

ALYSSA MONKS

Fixation

The paintings of Alyssa Monks have enjoyed considerable critical acclaim in recent years owing to both her remarkable technical skill and the complex psychological dimension evoked by her imagery. Her primary motif is the figure or face- isolated either by submersion in a bath or encapsulation behind the vapor and condensation of a shower glass.

The pristine seamlessness of Monks' surfaces maintained through their masterful conflation of direct and indirect painting along with the eerie freeze frame quality to the subject tend to place this painter in the camp of photorealism, a classification she has repeatedly denied. Nonetheless, despite the familiar aesthetic limitations through which photography has "taught" us to see, and Monks' utilization of those qualities (cinematic rather than still), her pictures are in fact, firmly rooted in the painterly. This is most evident in the way this painter, following the path of many great artists identifies and objectifies the very processes of this complex art. Standing before the paintings of Alyssa Monks we are reminded of a centuries old tradition - a tradition of method allegorized.

The subtle emergence of form's opacity from layers of oleaginous vehicle was, for centuries, one of the most admired operations in the painter's arsenal. Titian spoke to this effect when he advised that paintings should be executed with thirty or forty glazes. He went on to declare that the greatest quality in painting was the demonstration by the rise of the light mass from the colored pool of fat.

Along with glazing, the process of scumbling is another of the many elements that comprise the painter's technical canon. Its use, often undetectable but virtually ubiquitous in the art of painting, has, for centuries, stood as a primary method of encapsulation. It can affect a continuous skin over a form as it turns from light to darkness. It can delicately modify the light absorption of a transparent void. It alters the appearance of a glaze making a cool bluish film by the subtle manipulation of warm diaphanous whites.

Dynamic technical processes such as these, originally deployed in the service of atmospheric illusion, have, over time, been subjected to numerous re-interpretations. Among the most interesting modern examples, are those that seek an analogous reconfiguration of methods - less in the service of illusion than as a reification of the effect itself akin to signifiers detached from their presumed function.

Embedded in Alyssa Monks' paintings is a discernible cross-hatching of intensions. At once alluring and violent the dramatic narrative is replete with associations. Women, for the most part, immersed in fluid or vapor - are depicted as flirtatious (Bait), submerged (Trust), beckoning (Want) or challenging (Stare). The allure of their faces: full lips, chiseled features, beckoning eyes could suggest a typical horror movie's retribution for carnal sin, placing them squarely in the camp of the objectified or as Sirens drawing you into the mysterious pool. We, then, as spectators, are cast in roles of bystanders and voyeurs. But are these to be read as actual women?

Although seamless in their illusion, Monks' paintings give us pause to consider the symbolic implications of her motif. A powerful metaphoric element draws the subject into close proximity with a celebration of process. These characters, whether victims or Sirens, whether trapped within their aqueous prison, or luring us into drowsy oblivion allegorize the very nature of painting and its seductive enticement. Painters often characterize their methods as dramatic forces - as protagonists banding together for the greater good of suspended disbelief. Their ensemble performance is aligned (sequentialized) by the painter's desire for seamless disclosure.

Buoyant on a watery surface that parallels the picture plane, the faces in Monks' recent paintings emerge long enough to reveal an expanse of pallid flesh and a gash of lips still too red to be hypoxic. An oily film that floats on the surface, accentuating patterns of fluidity is, of course, a visual cue reiterating the painting medium itself.

The titles of these pictures offer still more: words such as "Cipher", from the Arabic *sifr* or "zero" - in later French and Italian translations, "encoded message," "Cryptology" from the Greek *kryptos* - "hidden, concealed, secret." However, it is the title, "Charade" that drives our imaginations into a flurry of heuristic plasticity. The image is of a woman, seen front-on, the bulk of her head submerged in water. Just breaking the surface are the foremost parts of the lower face. The lips, fully emerged, and parted, vacillate between speech imparted and speech implored.

We can read "Charade" by its common usage as a "false situation," in that sense the painting could be depicting a suicide attempt cruelly staged for a last minute rescue. Then there is "Charades," a game in which the player tries to communicate a word or syllable through silent actions or gestures. Viewed in this context the painting comes into greater semiotic focus setting the terms of its intelligibility.

The open mouth of the emerging woman is a channel from the hermetic encapsulation of the image - the figural's point of departure into the discursive or semiotic. The violation of the subject echoes the trauma enacted at the picture's surface - the glaze defaced, by an abraded patch, which breaks the seamless continuity of illusion. It is the image converted to text.

Vincent Desiderio
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