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slow thrills: LOOKING AT JOHN M. MILLER'S PAINTINGS

Miller has been making his riveting paintings in Los Angeles for more than twenty years, to shockingly small public recognition. His art is powerfully original because it draws out, over time, the phenomenal effects of deep satisfaction, giving usually fleeting gratifications the endurance common to more mundane responses. In addition, it delivers pleasures that are not predicated on the prevailing idea that satisfaction is the result of relieved or diminished tensions. This negative conception of pleasure—as a removal of unpleasant pressure—derives from the uniformly Puritanical basis of culture in this country. If anything, Miller's works crank up visual pressure, intellectual stimulation, and bodily drama as they draw you into their focused orbits with the relentless force of a mechanical vise.

A peculiarly sophisticated and rigorous hedonism best describes the precepts upon which Miller's paintings are based, and the terms in which they work. None of his mesmerizing canvases ever pretends to eliminate the restless, initially irritating energy that suffuses them all, preferring instead to show that pleasure sometimes goes hand-in-hand with the amplification and intensification of experience. Death could not be a more distant model for the type of activated engagement Miller's art seeks: His paintings never deliver final, fixed, or set satisfactions, but constantly open up onto more refined questions—always individualized, and always in the present. In fact, democracy constitutes the model on which Miller's art is based. Far from being inaccessible, elitist exercises, his paintings propose that each viewer is in the best position to determine the

nature and significance of his or her relationship to the work—that is, to the experiences elicited by it.

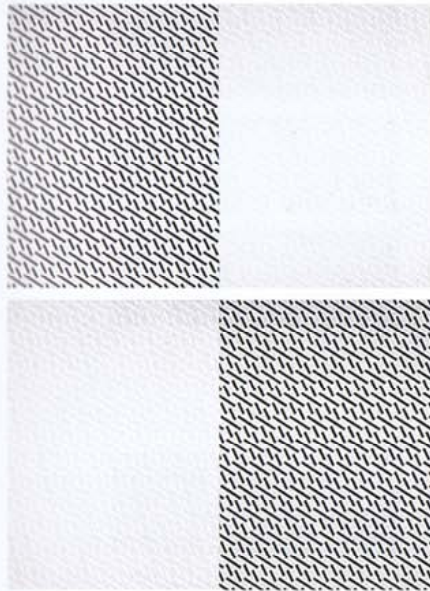
Miller's abstractions invite us to turn our attention inward—but not without first turning inside-out the very idea of the existence of a firm division between an inside and an outside at all. All of his paintings aim to locate the viewer in a shifting position: The beauty of the center expounded within Miller's works is that it is anything but fixed—hardly the point from which authority is exercised or mastery is demonstrated. Nor are the outer limits of his canvases in any sense less than essential to the whole. Unlike much contemporary art concerned with center-periphery issues, Miller's paradoxical paintings give shape to an entirely different set of relationships. Although most of his paintings from the past ten years consist of two, three, or four panels tightly abutted against one another to form single pieces, he doesn't refer to these works as diptychs or triptychs or polytychs—or even as multi-paneled paintings—but as single- or double- or triple-division paintings. This distinction is important, for it suggests that Miller is more concerned with how boundaries are drawn (and redrawn) than with making discrete, autonomous objects that can be peered at from a safe psychological or conceptual distance, under the guise of objectivity.

The various arrangements of bars and dashes of often almost imperceptibly varying dark and light colors that march across the paintings' surfaces further confound a viewer's ability to fix the relationships between the framing edges of the canvases and their internal divisions. When you spend time looking at Miller's excruciatingly precise works, you discover that figuring out the logic underlying their patterns is an activity distinct from simply taking in their appearance. Sensitivity to your intuitions regarding these works draws your whole body, rather than just your eyes and mind, into the experience of apprehending them. When you engage with these paintings, the boundaries between internal and external phenomena momentarily dissipate, leaving your ego with nothing to guide or control.

Miller's art exists only to heighten an engaged viewer's awareness of the connections that link his or her consciousness to its surroundings. After a while, you realize that when you're looking at one of Miller's paintings you're not really watching anything happen around you as much as you're regarding your own mode of attentiveness—the ongoing operations by which your consciousness makes sense of its surroundings. You're left to apprehend your own process of apprehension, to involve yourself with your mode of involvement with the world, and all of the attendant psychological complexities these activities imply. Pictorial incidents are absent from the experience.

Though Miller's paintings consist of tactile, seemingly graspable bars of dense color hand-painted onto precisely proportioned rectangles of taut, raw canvas, figure-ground ambiguity never enters the picture. The magna he uses is absorbed into the weave of the canvas, appearing so substantial and saturated that it seems to float free of the painting's surface—to hover, with a seemingly electrically charged energy, in the same space that the viewer's body occupies. This phenomenon is not an illusionistic trick intended to momentarily deceive, but results from Miller's capacity to enliven every square inch of his paintings, creating an endlessly fascinating vitality whose initial austerity and exactitude gradually and generously give way to supple, open-ended animation. Here, perception and cognition fuse as anonymity and intimacy dovetail in experiences that are extremely individual, but never limited to the personal. In both their structure and the experiences they elicit, Miller's paintings rank among the most radically democratic abstractions that have been made.

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Waxing, 1993
Magna on raw canvas
77½" x 116"

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