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"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

Alyssa Monks: Pandemic Self-Portraits by Donald Kuspit

Alyssa Monks, This is Not What You Wanted, 2021, oil on linen, 62 x 90 inches.

© Alyssa Monks, courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York, NY

Alyssa Monks: *It's All Under Control*

Forum Gallery

November 11, 2021 through January 8, 2022

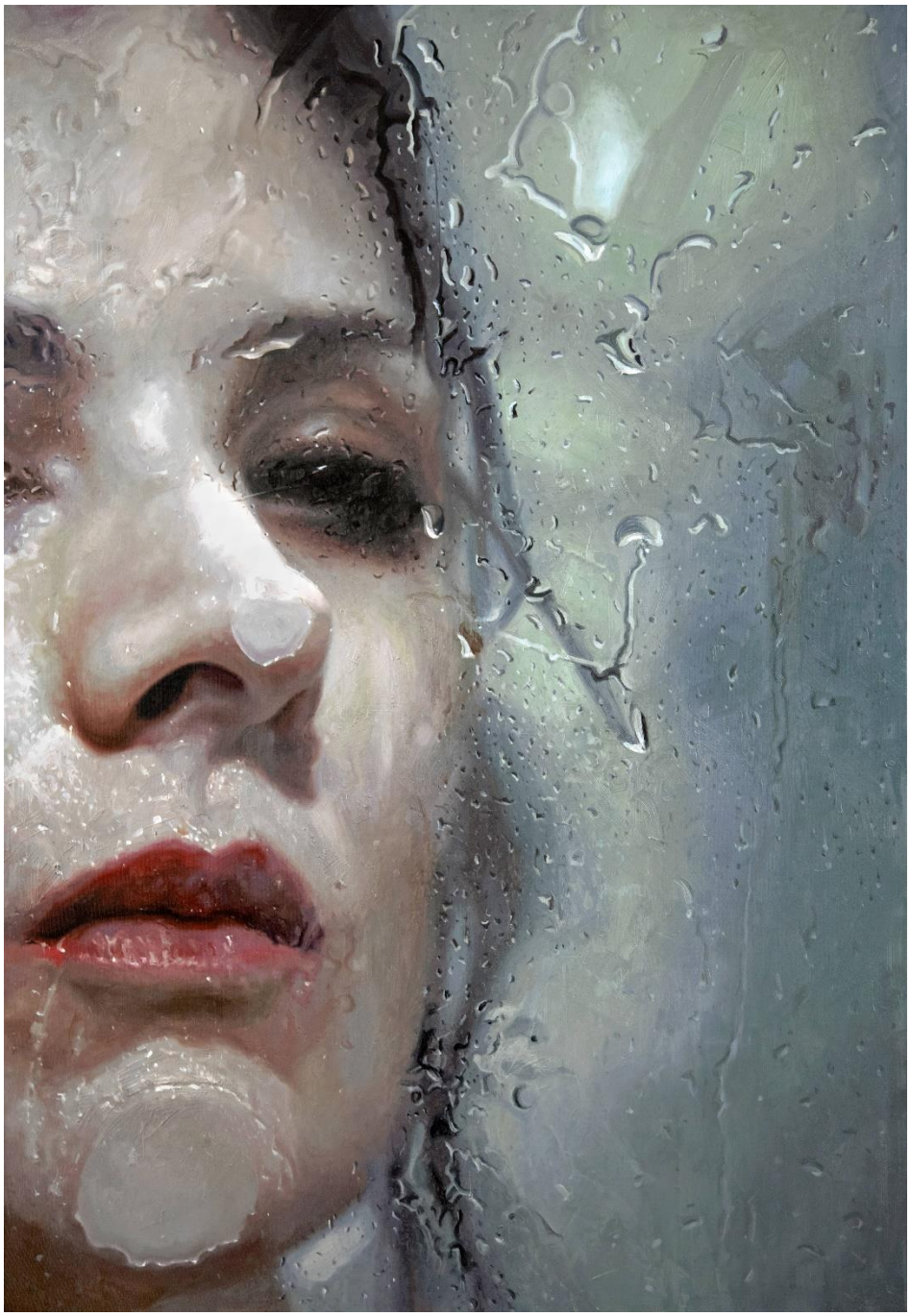
By DONALD KUSPIT, December 2021

One agonized face after, some with the artist holding her hands in front of her face, the hands held together in prayer, like those in Albrecht Dürer's *Praying Hands*, ca. 1508, but with more desperate purpose, as Monks' blurred, anxious face indicates. Not all the faces are blurred, but all are seen through a sort of glass darkly, the pane of glass with which Monks covers the painting, the space between the painting and the glass filled with vapor, turning the portrait into a sort of

mirage, its hallucinatory presence suggesting it is a dream, a rather bad one, if the unhappiness in many of the faces, some petrified by fear, suggests. In perhaps all too free association, the pane of glass that walls the portrait—the artist—in reminds me of the wall that seals the unfortunate hero of Edgar Allen Poe's romantic horror story "The Cask of Amontillado," 1846 in a wine cellar, leaving him to die, burying him alive. Similarly, Monks' self-portraits are romantic horror stories about living death—often fraught with uncontrollable fear of death, her face revealing her horror at the thought of death—death in the form of the covid virus, an invisible, microscopically small angel of the apocalypse.

All of Monks' self-portraits (all 2021) convey her panic and numbness—in some her face seems to be frozen in unspeakable fear, in others it seems beside itself with terror—at the prospect of death before she has lived the three score and ten years allotted to her by God. She's 44, suggesting that the emotional crisis depicted in the portraits coincides with the midlife crisis—when, as Dante wrote, death is on the horizon, and with that hopelessness, not to say self-doubt. And death was socially near, literally in the air—vapor--in the form of "virus-laden respiratory droplets," as she said. All of the self-portraits were made during the 18 months she remained in private and isolated in her studio during the pandemic in an attempt to avoid becoming infected by and dying from breathing that public air, studying the feelings she experienced in response to it, and recording them visually. All of them have to do with death, suggesting her paintings are a sort of preparation for it—a sort of ars moriendi. Dare one say that her studio became a monk's cell where she contemplated the reality of death, like Dürer's *Saint Jerome In His Study*, 1514? He is alone at his writing table the way Monks is alone at her easel in her studio—a kind of study. The saint is accompanied by death in the form of a skull the way Monks is accompanied by death in the form of her emotions. A study and a studio are private spaces; it is

only in privacy that one can seriously contemplate one's death, which is always a private affair, however many people witness it.



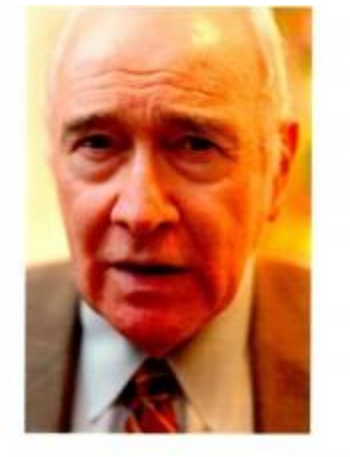
Alyssa Monks, I Accept, 2021, oil on linen, 68 x 47 inches.

Monks does save herself from “suffering unto death” by way of what the psychoanalysts call “working through” her bad feelings about it by way of painting them—and perhaps about herself, for her constant, relentless preoccupation with herself suggests she has been narcissistically injured, reminding us that what one needs most in life is empathic recognition, as the psychoanalysts tell us. Not to say the love of someone else—self-love in the form of self-portraiture may be the next best thing. Is the watery vapor that Monks uses distilled from the pool in which Narcissus looked at himself and fell in love with his image, and drowned in his attempt to embrace it? It is an image in a mirror—a one-dimensional, substanceless illusion—rather than a real, three-dimensional figure, suggesting that the narcissist has no reality principle (however real Monks knows the invisible virus is). In the final three self-portraits we see Monks’ face unveiled—no longer vaporized, and no longer fraught with suffering, as it is in the other thirteen portraits in the exhibition—and defiantly in-your-face, as the last self-portrait shows. She stares the spectator in the eye, defiantly alive rather than suffering, holding her own, rather than emotionally lost, as she is in the other self-portraits. All of the portraits are responses to the pandemic, forcing her back on herself, into isolation and self-analysis, that is, studies of the self at wit’s end as it faces death, and finally accepts it, as *I Accept* asserts. In several works she seems to be looking death in the eye, petrified by the sight--the sight of the spectator she stares at. Is the spectator death?

Alyssa Monks, Watch The Only Way Out Disappear, 2021, oil on linen, 54 x 54 inches.

From a feminist perspective—and the works are a feminist statement, about a self-absorbed, defiantly independent, autonomous, self-celebrating woman, performing herself, a performance artist using paint as a medium to perform, not to say express, herself—the male spectator is death, just as death is a man in Hans Baldung-Grien's famous picture of death coming for the maiden. If death is a

man, then the so-called gaze of the male spectator is a kiss of death, however admiring it may be. Monks' terrified, isolated woman, her mouth wide open in a scream in *Watch The Only Way Out Disappear*, is more than a match for the terrified, isolated man in Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, 1893, and more able to hold her own against death, for she does not shrink from it, as Munch's dehumanized ghost, not to say haunted shadow, of a man does. If "gross environmental failure can result in a loss of the individual's capacity for maintaining integration," as the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott wrote, then Monks retains her integrity despite the gross environmental failure that is the pandemic, however much she fears it, however much it forces her back on herself—and she is always recognizably herself. In sharp contrast, Munch's man—a bizarre self-portrait, in which the artist is completely unrecognizable, suggesting he has no self--is psychotically panicked. The bourgeois figures behind him, properly dressed, unlike him—he seems to be wrapped in a shroud, a sort of living death—symbolize the indifferent society he felt he lived in, the indifference that the sociologist T. W. Adorno said was endemic in bourgeois society, suggesting that it was a gross environmental failure, inhuman rather than all too human like Monks. Both works are psychological portraits of an artist at odds with society, not to say terrified by it—forced back on themselves, with whatever self they have left. **WM**



DONALD KUSPIT

Donald Kuspit is one of America's most distinguished art critics. In 1983 he received the prestigious Frank Jewett Mather Award for Distinction in Art Criticism, given by the College Art Association. In 1993 he received an honorary doctorate in fine arts from Davidson College, in 1996 from the San Francisco Art Institute, and in 2007 from the New York Academy of Art. In 1997 the National Association of the Schools of Art and Design presented him with a Citation for Distinguished Service to the Visual Arts. In 1998 he received an honorary doctorate of humane letters from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In 2000 he delivered the Getty Lectures at the University of Southern California. In 2005 he was the Robertson Fellow at the University of Glasgow. In 2008 he received the Tenth Annual Award for Excellence in the Arts from the Newington-Cropsey Foundation. In 2013 he received the First Annual Award for Excellence in Art Criticism from the Gabarron Foundation. He has received fellowships from the Ford Foundation, Fulbright Commission, National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, Guggenheim Foundation, and Asian Cultural Council, among other organizations.

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