

Knight, Christopher. "Beyond the Buzz of Art." *Los Angeles Times*, 2 October 1994, Calendar, p.63-64.

Beginning with Mondrian, geometric abstract painting has principally functioned as a secular assertion of a Renaissance ideal: Art was considered to be a vehicle for the redemption of human perfection, which had been destroyed in mankind's fall from grace.

Balance, precision, harmony, holistic order-these were the rigorous ingredients specific to painting that abstractionists thought necessary for achieving the goal. And because they were abstract, rather than figurative, geometric paintings were thought to be generic enough to allow any viewer to enter into a dialogue with the redemptive concept.

In light of this tradition, the geometric abstract paintings of John M. Miller have an astonishing proposition to make. Balance, precision, harmony, holistic order and the rest are fine, but what does one do with idiosyncrasy, irrationality and other less-than-normative conditions, which are nonetheless integral to life?

Banish them? Corral and tame them? Subject them to homogenizing assimilation?

Or, as Miller's paintings so mesmerizingly do, give those eccentricities free rein to participate in their own redemptive exercise?

At 55, Miller is among the most important abstract painters working today. He's at the top of his form, too, as evidenced by two visually lush, conceptually sophisticated recent paintings included in "Plane/Structures," a survey of current abstraction in L.A. on view at the Otis Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design.

The show will travel to six more sites around the country during the next 18 months. Meanwhile, Miller also anchors a second survey, titled "In Plain Sight: Abstract Painting in Los Angeles," organized for the Blue Star Art Space in San Antonio, Tex., where it's currently installed. Together, these surveys amply demonstrate his stature as a painter of the first rank.

Miller brings to geometric abstraction a perceptual rigor essential to the best of the genre. Yet, the loopy eccentricity of his paintings ratchets their level of accomplishment up a notch.

The paintings are composed simply. One or more panels of raw, unpainted canvas each features a regular, painted pattern of angled bars. Single rows of longer bars alternate with double rows of shorter bars.

Miller has been working with this basic format for 21 years. If it sounds simplistic or repetitive-well, you've probably never seen his paintings. There's endless subtle variety within the established format.

Seeing Miller's paintings is no mean feat, either, and not just because he shows his work in public only irregularly. Rather, these are canvases that are exceedingly demanding of a viewer's time.

A cursory look at a Miller painting yields little but a buzz of visual noise. Many who breeze by, merely glancing out of the corner of their mind, are likely to mutter, "Oh, Op art," and quickly move on. But the quality of these paintings is such that protracted looking yields commensurate pleasures.

It's the same with Miller's color, which verges on the indescribable. In the show at Otis, one painting includes a panel of black bars abutting a panel of equally dark hue, except the latter is made from black magna paint mixed with blue.

Sometimes the artist mixes red or green into the black, and sometimes the bars are painted white with a slight tint of color. Either way, only protracted looking allows the submerged color to float to the surface of your conscious eye.

The other Otis painting pairs a black half with one that glows with golden ocher bars. The sharp difference in the two sides is oddly reconciled at the edges where the two panels meet and black bars join with ocher ones. There, each bar of color seems to slide effortlessly into the other, while the pictorial space magically merges shallowness with depth.

These seemingly simple paintings get more and more complicated the longer you look at them. For instance, both rows of bars in Miller's paintings are tilted, from the upper left to the lower right. Yet, the angle of the single bars is steeper and more precipitous than that of the double bars.

Here's the kicker: The angles of the big bars and the small ones are at 59 degrees and 29 degrees on the diagonal, respectively. Because a painting is a rectangle, with horizontal and vertical edges at 90 degrees, you might logically expect the painted bars to be tilted at 60 degrees and 30 degrees.

Miller's slight deviance from the expected norm is just enough to gently animate the painting's surface, at a perceptual level hovering just below the threshold of cogent grasp. (In this, the structure is like his use of indescribable color.) The resulting pattern exudes a perceptual liveliness that would be lacking with more evenly divided angles.

The paintings' visual imagery also echoes the physical weave of cotton thread of the canvas. The double bars create a compositional movement exactly opposite the direction established by the bigger single bars. Visually, the resulting crisscross movement seems to knit the painting together into a stable whole.

Most important, the paradoxical creation of visual stability using eccentrically tilted and colored bars endows Miller's paintings with a philosophical dimension of bracing intelligence. The post-Renaissance motif of painting on a flat, portable, rectangular surface is peculiar to Western culture. Traditionally, a rectangle's natural emphasis on verticality and horizontality carries weight as a schematic approximation for an upright figure standing vertically on the horizontal plane of the earth. It reflects the viewer, standing before the painting.

The format also presents the viewer as an earthly reflection of a heavenly creator. The intersection of vertical with horizontal, expanded to spiritual dimensions, works as a sign for the intersection of a supernatural with a natural realm.

Miller's eccentrically tilted bars operate within those standard, age-old schemes-as does most geometric abstract painting of the 20th Century. Yet, his work also gently tips over those conventions. Dazzlingly precise and exquisitely controlled, Miller's paintings also mischievously revel in an oblique irrational space-which is, of course, the messy place where life is actually lived.

These are geometric abstractions that seek neither to banish nor to tame. Instead, they search for generosity, with which everyone might be embraced.