

Kandel, Susan. "Restoring Ceremony to the Experience." *Los Angeles Times*, 23 February 1995, Calendar, p. F10.

For more than 20 years, John M. Miller has been making paintings so consistent that his work feels almost like a religion. Now on view at Patricia Faure Gallery are several of the Los Angeles-based artist's most recent efforts, which - like any liturgy - result from a series of ritualistic actions performed according to a prescribed scenario.

Slashes and pairs of dashes are arranged on rectangles of unprimed canvas in vertical columns, horizontal rows, diagonal swaths, or all three - depending on how you look at it. How you look at it is not at all incidental. It is the subject of Miller's deceptively simple, phenomenologically sophisticated work.

A room full of Miller's apparently deadpan works leaves the uninitiated viewer rather non-plussed. These make Mondrian's plus-and-minus grids seem florid, Agnes Martin's geometric abstractions as fragile as blown-glass vases and Ad Reinhardt's black paintings positively expressionistic. Miller's paintings are that emotionally and aesthetically blank - and that frustrating.

Seeing very little, the viewer opts for more intense scrutiny, hoping for the dazzling things the infant sees in a blank, white wall: unexpected shadows, sudden streaks of light, tonal shifts and other optical effects not immediately visible to the jaundiced eye. None of these, however, is forthcoming. What you see, to quote Frank Stella, is what you see.

So what, then, is to recommend this work? If Stella's project was to insist upon the non-referentiality of abstract painting, Miller's project is rather different. It has something to do with establishing new patterns of attention, and then drawing attention to those patterns.

In making the viewer aware of the act of looking, the paintings prolong the look itself (if only out of a sense of shame). This, in turn, has something to do with restoring a sense of ceremony to the public experience of the art object - a blatantly liturgical, obliquely subversive and very interesting idea.