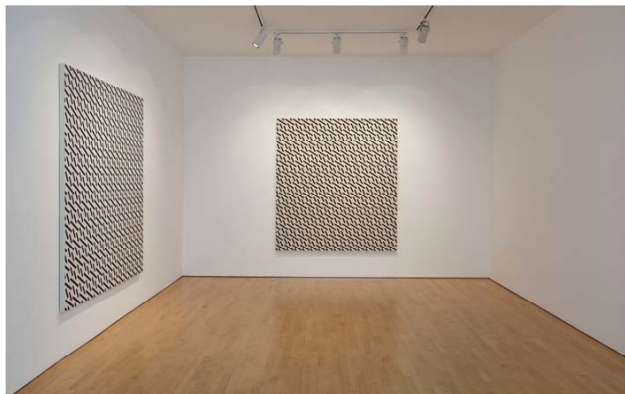


Leddy, Annette. "John M. Miller." *Frieze* (January/February 2012), p. 155.



John M. Miller
'Yesterdays'
2011
Installation view

John M. Miller Margo Leavin Gallery Los Angeles

For the past 40 years, John M. Miller has made his challenging, idiosyncratic paintings consisting of rows of vertical–diagonal bars approximately 2.5 centimetres long, alternating with rows of slightly larger horizontal–diagonal bars. He makes them in white, black, dark blue, dark violet and other dark tones, always on raw canvas. The seven main paintings in his exhibition 'Yesterdays' at Margo Leavin Gallery were generally the size of an adult body and were mounted 15 centimetres off the floor, as if you could step into them. There were also three small, mirror-sized works in bitter but pleasing shades of red, yellow and green.

These paintings have both an initial impact and a persistent force. At first view, the impression is of chaotic dispersal, like sticks tossed in the air. Then the bars come into focus, or settle. Strangely, the chaotic movement never again returns. Your mind's eye remains locked, as it were, into the bar world. The works are not Op, as they have sometimes been designated. They are more akin to Agnes Martin's grids, or Brice Marden's lines. Like those works, they offer a totality using a device borrowed from the world of utility. Where a painting by Marden might momentarily suggest a mangled city or metro system map, and a Martin might recall a faded ledger or computer punch card, Miller's work refers to manufacturing. The white paintings, such as the lyrical *Passages* (1994), which was shown in the main gallery, concern the hand-made: sewing and writing come to mind. Echoing the wave and weft of the canvas, they form rows on the horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines.

Dark paintings, such as *BBS I* (1993), are about machine manufacturing. They suggest both toys and component parts for cars or guns. At moments they are like soldiers marching in formation, and the bars are guns or legs. No one marches to a different drummer in the uniform world of the dark bars. They make you want to return to seeing them in a state of chaotic dispersal, but when a dark bar painting is seamlessly paired with a white bar painting, as in the stellar *Waxing*

and *Waning* (both 1993), one moves back and forth between them, endlessly engaged. This is the silence of which the artist speaks, which he calls the process of connecting to infinite time and losing yourself in it.

Since yesterday, today and tomorrow are all pretty much the same when it comes to these paintings, the title of the exhibition, 'Yesterdays', feels almost ironic. This show also, however, represents the gallery's participation in 'Pacific Standard Time' (PST), the Getty Research Institute's initiative to present the history of Southern Californian art simultaneously in dozens of institutions. As this exhibition was previously staged in Claremont, to the east of LA, in 1998, the show's 'Yesterday' carries some significance. Pomona College in Claremont was the improbable locus of the region's most avant-garde art in the late 1960s and early '70s. Although Miller is not included in the PST exhibition 'It Happened at Pomona: Art at the Edge of Los Angeles 1969–1973', he was a graduate student there from 1970 to 1972, when he developed his first bar painting.

However, Miller had no real mentors at Claremont, and he never met his important predecessor, the LA-based hard-edge geometric painter John McLaughlin. Miller's colleagues were the Light and Space artists, including James Turrell, who was teaching in Claremont in 1972 and signed off on Miller's thesis. Miller then moved to Santa Monica, where he worked for Doug Wheeler and DeWain Valentine, coving, mudding and building walls. When he became overly engaged in the work of his employers, he turned to home construction as a day job. Since then, he has focused exclusively on what he calls his 'theory of everything' paintings.

This art-historical context for Miller's work renders it more legible. For one thing, it points to the importance of installation in the presentation of the paintings, and at Margo Leavin the work was sensitively arranged so as to allow the paintings to reflect and talk with one another. More crucially, it emphasized how these paintings, like the work of the Light and Space, are phenomenological. They invite you to lose yourself, to give yourself over to a weightless, directionless world. Miller's achievement is to have created an experience of commensurate intensity and variation employing mere paint and canvas.

Annette Leddy