

Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah. "John M. Miller, Margo Leavin Gallery." *Artforum* (February 2012), p. 235- 36.

John M. Miller

MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY

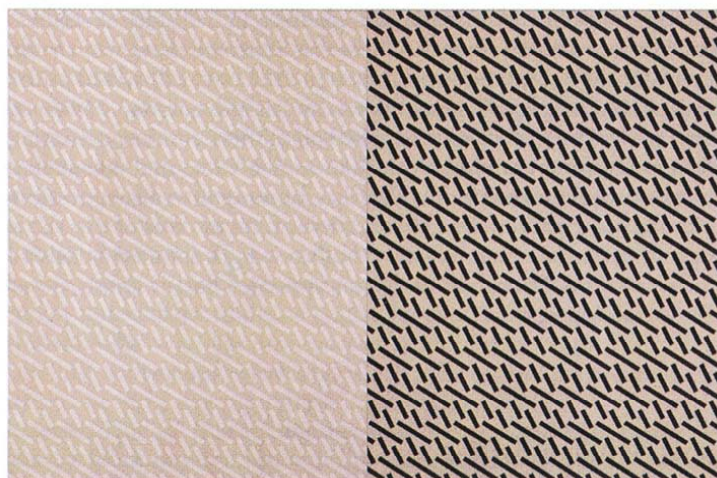
LA-based artist John M. Miller has been painting the same painting since 1973: alternating rows of diagonal lines staggered across the canvas to occupy pictorial space as an all-over pattern—a crowded tally of leaning digits that, like so many tick marks on the wall, allude to the occupation of time. Produced in 1993 and 1994, the seven works on view in this show, wistfully titled "Yesterdays," demonstrated the artist's superlatively disciplined approach. Each painting had been meticulously handpainted with Magna acrylic on raw canvas in monochrome according to a finely tuned palette, restricted here to white and shades of off-black tinged so subtly with blue or violet that the differences between tones were otherwise sensed as much as seen. In many instances, two or more panels of equivalent dimensions (and, as always, equivalent design) but contrasting color had been precisely aligned and conjoined to form a larger, longer painting multiplying the scope of its jagged pattern.

Though each painted shape is manageably human-scale—the length of a hand or finger, the width of a face—the canvases, when installed, exude a persistent sense of magnification and closeness. Miller's lattice-work is so tightly organized that claustrophobia threatens to set in even as dizziness has already taken hold. Vision buzzes, bounces, and zips compulsively between hundreds of angled lines as the viewer attempts to map structural alignments along overlapping axes, as though tracking sight lines across an orchard. The crosscurrent between the slanted bars sends a shudder through the grid's familiar order, shifting linear weight contrapposto style. As though a strong hit of Op art, the effect is dependably hypnotic. Miller pushes psycho-physiological buttons, getting vision to glaze over and lock into an unhinged, fluid stare that plugs into the painting's surface just as you realize that its rectangular slots do happen to look quite a bit like, say, rows of electrical sockets.

For being abstract, these works—terse and dry, yet richly associative and redolent—picture so much. Absorbed into the fabric ground, Miller's repeating, ever-expanding pattern doubles painting as printed textile and suggests that the canvas be experienced like freshly pressed linen, a stretched and tucked bedsheet to get wrapped up in. The mesh-like field is itself a graphic stylization of the interwoven structure of fabric, seen here as a metaphor for densely stitched interrelations.

Broadcasting slashes and dashes, Miller's zigzagging screens resonate like static on a television while conveying something mechanical and programmed through measured regularity. Analogously, perhaps, the pattern reads schematically as a force field, an energy map of interlocking charges evenly dispersed in entropic equilibrium. Miller solidifies his composition into a molecular structure as crystalline as a diamond and as pervasively expansive as Kurt Vonnegut's annihilating ice-nine or some more routine and local form of gridlock envisioned as a congested pileup of tire-tread marks.

John M. Miller,
Waning, 1993, Magna
acrylic on unprimed
canvas, 77 7/8 x 116".



But beyond the referentiality of his geometric abstractions, what's most dizzying about Miller's paintings is the exuberant, ecstatic, unrelenting single-mindedness with which he has produced them, mantra-like, for nearly four decades. And increasingly, it seems that the paintings aren't so abstract after all, but rather are quite literal indexes of the persistence and mania that is their impetus. Ultimately, the artist's labor and conviction in pattern—as an aesthetic mode and template for existence—are his real subjects. Such sustained, laser focus is breathtaking. You can't fake the gravity of thirty-eight years on the regional stage (I'm talking to you, Jacob Kassay). The profound, transformative power of the long haul insists not only that time matter but that it generate new meaning and clarity of purpose.

—Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer