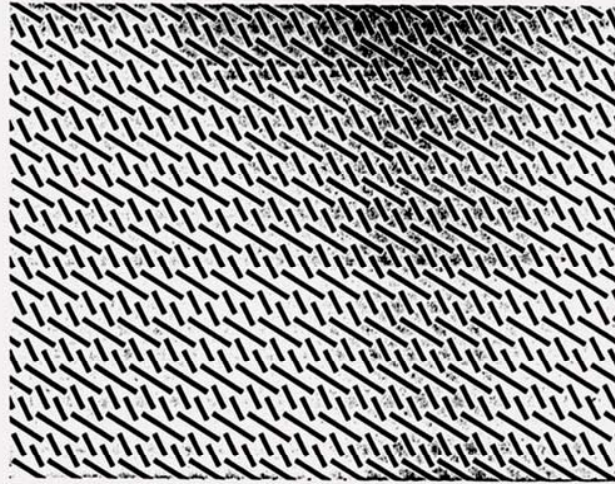


Kornblau, Gary. "John M. Miller at Fred Hoffman." *Art issues* (May/June 1991), p. 38.



### John M. Miller

at FRED HOFFMAN, 12 March–11 April

I have long known John M. Miller's paintings (he's been making these extraordinary works, in this town, for 20 years), but I've always dismissed them as retro Op Art. At first glance, they are so visually disrupting that they demand to be stared at long and hard, or not at all. That should have clued me in: this artist was not after the easy fix, nor was he interested in spectators who fail to provide their complete and undivided attention. Unlike Op paintings, Miller's are not concerned with turning the tables on Greenbergian formalism by being "true to their nature" as colored shapes on flat surfaces while simultaneously depicting three-dimensional space (the only interesting facet of that otherwise pedantic art). They are not all dazzle and illusion; on the contrary, Miller's paintings are reflections on the steady act of viewing. More akin to the demanding works of John McLaughlin, Robert Ryman, Agnes Martin and Roy Thurston, among others, his paintings are highly intelligent and controlled exercises exploring the concept of spectatorship.

Judging by the effect of these compositions, the rectangular motifs running throughout Miller's bare canvases appear not painted on so much as *sewn into* their support. Longer colored bars (about the

length of one's hand) are placed diagonally across the painting in one direction, and twice as many shorter ones (more or less the length of one's fingers) lie stretched out in a slightly different direction. The "image" appears *stretched* from edge to edge, as it were, echoing the way the canvas is pulled over its stretcher bars. Long before Meyer Vaisman became known for paintings of blown-up representations of canvas in the mid eighties, Miller was already perfecting a style which doubles as a depiction of the very weave of the canvas, and in a more sophisticated fashion. The all-over pattern of colored bars leads the eye to imagine visual stitches in and out of the plane of the canvas. In time, the paintings gel before one's eyes, and we discover that they each contain a number of separate picture planes, each rubbing against and undulating in and out of the others. What's now up front is later behind, and then shifts to a forward plane once again. We follow the vertiginous actions of these overlapping planes and sense the ways they are stitched into each other to form the painting. Rather than different images coexisting on a single picture plane—which is what we ordinarily expect of painterly composition—a single "image" here results from the interaction of the many different picture planes which the painting posits.

Cross your eyes, and what you see is the world doubled up, one image superimposed on top of another, the two sliding back and forth across one's visual field. A Miller painting affords a similar, albeit more

complicated visual experience, and this is significant. For what is odd about the cross-eyed view of the world is that it puts one's immediate environment into flux. Seeing this way results in spatiotemporal confusion, greatly enhancing the feeling that sensory data are always fleeting, disappearing. Paintings which create such an effect, as Miller's do, *move*. They resurrect abstract art precisely by putting into the content of painting the very motion of the eye across, in and through the surface of it.

Miller's most recent body of work finds him expanding his palette—from the dark olive greens, browns and blues (all of which appear almost black) characteristic of his past work—to include a brighter red, and an almost butterscotch yellow. I've heard the exhibition's four-panel, four-color composition—clearly the masterpiece of the group—described as seasonal; if so, it indicates that Miller's ongoing examination of the viewer's rapid mental reconfiguration of the painted image is finding yet more powerful expression. His works have always been metaphors for birth, death and rebirth: indeed, that's one way to describe the process we undergo while peering into his paintings, in the shifting planes of their surfaces. Updating formal abstract painting, a genre often seen as outmoded, Miller's paintings, remarkably and doubly so, are a welcome change.

Gary Kornblau

John M. Miller  
*Untitled*, 1991  
 Magna paint on raw canvas  
 57-1/2" x 77-1/4"  
 Photo: Philip Cohen  
 Courtesy Modernism, San Francisco