

# One With The Sublime

Artists, friends, muses: we are all these things to one another in the longstanding friendship between Alyssa Monks, myself and my husband, painter Bo Bartlett. For the sake of art, Alyssa and I have waltzed on rocky shores, intertwined as two of the three graces and held fast that all of life's setbacks, pain, loss and victories somehow deepen our understanding and make us better humans capable of great things. For years, our friendship had been a subject of Bo's paintings. Then one day Alyssa asked if I would pose for her. She would fly to my studio in Georgia for a visit totaling less than 24 hours.

As I sat for Alyssa, it didn't take long to understand that her intent was to study beyond the skin, which is ironic for someone who paints skin so exquisitely. At the time, her work was experiencing a shift from the women in water series where skin and water both offered the power of seduction through the isolated figure. As she drew me, she began mining the vulnerable human experience that is fraught with both contradiction and resolve. She wanted to find the beauty in the scars. There's a shared space cohabitated by the artist and sitter that is personal in nature and profoundly exposed. The artist is often searching for something beyond the visible and it's up to both parties to stay present while that reveals itself and then ride the wave once it does. In the session, as in all her recent paintings, Alyssa seemed charged to scrape the façade and reach deep into the collective experience of what makes us human, countering what could be seen as the hubris of a heroic-scaled portrait with vulnerability harkening back to the days before Pop art heralded the separation from instinct. There's an inner outer world within these paintings where fissures are dendrites are

tree limbs and all vein the portrait, defusing the subject among the overlapping patterns in nature. We can't help but see in these works hints of infinity stretching both outward and in. With titles like *Synthesis* and *Impermanence*, the viewer is left suspended in an ungraspable aspect of all-time, that of the multiverse.

Like John Everett Millais with *Ophelia*, artists of the Romantic era depicted the protagonist as helpless and often defeated by outside influences or battles of the heart. As in Monks' previous work, *Ophelia*, while beautiful, lays out of reach and obfuscated behind the brook's veil. In her recent paintings, Monks is breaking the bondage of the defenseless and calling forth a conversation about quiet empowerment.

Kant articulated two distinctions of the Sublime: mathematical and dynamic. In the mathematical Sublime we experience the vastness of nature within the commingling of our intuitions and intellect. We are awed by beauty and somehow left wanting more, as our reason propels us to imagine more. In the face of dynamic sublime, our moral nature is left humiliated by the forces of nature which leave us feeling powerless. Hegel described the Sublime as the expression of the infinite vacant of representational phenomena. David Caspar Friedrich posed man viewing nature. Alyssa Monks takes it a step further positioning the female protagonist in nature, as if to imply that we are not separate, but we are one with the Sublime.

—Betsy Eby  
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