

WATCH WHAT YOU WISH FOR

Alyssa Monks paints drips, bubbles, and vapor so precisely that you are drawn to her surfaces to see how she has mastered this evanescent illusion. I think there is a combination of awe and suspicion mixed into your curiosity because on some level you would like to see her fail at this legerdemain. But she doesn't. Harder scrutiny only gives you greater pleasure. There is no weakness. There is no dismissing her paintings.

While Monks's manner of painting is rooted in traditional realism, she is not burdened by it. Nor does she sentimentalize it. Her paintings are as fresh and contemporary as her subject matter.

Monks's work straddles a difficult line between painting and photography. The way she handles the complicated and often blurred distinctions between the two mediums is what compels me to admire her work. Because she paints her images, she is able to do what a photographer cannot do - undermine the immediate impact of the image. Painting is about the space between what is painted and how it was painted, and in that there is tremendous latitude for introducing ambiguity. Monks, with her masterful depiction of sensual and fugitive surfaces, slows down our looking and seduces us into an intimacy that is both erotic and discomfiting.

Why do I say discomfiting? Her paintings express a psychologically charged eroticism. That is a paradox. The language of eroticism is designed to free us from self-consciousness. Self-consciousness undermines fantasy and makes us aware of our own complicated needs and desires. Contradictory impulses, such as our desire to possess and dominate, while at the same time desiring to be dominated and possessed, spark emotions that confuse the moment. In Monks's work what first appears as a simple exchange of presentation quickly becomes a less than comfortable voyeuristic space charged with emotional ambivalence. These images of women presenting themselves to us from behind scrimms of moist vapory glass, translucent vinyl, or submerged beneath soapy bathwater trigger, reflexively, a male's desire while, at the same time, tempering that desire, making us disarmingly aware of a struggle taking place on the other side of the glass. There is a tension created between the viewer and the viewed - her needs vs. my desire.

Water, steam, saliva, heat, moisture, and flesh are the physical elements depicted in her paintings. Enwrapped, submerged, engulfed, immersed, and emergent are the metaphors for the inner thought/feeling states of her protagonist - a woman fully formed, suspended in a constellation of milky whey, embryo-like, on the verge of birthing herself.

Eric Fischl

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Eric Fischl, the painter and sculptor, lives and works in New York City and on Long Island and is a senior critic at the New York Academy of Art.