



*Gasp, 2010, oil on linen*

## WATER WATER EVERYWHERE

FINE ARTIST ALYSSA MONKS MAKES A  
SPLASH ON THE CANVAS, AND IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup>  
CENTURY ART WORLD.

If we're smart we do not even pretend to understand the level of concentration necessary to accomplish a stunning portrait in oil. We simply stand in awe of how they might be realized across the days and years. And we do so rightfully. This process is not that of the carefree abstraction, buoyantly viscous. The portrait in oil is painstaking and with devout precedent, not only in its own medium, but in that of the photographer's eye and in the eyes of all of us. For the portrait artist's subject is one we know well. It is humanity; that which we are closest to, most inspired by and most afraid of.

Alyssa Monks is a fearless portrait artist. In just a few short years she has taken her subjects and audience on a joyous ride from bath to pool to shower and back again. Pushing, pulling, splashing and smirking all the way. She has continued to recreate her approach and produce a significant and changing body of work as the world's collectors and press have taken note and turned up the heat.

In the universe of art, yet another sphere dominated by males for millennia, Monks' exhibition schedule astonishes. On April 7<sup>th</sup>, Monks has another solo show at DFN Gallery in New York City opening. She goes from there to be part of a group show at the Noyes Museum in Oceanville, New Jersey this summer followed by yet another solo show at David Klein in Birmingham, Michigan, in October. And she has only just recently returned from Ahlen, Germany, where her work stood in a group show at the Kunstmuseum along side Degas, Botero, Fischl and Manet; a brilliant yet nonetheless stalwart, staunch and

entrenched cast, to say the least.

So, what is all the fuss about? Why all the attention, the travel and all these sales? Well, Monks is that rare painter that we sometimes so easily recognize across a crowded field. One that achieves narrative, intimacy, motion and life with a richness of brushwork and continuity of both vision and application that makes her so obvious and so easy to appreciate. She works tirelessly; in her studio 60 hours a week juggling multiple canvases and thousands of photographic images. She works freely; encouraging her subjects to act as they please while she fires away, taking the scores of pictures that will later become reference points for her paintings. And she works progressively; each series introducing new filters "behind" which she is breathing warmth into flesh and "through" which the audience will view her subject.

Lately, Monks has gone back to the bath tub, in a way, where she started to find focus. This time though she is manipulating the water itself. So where there was a shower door introduced in 2008 and fog in 2009, she has now returned to the surface of the water as a different sort of filter than that which she was so enamored by over the past few years. Now its properties have been changed by the artist herself, prior to the arrival of the model or the camera. In "Gasp" we see clearly how adding oils to the water before submerging the subject is both consistent with her approach throughout the last several years and yet brand new again. We are looking down from above at a bather on her back. Her countenance the usual playground of expression, free to



Scream, 2010, oil on linen

Images courtesy of DFN Gallery, New York

interpretation by the audience as the artist unveils for us our own human joys, mysteries and doubts. Yet, this time the figure moves out of reality and into obscurity and abstraction, a place the artist admittedly once shunned, but now finds herself beginning to embrace.

So when the independent minded, ambitious and talented young artist starts to find traction in the global market place there is the type of recognition that brings warmth to any who would embrace such achievement. Add to this the fact that this artist is a woman and we stand at an historic cultural crossroad. Is Monks' success partially the product of a growing movement towards greater gender equanimity in museums and collections throughout Europe and the Americas? Or is she part of the cause of these shifting sands? While MoMA unveils the Marina Abramovic retrospective so sure to dazzle, The Brooklyn Museum's Sackler Center continues to thrive with Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* as its centerpiece, and the Whitney reflects on recent major shows by Kiki Smith, Kara Walker and Jenny Holzer, it is clear that major New York institutions are starting to redraw the lines of inclusion. However, downtown this shift is not yet so pronounced and visible. Gallery shows both group and solo still skew greatly male, as has always been the case. According to The Brainstormers, a female art collective dedicated to greater gender equality in the art world, galleries in Chelsea and the Lower East Side featured 94 solo shows by men and 40 by women in September of 2009; not the kind of ratio that makes a female portrait artist's career an easy task. It would seem that Monks' burgeoning celebrity, in spite of positive currents in the most visible places, is still counter to the norm in a universe in which she remains the minority. It would seem, and rightly so, that Ms. Monks' work is precisely the cause of her success. In a marketplace and society that is always in motion, we are lucky to have those that help us along.

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