

Alyssa Monks: Through Flesh and Light and Paint

"The flesh is at the heart of the world" — *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*

We first met Alyssa Monks on a clear cool autumn night in New York City. My wife, artist Betsy Eby, and I were attending a New York Academy "Take Home A Nude" Gala at Sotheby's. An energetic, strikingly beautiful, young, dark-haired woman came up to us and asked why we weren't headed upstairs for the Gala dinner. We confessed that we weren't officially invited. We had just shown up last minute after summering in Maine. Alyssa offered for us to come upstairs to the Gala dinner as her guests. But we didn't want to inconvenience anyone. Selflessly giving up her own seat at the Gala, Alyssa told us she knew of a great little restaurant around the corner and suggested we just all go there. We walked out of Sotheby's and into the chilly evening, excitedly dancing down 72nd Street in our best artist's gala finery, peppering one another with questions, landing in a quaint Chinese place over on 2nd.

The joy of these first moments of friendship between like-minded artists is indelibly etched. At dinner in an empty Chinese restaurant we got to know one another, mostly talking about galleries, paints, choice of subject matter, basically shop talk. Alyssa was familiar with our work and we were familiar with hers. She had been a star student of Vincent Desiderio at The New York Academy. Vince was an old friend, going back to the 1980's when we were both at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Word had spread of Vince's prized pupil, Alyssa Monks. Everyone was

talking about her work. We too were duly impressed. It was a momentous night, we were all glad to meet. Standing outside afterward, beneath the glowing neon sign of the Chinese restaurant, Alyssa and Betsy posed for a quick photo to mark the occasion. Alyssa slid her head perfectly into the crook of Betsy's neck like a puzzle piece. Time stopped as I looked at them in that moment. I snapped their picture. We all vowed to be artist friends forever.

Initially, we had stopped into "Take Home A Nude" to see the offerings but we left with something far greater, inspiration and a deepening of our emotional life. In my experience it is a relatively rare thing for one artist to ask another to pose. We all know that we are busy in our worlds, doing our creative work. But, there was something about the image of Betsy and Alyssa that was etched in my mind. I risked asking them to pose, Alyssa and Betsy together, first for a double-portrait, but later, eventually, for more intimate moments of friendship. These times together, on our island in Maine, in Alyssa's studio and apartment in Brooklyn, in our studios and home in Georgia, all resulted in paintings... by me of the two of them, and by Alyssa of Betsy, and by Betsy of the powerful rhythmic swaying motions of the elements of nature. We now share in a life of creativity and Art. Alyssa has a large painting by Betsy over her bed. In our bedroom we have a nimble little study for one of Alyssa's earliest mature paintings, *Welcome To* (2005), a nude self-portrait in the fetal position

on a bed devoid of covers. It is a painting of vulnerability, particularly female vulnerability.

From her first efforts at The New York Academy (NYAA MFA 2001) Alyssa used herself, often her nude body, to draw attention to her own sense of vulnerability in the world. There has been no doubt from the start of Alyssa's prodigious talents. Her ability to articulate her subjects in full chromatic color with a paint surface that has veracity, an innate integrity, that is luscious, not fastidious or rendered, is unmatched in contemporary realism. The contemporary art world into which she was hatched sang the praises of the painterly realism of Lucien Freud and Eric Fischl and others, along with the emergence of major female painters using their own bodies as primary subject matter, such as Lisa Yuskavage and Jenny Saville. Alyssa's work too has garnered a loyal following as evidenced by any number of imitators and widely influenced students employing hyper-realism in art schools around the country.

There are three distinct periods of Alyssa's work. The first being the work she did during and upon graduating from NYAA, single female figures in bathrooms, on hard surfaces, or soaking in tubs of water. One may be reminded of Bonnard and Degas, but there is nothing decorative, oriental or romantic about these pieces, which portray a heightened psychology seen through a modern eye. There is a sterile analytical mood to the cold hard surfaces that is at odds with the suppleness of the flesh. This discord engages the viewer and enlists our empathies. The paintings are crying out to us for help. By 2007, the figures in her works are fully submerged or struggling at

the surface of water or obfuscated behind the shield of a shower curtain or glass stall. There is a barrier in many of these works, protecting the naked body from the direct gaze of the viewer. Monks is explicitly aware of the body politic. She plays with the concept of objectification, with the concept of the observer and the observed; her peep-show is an earnest attempt at revelation. She demands that we see beyond the surface beauty of her paintings, water droplets, steam on glass, oily water films; all create an urge in us, a desire to see and know more, our dopamine is teased and we succumb.

The latest phase of her work has been a transformation. She is no longer attempting the almost photographic realism that has marked her career thus far, she is instead engaging on a more emotional level with the paint itself.

The first tenet of Buddhism's Four Noble Truths states that "there is suffering". No one can escape it. When Alyssa's mother passed away after a year-long struggle with cancer, Alyssa's work underwent a marked transition. Initially, she began to completely abstract her surfaces, throwing, scrapping and slapping paint in an emotional release, but eventually forms began to emerge. It was as if the artist was looking to make sense out of the chaos of death. In her latest series of paintings, the fear, aquaphobia and claustrophobia have given way to open spaces, which provide a way out for the viewer. It is as if the artist has pushed through her own devastating loss and seen a larger reality. She presents this to us in airy tableaus combining portraiture and figures and landscapes where we can breathe without fear of drowning, where the air is fresh from foliage of trees and the light comes from

within the picture itself, from the beyond as if from the edge of some metaphysical forest. The existential dramas that filled Alyssa's earlier work with angst have given way to a more unified vision, filled with complexity, but where form breaks down and the particles of this earthly body meld with the light of the great mystery. There are few precedents for work like this. I think tangentially of Jules Bastien-Lepage's *Joan of Arc* in the Met, the future saint almost melding with the tree branches and the armored figure floating other worldly defying gravity. But, Monks' new paintings go beyond any kind of Symbolist or Surrealistic works, they have a personal inner logic, which nudges us toward the place where phenomenological meaning is found. The courage of these new works is in their absolute originality. Monks willingly sacrifices her facileness for a greater dexterity, letting go of the fascination with the physical body and releasing into the larger connective tissue and web of the ever-expanding world. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes, "Humanity is not an aggregate of individuals, a community of thinkers, each of whom is guaranteed from the outset to be able to reach agreement with the others because all par-

ticipate in the same thinking essence. Nor, of course, is it a single Being in which the multiplicity of individuals are dissolved and into which these individuals are destined to be reabsorbed. As a matter of principle, humanity is precarious: each person can only believe what he recognizes to be true internally and, at the same time, nobody thinks or makes up his mind without already being caught up in certain relationships with others, which leads him to opt for a particular set of opinions. Everyone is alone and yet nobody can do without other people, not just because they are useful (which is not in dispute here) but also when it comes to happiness.... We must therefore rediscover, after the natural world, the social world, not as an object or sum of objects, but as a permanent field or dimension of existence." In her new work Alyssa Monks does just this, through flesh and light and paint she alludes to the oneness of all, she reminds us that we are all connected, not just physically here in this world, but beyond this realm as well, in the invisible spaces of the unutterable.

—Bo Bartlett
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