

Three to Watch: Artists Making Their Mark

There is a lot of superb art being made these days;
this column shines light on a trio of gifted individuals.



BRAD KUNKLE (b. 1978) hails from rural Pennsylvania, where he explored — and romanticized — the verdant countryside around him. He studied at Kutztown University, primarily under George Sorrells (b. 1944), the painter of “imaginary realism” trained by a pupil of the great 19th-century academician, William-Adolphe Bouguereau. There Kunkle grew technically proficient, but felt he had not yet found his own pictorial language. He was sure, however, of his attraction to the paradoxically hyper-realistic and unreal visions of the Pre-Raphaelites, and of their great American inheritor, Maxfield Parrish. These masters created moody worlds, Kunkle says, “where a subtle, supernatural beauty seems to be hiding under the breath of women — worlds where something beyond our natural perception is waiting to be found.”

Kunkle then spent almost a decade teaching himself new methods and studying masterworks in person, even as he found success fulfilling commissions for portraits and decorative projects. While painting decorations, he came to enjoy covering surfaces in copper, gold, or silver leaf, beguiled by the way these surfaces change in appearance as we move around them (rather like life changes as we move through it). He began to incorporate passages of gilding in his own paintings, a strategy that enhanced the unreal quality he had been seeking.

Kunkle also began reducing the number of colors on his palette, finding inspiration in *grisailles* (paintings made in monochrome, usually greys) and historical photographs, especially daguerreotypes. “*Grisaille* has a mysterious quality to it,” he notes, one that offers “just enough information for viewers to finish the details of what they are seeing.”

Today Kunkle paints large images of modern-looking women in sylvan settings, with which they seem organically linked. He paints these figures in a variation of *grisaille* that contrasts strikingly with the richly toned foliage and shimmering gold leaf all around. Rarely used together, these disparate elements disorient us: Perhaps we’ve stumbled upon a magical being in a glade unlike any on earth. Kunkle is particularly skilled at mottling patches of sunlight and shade to heighten our sense of dislocation, and when we gaze at the painting from different angles, or even when we dim the lights, it becomes what he calls a “living, breathing thing.” The artist says he paints “to connect with the part of being human that is beautiful and slightly dark, stripped to its truth and always changing: the part of being human that appears to be romantic, but feels very real.”

Though he imagines woodlands, Kunkle now lives and works in New York City, where his first solo exhibition will be presented at Arcadia Fine Arts April 22-May 7.

BRAD KUNKLE (b. 1978)

REVELEN

2009, OIL AND GOLD LEAF ON CANVAS, 60 x 33 IN.

ARCADIA FINE ARTS, NEW YORK





ALYSSA MONKS (b. 1977) is winning acclaim for her oil paintings of people showering or floating in water. For centuries, the motif of bathers has carried the guilty whiff of a voyeurism that is shared by artist and viewer, yet Monks deftly avoids such prurience to achieve something more intriguing.

Although some of her compositions feature views into the distance, most present a single model very close to the picture plane, sometimes threatening to push right out into the viewer's own space. Most of the models are women Monks knows well, and indeed she often uses herself, a practicality that allows her to capture exactly the expression and pose she seeks. Monks takes photographs of these scenes "as a loose reference"; approximately 1,000 shots are consulted in order to paint a small series of oils.

Monks's showering pictures are especially captivating. We viewers are positioned outside the stall looking in toward the model, but Monks inserts a visual "filter" of steam and water droplets on the intervening plastic curtain or glass door in order to distort the body, or to emphasize certain parts of it, including the face. In some scenes, the model's flesh is pressed worrisomely, or amusingly, against the translucent surface, creating virtually dead-looking forms that can contrast sharply with more roseate body parts nearby. Monks is developing a new series of pictures, including the one illustrated here, that tends to emphasize the water itself and creates an ambiguity about both the filter and what is being filtered.

Monks has arrived at this challenging enterprise through smarts and hard work. Raised in New Jersey, she earned a BA at Boston College before graduating in painting *cum laude* from the New York Academy of

ALYSSA MONKS (b. 1977)

GASP

2010, OIL ON CANVAS, 48 X 72 IN.

DFN GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

Art, where she still teaches flesh painting occasionally. She studied briefly at several other institutions, including New Jersey's Montclair State University, and she now lives and works in Brooklyn.

Monks's experience at the New York Academy — established in 1982 to revive the atelier tradition of rigorous draftsmanship and painterly realism — is highly pertinent. Although she uses photography as a tool and creates paintings that look "tight" from a distance (or when photographed upon completion), Monks is not a photorealist at all. Rather, she seeks to create an image "realer than real, beyond what even a photograph can portray." Seemingly smooth surfaces are actually rife with thick, expressive strokes that, in person, appear abstract, resembling those of Monks's idol, Jackson Pollock, and also of two other superb painters working today, Lucian Freud and Jenny Saville. Moreover, the largeness of her surfaces (some measure eight feet wide) confronts us viscerally: We quickly see that this brand of realism could only have arisen by drawing upon the lessons learned from abstraction.

Monks's works are on view at New York City's DFN Gallery from April 7 through May 8; at the Noyes Museum in Oceanville, New Jersey, this summer; and at David Klein Gallery in Birmingham, Michigan, next October.

JOHN MOORE (b. 1941) may initially seem ill-suited for this *Three to Watch* section, given his four-decade career as an exhibiting painter and professor at such prestigious universities as Boston University and the University of Pennsylvania. He earned his BFA at Washington University in his native St. Louis, then took an MFA at Yale before entering academe. Along the way, Moore has been elected to the National Academy of Design and honored several times by the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Moore is best known for his large oil paintings of urban landscapes and studio interiors, worked up from sketches, reference photographs, and memory. His mostly unpopulated scenes are meticulously detailed, yet they are not strict likenesses of specific places: Instead, they are almost surrealist, carefully orchestrated re-arrangements of views and angles, reflecting his preoccupation with architecture and spatial relationships, as well as geography and social history.

Last year, Moore retired from academe and began immersing himself in a new medium: charcoal. He has always sketched for pleasure and reference (his shelves are packed with decades' worth of sketchbooks), and before art school he worked as a draftsman and technical illustrator at McDonnell-Douglas. But charcoal is an entirely new adventure: "I have never made finished drawings quite like this before," says Moore, who found inspiration in a range of sources including the animated charcoal drawings of South African artist William Kentridge (b. 1955).

Moore's new drawings resemble his paintings in subject, as both feature leafless trees, distant hills, and old factories. There's often an almost vertiginous play between a foreground, close up to the picture plane, and a distant but minutely detailed background. He remains fascinated with the environs of Coatesville, Pennsylvania — the stomping ground of his heroes, Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth, and also an uncanny repository of both urban decay and verdant countryside. Views through windows are another favorite device, and thrown into the repertoire are glimpses of Greenville, South Carolina, and his studio's North Philadelphia neighborhood.

Yet charcoal has taken Moore in a new direction, too. Relying solely on black and white, his new drawings display a rich range of values and sense of volume, a departure from the slightly flattened value range sometimes seen in his oils. Perhaps due to charcoal's monochromatic nature, a closer harmony is achieved between the distinct



JOHN MOORE (b. 1941)

HARPER

2009, CHARCOAL ON PAPER, 43 3/4 X 45 IN.

LOCKS GALLERY, PHILADELPHIA

pictorial components. Also new is Moore's sensuous reveling in texture: luxuriant, deep, velvety darks and whispery veils of half-tone crumbling gently into the light. In these drawings, Moore seems to be more clearly showing us his emotions for the first time. Their lushness and quiet drama evoke feelings of loss and joy, and also a sense of the progression of time. They invite comparison with the dreamlike tonal drawings of Georges Seurat and Fernand Khnopff, as well as the serene clarity and focus of Christen Købke's landscapes.

Moore will soon be exhibiting his charcoal drawings — for the first time ever — at Philadelphia's Locks Gallery (March 5-April 10). He is also represented by Hirschl & Adler (New York City), which will mount a solo show in spring 2011.

Text about John Moore written by Nancy Bea Miller (artist and writer, Narberth, PA).