

Colpitt, Frances. *John M. Miller: Paintings 1988-1989*. Exhibition catalogue. Santa Monica, CA: Fred Hoffman Gallery, 1989.

For all their immediacy, John M. Miller's paintings reveal themselves slowly. Continuously provocative, they tell us less about the painter who made them than about ourselves as human beings. To experience the fragile mortality of one of Miller's paintings is to be more fully alive; to sense, like a pulsing heartbeat, an ongoing, enduring vitality. The painting's appeal is perceptual — given through temporal experience — rather than inertly material. Maintained by the activity of perception, each painting seems to be continuously becoming, in a state of flux like life itself.

Of course, all paintings are perceptual objects, but abstract paintings especially appeal to and are constituted by vision. Miller's works are distinct from those, however, which are primarily decorations, as well as those which can be described as objects. The object is static and impenetrable. Frank Stella's Black Paintings, for example, present immediately graspable configurations, like pictures or motifs. Until recently, Brice Marden's paintings were also experienced as objects, characterized by opaque, sensuous surfaces and waxy edges. Though the viewer might linger over these paintings, their impact is immediate, their existence self-sustaining. The decorative painting is much less commanding than the object. Its point is pleasure, to be settled into, as Matisse maintained, "like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue." Because of their concise structure and graceful vitality, Miller's paintings might be aligned with the decorative yet there is nothing restful about them. They actively challenge the viewer to participate. The viewer has to give him or herself up to the object of perception, and yield to an unmediated experience. Liberated from concepts and preconceptions, the viewer intuits rather than analyzes Miller's paintings. According to Henri Bergson, analysis "reduces the object to elements already known," and results only in concepts. Intuition, on the other hand, provides an understanding from within rather than from without.<sup>1</sup>

Color, perhaps the most subtle feature of Miller's painting, tends to be overlooked in conceptually oriented analyses. In geometric compositions on single or multiple abutting panels that the artist has used for a decade now, series of angled bars are repeated across expanses of raw canvas. For a moment, the paintings do appear to present a set of unmodulated marks, since the stark contrast of the bar and its surround is immediately recognized. On closer inspection, various shades of black, inflected by red, green, violet or blue, are revealed. The shades of black, (or tints of white in a few paintings) remain imperceptible to some viewers who, Miller believes, continue to operate on preconceptions, hesitant to relinquish their first impressions. The colors in the paintings radiate and wash over the viewer. They cannot be captured in static description or through a distant glance. The painting is rhythmically structured one color per panel, producing an even, melodic beat.

Miller's colors appear especially vivid where panel meets panel, and the contrast is enhanced when the colors are nearly complementary. The yellow-green and violet sections of #78 make it an especially dramatic work. Each painting has its own character, just as each panel does. Some are terse and confident, others supple and sensuous. Sometimes the black of one panel is more saturated with color than its neighbor. Miller's reds are particularly prone to detection, their warmth nearly palpable next to cool grays. The chromatic interaction between panels makes some appear to fall back and others advance toward the viewer, suggesting an extraordinarily complex space. The greenish black bars on the left panel of #74 cool their raw canvas ground in relation to the right panel, structured of bluish marks which take on a slightly red cast next to the green. In a few paintings, particularly the white ones, the colors initially appear to be identical but with time their differences can be discerned, even if the colors are not nameable.

For Cézanne, "Color is the place where our brain and the universe meet."<sup>2</sup> And like Cézanne, Miller relies on the temperature of colors to create the spaces of his paintings. What appears before us is a radiant — but not pictorial — space consisting of warm and cool planes. In Miller's paintings, color and temperature are not immutably fixed. Reds can be cooled down;

blues may be heated up. To perceive the chill and the heat of a painting is to make demands on the body as well as the eyes. "Quality, light, color, depth, which are there before us, wrote Merleau-Ponty, "are there only because they awaken an echo in our body and because the body welcomes them."<sup>3</sup> Rather than playing a purely retinal guessing game of color, a substantial surrender to Miller's paintings is in order.

As light is absorbed or reflected by these paintings, our eyes grow accustomed to their finely tuned hues. Black, literally composed of all colors, embodies light and is fuller than white, which throws all colors out. Made in the natural daylight of Southern California, Miller's paintings have an affinity with L.A. Light and Space art, such as the environments produced by Doug Wheeler and Robert Irwin. The affiliation is based on the experiential and anti-pictorial, anti-object orientation of that art, as much as on a shared love of light.

Miller's is a structured light; the marks on his canvases are vehicles for color. Angled to the upper left to prevent perceptual drift, a unit of two longer bars sandwiching two short bars is repeated across the surface of the canvas. Although the width of the bars and their distance from each other might vary from painting to painting, the structure of the individual unit never changes. Early on, Miller discovered that the bars he was making were angled at 29 and 59 degrees, more vitally imprecise and just slightly less stable than the more comfortable 30 and 60 degree angles.

The structure of Miller's work began to evolve in 1969, with a drawing of the threads of two screws, magnified as if through a microscope. His earliest venture into abstraction was literally that, abstraction from observable reality. In a series of ink drawings on graph paper, the interlocking pattern, suggesting a tightly woven basket of grasses, was developed and elaborated in delicate studies in masking tape stained with tusche on cardboard. A painting of 1972, of angled bars in various colors, punctuated by little V-shapes, is derived from these studies. The following year, he settled on the structure he has used ever since. The V's were eliminated and the unit made more coherent. In some early paintings, the longer bars were cut off at the top edge of the canvas (with whole bars at the bottom), but these were rejected by the artist because of their architectural overtones. Heavier at the bottom and lighter at the top, these paintings recalled such Renaissance buildings as Alberti's rusticated Palazzo Rucellai, in Florence. In more recent paintings, opposite corners (upper left and lower right, lower left and upper right) mirror one another, as do top and bottom, where a series of unbroken bars is delineated. Subtle imperfections enliven Miller's otherwise consummate work. In a few, such as #77, the uppermost row of bars descends incrementally from left to right, an aspect hardly noticeable but which contributes nevertheless to the non-mechanical quality of his paintings.

Each new painting is begun by creating a cardboard template which Miller uses to make a drawing on the studio wall. This structure then determines the dimensions of the canvas, as Miller decides where he wants its center and perimeters to fall. The template is traced in pencil on raw canvas. The edges of individual bars are masked before black or white magna is mixed with color and applied to the surface. Because of the highly absorbent canvas and liquid consistency of the paint, the taping does not result in a predictably mechanical edge. The bars are very obviously hand-painted; fragile and delicate for all their precision. The canvas absorbs paint just as the colors absorb light. The paint does not conceal the canvas so the weave of the fabric is uniformly apparent. The texture of the canvas, what Miller calls the painting's "mortality," reinforces the consistency of what he describes as the "plane."

Miller makes an important distinction between the plane and what is traditionally called the "field." The latter term popularly describes the kind of space in Abstract Expressionist painting that spreads out before the viewer. This is not a recessive landscape space, nor is it flat and coincident with the picture plane. The paintings of Pollock, Newman, and Rothko possess a kind of shallow depth as opposed to Miller's, which cannot be looked into at all. The structural divisions of Miller's paintings at once cut into and reinforce the plane. As in Marden's work,

real edges rather than illusory lines, are formed where the panels meet. Yet, these divisions are immaterial — they are made of nothing — as is the plane in Miller's paintings. According to Miller, the plane is "experiential not physical." The plane, he maintains, is in constant flux. Received through temporal experience, it endures in, through, and because of the viewer's perception of it. Established by the bars, Miller's plane seems to me to be the picture plane as such, but the picture plane unusually revealed: the imaginary window with nothing behind it, on top of it or in front of it. I am reminded of Alberti's veil, which he suggested the painter set up as a surrogate picture plane between the eye and the object to be painted. In Miller's case the veil is given without the object. And, like a picture plane, its existence is purely perceptual.

Miller's paintings come alive through the viewer's experience. By themselves the marks on the canvas are not the picture-content. It is impossible to see the bars disengaged from their canvas ground. Ground is, in fact, a misleading term here, since his paintings do not traffic in figure-ground relationships. No one element is any more significant than any other. There is no balancing of form against form, nor any focus, yet equilibrium obtains. Miller's paintings require a sort of settling in period, to get your sea legs, so to speak. To the novice viewer, the paintings appear full of movement, dynamic to the point of chaos. This optical movement, however, ceases as the viewer grows intimately acquainted with the paintings. It might take some time to get them to stop moving, but they invariably do. The viewer eventually allows the painting to spark, as Kandinsky would have it, vibrations in the soul rather than in the eye.

For Merleau-Ponty, perception is embodied, that is, it occurs through the body as well as the eye. He is critical of Bergson's concept of intuition, his desire "to know by coinciding.... Bergson's mistake consists in believing that the thinking subject can become fused with the object thought about, and that knowledge can swell and be incorporated into being."<sup>4</sup> With Miller's paintings, the viewer is, to an extent, "fused" with the work at hand, but not in any transcendental or mystical way. I remain aware of the painting not as distinct from my experience of it, but yet distinct from myself. This results from the recognition that the painting is (both perceptually and materially) finite. Scale, which one always measures against oneself, is equally significant here. Between five and six feet tall, the paintings are of human height. In the multipanel works, the divisions where canvas meets canvas provide an intimately human dimension, like the space of an embrace. A single bar might fit in your hand. In effect, every structural element of Miller's art relates to the gestures and proportions of the human body.

Because Miller's paintings rely so heavily on the viewer's experience, they are renewed with each viewing. They cannot be exhausted because they cannot be recalled to memory. Of course, the generalized coloration and structure can be remembered, but even if they've seen a particular work before, viewers often think they're seeing a new painting. The paintings' perceptual complexity causes them to be, as Lucy Lippard wrote of Robert Smithson's early mirror sculptures, oddly "unmemorable."<sup>5</sup>

For Bergson, there are two distinct forms of memories: "learnt memories," which involve memorizing by rote and are built by repetition; and "memory on first reading." The latter are accumulated and make recognition possible, but are incapable of being experienced again.<sup>6</sup> The memories associated with Miller's work fall into this category because his paintings are not pictures, or in Bergson's words, "memory-images." They cannot be studied and recollected as, say, the *Mona Lisa* can. More like the experiencing of people than of works of art, each of Miller's paintings has a unique character, a whole that supersedes perceptually memorizable detail. One does not recognize a dear friend merely by recalling a set of learnt memories, such as facial features or personality traits. The experience of one of Miller's paintings is similar to time spent with a friend. One dwells in the present moment, allowing the moments to accumulate and deepen life's experience. From first viewing through years of familiarity, the work continues to gratify. "The intention," Robert Irwin wrote, "of a phenomenal art is simply the gift of seeing a little more today than you did yesterday."<sup>7</sup> To grow familiar with Miller's paintings is to realize

that they don't look like they did yesterday.

These works are not at all about the conventional issues of painting, eschewing reference to worldly objects, narrative anecdote, other paintings (Miller sees himself outside the art historical progression, uninterested in art as a "relic," or as an historical fact) and most especially self-expression, as it is traditionally understood. As an artist, Miller is generous to the point of being self-effacing. The world he presents to the viewer is a joyful and optimistic one, expressing an order of things not as they appear but as they are.

Frances Colpitt  
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#### NOTES

1. Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics, Selections from Bergson*, ed. Harold A. Larrabee (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949), pp. 1-4. I thank R.J. Merrill for directing me to this particular essay of Bergson's.
2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind, The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p.180.
3. Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, p.164.
4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p.62.
5. Lucy R. Lippard, *Rejective Art, Changing*, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1971), p.153.
6. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory, Selections from Bergson*, pp. 50-52.
7. Robert Irwin, *Being and Circumstance: Notes Toward a Conditional Art* (Larkspur Landing: Lapis Press, 1985), p.25.