rawness. In the title piece, *Be Perfectly Still*, a young woman sinks into a pool of clear slime. Or is she emerging? Her cupid lips suggest youthful sexuality. The painting begs a narrative and yet the artist offers no concrete storyline. The young woman could be drowning in her tears—her eyes and nose seem reddened. Or perhaps she is being born, going from child to woman, her gaze filled with a look of lost innocence.

If there is one thing Monks wants viewers to avoid is seeing her work as photorealistic. "When have you ever seen a photo like that?" she asks.

Monks intentionally plays with people's sense of reality and recognition. "I like to turn that on its head and ask, 'What is real?'" she says. "The brain's job is to take shapes and colors and make sense of them. But it's really a hallucination. It's not perfect; there are mistakes."

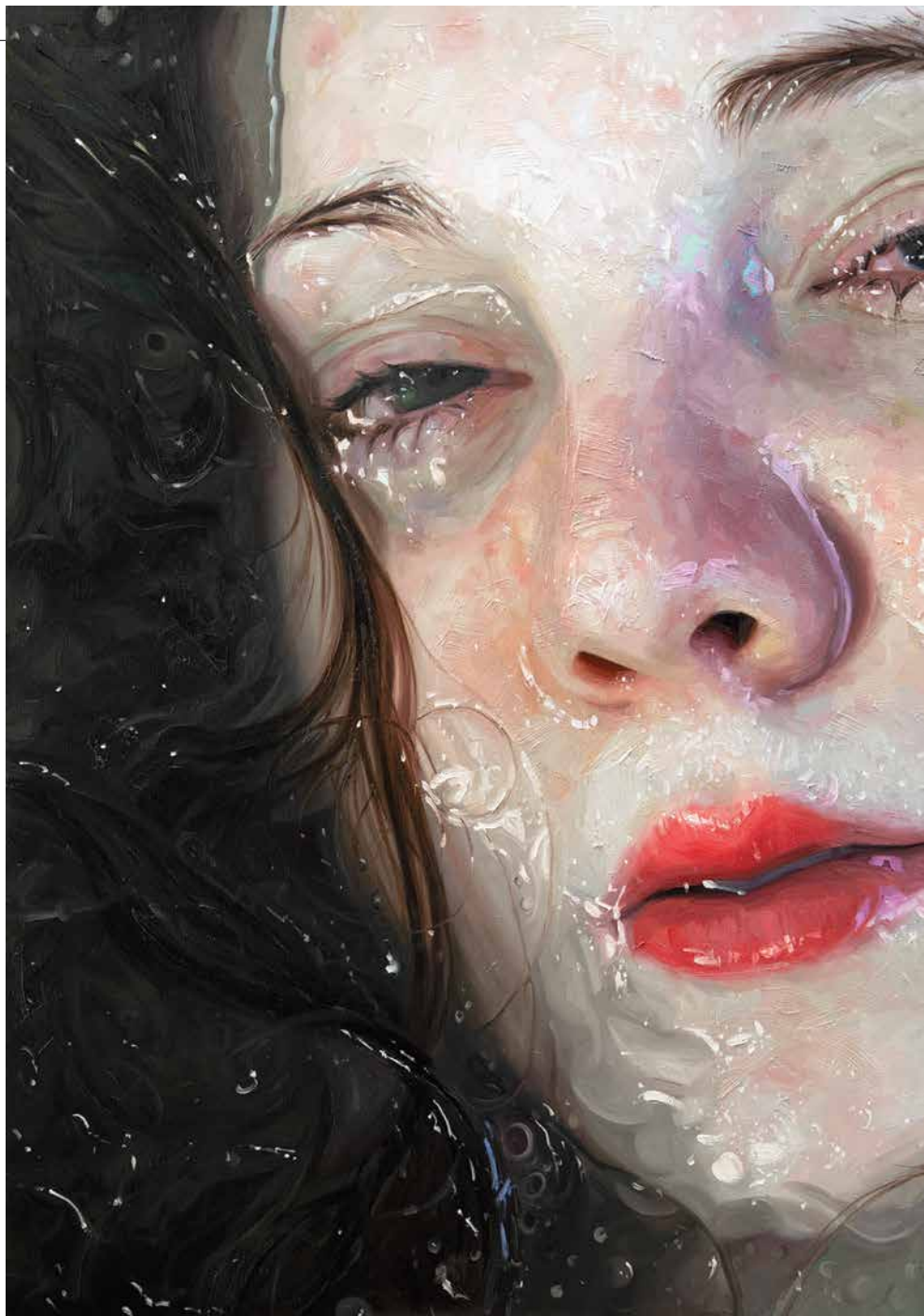
That's the reason Monks uses paint, not photography, as her medium. She wants all the fragmented and messy pieces of a composition to show.

"Paint feels like a living thing that wants to do what it wants to do," she says. She purposely chooses subject matter that allows her to explore paint itself. "I want the gestures of my movement to be fossilized by this material."

Monks says her earlier paintings were slicker than her recent work. One of the older pieces in the show,

**1**  
*Bait*, oil on linen,  
58 x 86". Courtesy of the  
artist and Ava Feldman

**2**  
*Be Perfectly Still*, 2021,  
oil on linen, 47 x 33".  
Courtesy of Forum  
Gallery, New York, NY







4

*Vaseline II*, from 2007, is in fact about the slick surface covering a nude figure. Though the surface appears viscous, the paint strokes are tighter than in later work. By “being perfectly still” you can see the paint becoming, as Monks says, “slathery and meaty.”

Many of Monks’ paintings feel ominous. For example, her 2010 piece, *Bait*, features a woman in a body of water, gazing seductively—or is it pleadingly?—at the viewer. Her hand reaches up underneath her splayed hair in a way that suggests luxuriating in her own sensuality. Yet, as the title implies, the image also contains entanglement and threat. The woman’s face baits the viewer into staring at the painting and then the face recedes and the swirls of hair, ripples of water and finally the brushstrokes themselves emerge as the subject.

Her eerie, shape-shifting images have earned Monks accolades from formal arts institutions as well as popular culture. Her work is featured heavily in the final season of the acclaimed FX drama *The Americans*. She was named one of Buzzfeed’s 100 Best Figurative Oil Painters Working Right Now in 2020. Exhibitions include the Kunstmuseum Ahlen in Germany, and the National Academy Museum of Fine Arts, New York, among many others. She is represented by Forum

Gallery in New York City.

At 45, Monks is only midstream in her career. In addition to her water paintings, she has a series of paintings focused on figures in nature. She says seeing a retrospective of the water paintings to date felt jostling, in a good way. “I don’t spend a lot of time looking back on my work,” she says. “I tend to be present with the work I’m making now. But walking into the show, I was confronted by my younger self. It was like seeing pages of my diary.”

Saperstein, who has followed Monks’ work for decades, is thrilled to be the first to do a Monks retrospective. “I think audiences will both be awestruck by the technical prowess of her painting, and also deeply moved by her subject matter,” she says.

Monks, meanwhile, is not so concerned with wowing audiences. Her goal is more personal. She says she is driven by wanting to tell the truth through painting. “I want my work to have a real glimpse of what I was thinking and feeling, something I learned about living.” Those truths, it’s safe to say, are not something that can be put into words. ●

**3**  
*Charade*, 2010, oil on linen, 48 x 32". Courtesy of the artist and Ann M. Williams and Frank M. Edwards

**4**  
*It's All Under Control*, 2021, oil on linen, 62 x 90". Courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York, NY.

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