Miles, Christopher. *John M. Miller Edit: Paintings 2001.* Exhibition catalogue.
Santa Monica, CA: Patricia Faure Gallery, 2001.

Identically Unique

Since the 1970s, John M. Miller has focused his painting practice on a two-dimensional structure resembling a lattice weave. All of the resulting paintings are defined by a repeating system abstracted from Miller's original structure consisting of two sets of slanted, parallel bars (simply designated as small and large) laid out in alternating horizontal rows. The former are evenly spaced and set at approximately sixty degrees to the vertical axis. The latter are set at approximately thirty degrees, coupled in pairs, and pushed slightly into the space of their smaller counterparts. Depending on how you choose to think about it, the bars run diagonally from lower right to upper left, or vice versa. The bars, which collectively generate a plane that hovers in front of the canvas, are densely pigmented, hard-edged and rectilinear, leaving little trace of gesture. All the paintings are acrylic resin paint on stretched raw canvas, and the canvases consistently are rectilinear. Miller's colors vary widely, but have been mostly limited to one color per canvas. Thus, multiple colors occur in Miller's recent paintings only when multiple canvases within one work provide actual physical divisions necessary for color transitions. The scale of Miller's paintings varies, and the scale of the bars varies somewhat proportionally—an enlarged structure for larger paintings and a reduced one for smaller—but the structure is never made to fit the format of the canvas. Rather, the format is chosen based upon the artist's desire to control how (and how much of) the structure is contained within a containing edge.

Needless to say, once you've seen one of Miller's paintings, you'll always recognize another, but this does not mean that when you see one you've seen them all, as would be the premise of those who claim that Miller has been painting the same painting over and over again for the last three decades. Such a generalizing claim is that of the artist's detractors, but I count myself among his fans, in part because I admire his tenacity and dedication, but mainly because I am consistently impressed with how Miller, working from such a reductive basis, delivers such expansive results—how when you see one John M. Miller painting, if you're paying any attention at all, you realize not only how very different it is from the previous one you've seen in its actuality as a thing, but how different his paintings are in your impression of them from one to the next. Very few artists have managed to deliver such breadth from such a strict program, and it seems Miller has been successful in such an endeavor precisely because he has never lost faith in the power of subtlety. In Miller's scheme of things, a shift from a warm black to a cool black becomes

monumental, and a minor adjustment in the size or proportions of a canvas forces you to completely reevaluate how you relate to the work spatially. Since I first became acquainted with Miller's work twelve years ago, I have taken great pleasure in watching how the artist makes paintings that at once are so similar in their basic components and yet so diverse in effect—in seeing precisely how Miller has not been painting the same painting over and over—and for this reason, I am perversely pleased about Miler's most recent project, which makes good on precisely what, for much of his career, he has been wrongly accused. As is evidenced in the exhibition with which this catalog coincides, John M. Miller has been painting the same painting over and over again (twenty-six times, to be exact).

Edit refers to this group of twenty-six individually made paintings as close as possible to being identical. The only minute variations are in the manufacture of the stretchers, the weave and stretch of the canvas, and in the laying out and painting in of the barsfrom one canvas to the next. They are seen as a group in this exhibition, and thereafter separated and scattered. Each of the paintings is numbered 1/26, 2/26, and so on. The paintings seem square at first, but are in fact slightly wider (21.4375") than high (20.5"), again deferring in their dimensions to the artists will to fit the format to the structure in order to deliver a particular field of perception. Perception is, of course, a broad variable. One can perceive something in many ways regardless of what something one is looking at, and the artist has control over only the providence of that something, not perception. In this instance, or in these twenty-six instances, working within his usual set of parameters, Miller has generated something to perceive that is intimate in scale though large enough to fully occupy one's field of vision on close viewing, and that takes advantage of the manner by which the structure is contained to reinforce balance and a strong central focal point within the composition. From there, as with all of Miller's works, perception is left unabashedly up to the viewer.

I am reminded of critic/philosopher Arthur C. Danto's essay, "Works of Art and Mere Real Things", in which the author proposes a hypothetical exhibition including paintings made by artists spanning centuries, continents and a broad sampling of stylistic and conceptual trends and concerns: an epic history painting of unknown authorship, a penetrating psychological portrait by a Danish painter, a landscape from Soviet Russia, a minimalist piece no doubt by an American, a profound religious work from India, a still life by a follower of Matisse, an unfinished

(in fact, barely started) canvas from the workshop of Giorgione, a last-minute inclusion by an angry young Duchampian, and one non-art object thrown in by Danto for the sake of interest. The catch is that all of these works of art look virtually the same. All are square canvases simply covered in solid red paint with only minor differences in paint media and thickness. The catalog for the exhibition, Danto points out, is, like the catalog in which this essay appears, seemingly redundant, but only at the most superficial visual scan. It in fact documents about as broad a range of works as one could imagine. It just so happens that across the span of history, a handful of artists found the same form/image to be the most succinct manifestation for each of their unique and unrelated expressions or concerns; that someone made something similar to these various works of art but with no artistic intentions or claims; and that Giorgione, in the course of preparing to make something likely visually dissimilar from these other works, first grounded a canvas in red, inadvertently creating a historical curiosity similar to the rest of the objects in Danto's show, and then up and died before painting over it. This scenario, of course, could lead to any number of mixed and missed meanings. Imagine staring at what you thought was the religious painting, scratching your head and crossing your eyes in search of Nirvana, only to find out that you were blowing your energy on minimalism. Luckily, we have a load of contextual information to help us sort things out. In other words, the who, how, where, when and presumed why, help us to understand which *what* we're looking at.

Danto wrote his story as a lead-in to an investigation of how we differentiate between art objects and ordinary objects (an argument for another day) and inadvertently raised perhaps the more compelling question of how we differentiate between one work of art and the next. It was, of course, a hypothetical, though shortly after conjuring this fine story, Danto came across the likes of Sherrie Levine and Mike Bidlo, who, in making exacting copies of known works of art but presenting them as attached to different authors, places, times, intellectual and cultural climates and other contextual variables, came very close to manifesting Danto's vision. Of course, Bidlo and Levine were making copies, whereas in Danto's stories, nobody was copying anybody. The works just came into being, looking exactly alike, but completely unrelated, like that perfect twin we all supposedly have living on the other side of the planet or in a parallel universe.

Of his red paintings, Danto asks a Wittgensteinian question: if we take away from each of the visually identical things that which

makes them identical, what is left that makes them different? Of course, we are left with the who, where, when, how and why. This is the contextual baggage. But what if, as in John M. Miller's case, we have a group of paintings (whats) for which the who, where, when, how and why remain constant, painted by the same artist, in the same studio, in the same general period of time, with the same technique, presumably for the same reason, and, at least initially, all exhibited in the same place? If we subtract all of these variables, then what are we left with? There are titles, which in Danto's story proved helpful in clueing us in that *Nirvana* was a religious painting and *Red Table Cloth* was a still life, though the Russian landscape and the minimalist piece both were titled *Red Square*. As contextual clues to meaning, titles also were handy in differentiating Sherrie Levine's work from the various artists she appropriated, and a title change got Veronese out from under the thumb of the Inquisition when he magically changed one painting into another by simply tossing off a few words and transforming what had been a Last Supper image into some other New Testament dinner. But Miller's titles primarily help catalogers; they're just numbers which, like numbers on editioned prints, merely remind us that each individual work is part of a group of works that are the same.

We could of course look to other historical examples. More than a few painters have made copies of previous paintings by their very same hand, or made multiple versions of the same painting, but in a case such as Jan van Eyck's alleged two versions of *St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, the logic for such a duplication seems obvious. Van Eyck needed to do two paintings on the same topic, and he had a composition that was working for him. I go back to Miller, whose career has been defined by using the same basic structure to create always different compositions, and who isn't dealing with a problem of needing to represent the same thing twice, let alone twenty-six times, and the difference becomes clear. Van Eyck was painting for an audience ready to receive stigmata paintings. Miller has spent his career painting for an audience he doesn't want to predict. Of course, he must assume that his is an audience interested in reduced color schemes, abstraction, structure, geometry, and subtlety among other predilections, but as a maker of art, he has stayed ardently on the supply side of his trade, neither seeking to give an audience what it wants, nor attempting to educate that audience about how it should receive his offering. His paintings have been derived of his perceptions, but left to the perception of the viewer once out of the artist's studio. They come with no instructions. This group of paintings, in its collective presentation, is the

first group that, in fact, does seem to come with implied instructions, and the instructions are that in case we haven't gotten it by now, there are no instructions. The instructions are to look and perceive and position ourselves and understand our relations to these things on our own. Collectively, these paintings show how Miller's paintings always have functioned—as odd, curious objects, born of the artist's insistence that they need to exist in the world, passed along to the rest of us to have our own experiences with them. Thus, the difference between these paintings is in how I relate to one on this side of the room or that side of the room, how you relate to one and I relate to another, and in how we will relate to any one of them today in a gallery versus tomorrow in an apartment somewhere. If we subtract everything that makes these paintings the same, what is left to make them different is us and our experiences. Our individual and collective spheres of perception become the context.

Personally, I am more interested that there are several of these same paintings than that there are specifically twenty-six, but the number, which clearly references the Roman alphabet, does suggest a way of thinking about these paintings that I enjoy—that they are parts of a much broader whole, and that they operate on a prelinguistic or perhaps extralinguistic level where one might see a certain clarity, certainly different from the next, but clear in itself, and likely beyond words. So, rather than trying to describe it, I simply will state that I hope you will enjoy your clarity as much as I have mine.

I like to imagine that these twenty-six paintings will fan out around the globe—that while someone in Vancouver might find focus at the end of the day looking at one of the twenty-six in late-day summer sunshine, someone in New Delhi might pause to look across the room at one before getting out of bed in the morning—but it wouldn't matter if they stayed in the same country or city or block. They'd do their thing just the same.

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