

Elissa Bardhi
Miller Arts Scholars
Award Outcome Report
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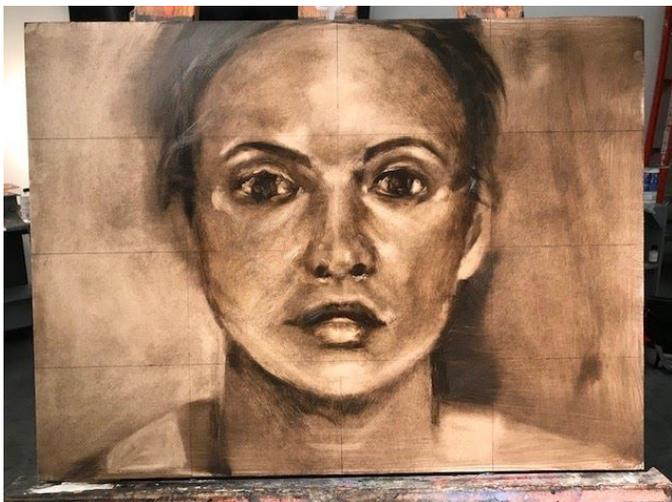
Transcending the Photo Reference

This past summer, I attended a painting workshop led by artist Alyssa Monks at the New York Academy of Art. The workshop was primarily focused on transforming a photograph into a painting. Monks led the class not only by demonstrating her painting techniques, but by explaining her thought process—providing a unique perspective on how she looks into a two-dimensional image.

Each day, Monks provided a demo for the class to observe and comment on. She began her paintings with a *prematura* layer consisting of an even coating of sepia extra oil paint. She explained that as she continues to experiment as an artist, she has played around with different colors for this undercoat. Then she began filling in the darkest spots with a 1” synthetic brush, and wiping away the highlights with a rag. Throughout her demonstration she emphasized the importance of fluid, abstract motions. Further, every time her undercoat started to become too detailed, she aggressively obliterated her work with a dry 2” bristled brush. This step was crucial to prevent the artist from becoming too focused on the details too early on.



The technique used for this underlayer was very different from the method I had used in prior paintings. In the past, I had used the underlayer as an outline—one which I treated as a *fact*.



Instead, Monks taught me to treat the underlayer as more of a *suggestion*, rather than the truth. Since this layer did not have any harsh details or lines, it allowed for a considerable amount of flexibility in the following application of paint. Prior to this course, I used the underlayer almost as a coloring book, and the layers that followed were parallel to coloring in the lines. Using the 2” brush to continuously obliterate the details allowed me to step back from the painting and focus on depth. The most important aspect of this

step was to get the darks and highlights in the right places—purposefully leaving behind the details for a later step.



As the underlayer dried, Monks guided the class through an entire day of color matching. She gave us pixelated photographs to work from, of which all the details were blurred. On this day, we focused on exploring the characteristics of each color. We went through each color and placed them in a particular order. Monks also helped me realize that the colors that come in a basic oil paint set are not the only option for a palette. From her personal palette, she omits staple colors like alizarin crimson and ultramarine blue.

We then used the laminated blurred photo to directly mix paint to make the exact colors on the photo. This process made me realize how many different shades and tones truly persist in the skin. Prior to this workshop, I had painted the skin as one even color, adding shadows and highlights from a set base color. However, in this portrait, I found that the first half of the face was significantly different from the next half.

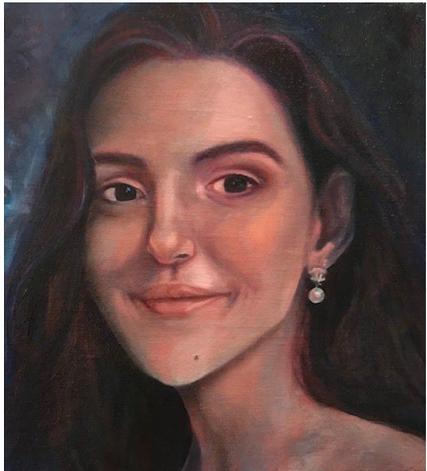


Monks pushed us to apply the paint in a craftful fashion. Each stroke should have character and style—this is what makes a painting interesting. Prior to this workshop, I painted very flat portraits. I used a small brush and tried to make exact lines and perfectly fading colors. During the workshop, Monks constantly reminded us to use a brush that is “slightly bigger than the mark you intend to make.” Rather than focusing on details, I was able to focus on putting the right color in the right place.



The final piece I created at the workshop was unlike any portrait I had made before. The piece has texture, character, and dimension beyond what was apparent in the photograph. As an artist, I learned that I had immense power over how a flat photograph can be translated onto a blank canvas.

The following fall semester I took Special Topic in Painting with Meghan Marlatt, and the final assignment was a self portrait. I was able to use the skills I learned in the workshop to paint myself under a new set of guidelines. Throughout the process, I found myself using the same painting techniques I learned at the NY Academy of Art.



My final self portrait is depicted on the right. This spring semester I am currently enrolled in the Painting II Oil class. I hope to continue to use these skills in painting from observation. I also intend to continue exploring the world of photography in relation to painting.

This opportunity would not have been possible without funding from the Miller Arts Fourth Year Award. The skills I have learned in this workshop will surely persist throughout my future endeavors in art. This experience allowed me to realize that paint can truly surpass the look of a photograph.

