

Meyer Riegger

John Miller

Public Works

Opening: Wednesday, 6 November 2024, 5–8 pm

On view through 17 January 2025

Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe

Everything & More

Opening: Friday, 8 November 2024, 5–8 pm

On view through 21 December 2024

Meyer Riegger, Berlin

Cavalcade of Brown

Opening: Friday, 8 November 2024, 5–8 pm

On view through 11 January 2025

Trautwein Herleth, Berlin

Many people have written about John Miller's work as an artist, musician, writer, teacher and friend, and most of them know that no one can do it as pointedly as he does himself:

“Inscribed within the demand to produce is the inexorable demand to consume. The political economy consigns the labor of consumption, however, to so-called leisure or ‘free’ time. Nevertheless, how free is free?”

In *Cavalcade of Brown* at Trautwein Herleth, viewers encounter a cavalcade of paintings, sculptures and prints that are less grandiose and solemn than disturbing. John Miller's signature brown (which has earned him the reputation of being the “Yves Klein of brown”), gives rise to infantile, faecal mind games with the repulsive, even the abject, while simultaneously referencing the earthiness of Land Art and the grandeur of artistic subjectivity in the sprawling impasto brushstrokes of Abstract Expressionism. Instead of being reminiscent of a painterly flex, Miller's brushstrokes are more cartoon-like and, at the same time, “real”. Once an emotional reaction to Miller's self-imposed mandate to arbitrarily paint a picture every day, or more precisely, as he says, “pictures of pictures”, he began the brown works in the 1980s, finding that the presumed “love of paint” was a matter of ambivalence. The “Miller brown” series is itself a good example of this: no creative inspiration is reflected by random muddy, earthy colours; rather, they follow pragmatism, with primary colours subtractively mixed together on the palette, “extinguishing” one another.

Miller's “faecal brown”, as he calls it, reflects Sigmund Freud's assumption that making art is a sublimation of the anal drive – the urge to make art deriving from the urge to model faeces. In Miller's work, there seems to be hardly any redirection of the drive into creativity. A fact that, at times, could plunge the contemplative neoliberal viewer in the gallery space into a profound crisis or lead to a loss of reality: here, one does not encounter the reincarnation of a magnificent still life with nature's opulence, as in Dutch and Flemish painting of the seventeenth century. On

the contrary, here, a brown mass of excrement runs out of a tower of wastebaskets, turned upside down, over plastic fruits.

On the gallery walls, brown monochrome oil paintings or “pseudo-abstractions”, as Miller calls them, are lined up. First shown at Metro Pictures in New York in 1986, their geometric elements are evocative of upright bodies, ancient columns and Christian iconography. On another wall, hyperreal inkjet prints on canvas are hung. They show exterior shots of Miller’s second home, Berlin, which the artist photographed on the street while consciously, aimlessly wandering or on a *dérive* as Guy Debord called it: close-ups of a half-demolished billboard and textured facades. From a fenced-in freestanding firewall, initially a fire-resistant barrier between two buildings, to expressionist brick, to the exposed aggregate concrete of an East Berliner Plattenbau, all of Miller’s facades are perceived passively rather than haptically during an urban stroll. Overpainted by geometric brown impasto colour fields and embedded with drop shadows in a trompe l’oeil manner surrounding them, the works subvert the modernist idea of interior and exterior, private and public, of excrement brown in the white cube or on a side of the building in the urban space. As Walter Benjamin and Asja Lācis have noted in *Naples* (1925): “Just as the living room reappears on the street, with chairs, hearth, and altar, so...the street migrates into the living room”. This makes one think of Dan Graham’s artistic/architectural concept *Alteration to a Suburban House* (1978), which Miller analyzed to the core in his text *Now Even the Pigs’re Groovin’* (2001), namely the suggestion to replace the façade of a suburban house with a glass “picture window” revealing the inside.

Miller always ensures that viewers are repeatedly made aware of both the artificiality of what is displayed and their own position in the exhibition space, because, as the collective Chto Delat once put it, with a Brechtian ethos: “It is not enough to make shit look shittier and smell smellier. It is vital to convince the viewer that there is also something that is different from shit.” In Miller’s work, so-called “through the looking glass” gestures, as he calls them in reference to Juan Downey’s influential video essay *The Looking Glass* (1981), reappear. The mirror often serves as an ironic tool for self-reflection and the questioning of ideologically-shaped identity, indeed of recognition, which calls subjects into being when they are “hailed” by ideological apparatuses, whether state, media or culture, in an Althusserian sense: “Hey, you there!” Here, too, a mirror is hung at eye level, smeared with a brown impasto like a cow pat and obscuring the appearance of the self/observer, while reflecting only fragments of the self, because, as Miller himself noted, “endless mirroring is the end product of mass culture”, creating a fragmented experience of reality.

Everything & More at Meyer Riegger in Berlin focuses on the works that Miller made after his faecal browns, which are, in Freudian terms, essentially two facets of the same matter only in different packaging. His golden reliefs are considered proof of the pious platitudes and window dressing of American consumer culture and show how one can derive a wealth of pleasure from suppressed disgust – namely, how cultural waste products, even shit, can supposedly be turned into gold. Behind the seemingly gilt-leaf staging of desire and value lies a potpourri of cultural trash and junk in a wide variety of variations on predefined panel dimensions, such as those found on Canal Street not far from Miller’s studio in New York in the 2000s: cheap

studded belts, key fobs, bling and mannequins' body parts, or "Canal's abject excess", as Matt Keegan, whom assisted Miller in producing the works in the studio, once aptly described it. Presumably, one could also read into these works the bourgeois need to regulate the "body-machine" (Silvia Federici) and cleanse it of any element that might bring about "a dead time in the expenditure of labor."

In an act of reification, *junk* is camouflaged here in fake decorative gold as real gold leaf, while the gold rush was booming in the 2000s – a time when eye-catching art in the form of "proxy gold standard" and "art fair art" (Jack Bankowsky) did not shy away from sacrificing substance for the sake of incentive and from penetrating the innermost sanctuary of commerce. Miller's megalomaniacal monument of a holy warrior with all his Christian virtues, next to a scrapheap of devotional objects and an arsenal of toy weapons, is an example of how the religious fetish character of twenty-first century goods has replaced the classic icon, which has been relocated from churches to museums and art fair booths, where it has become a miracle of goods. That the motif of the brimming cornucopia as a rich, overflowing treasury of resources and consumer goods also symbolizes an excessive abundance that shapes desires and social relationships in a way that obscures reality is illustrated by Miller's grotesque dome-shaped-like "Binishell". Invented by Dante Bini in the 1960s, it is a thin concrete shell structure that can be lifted and shaped by air pressure. Covered with plastic fruits, Miller's look-a-like version appears like a miniature railway landscape that has been moved into the exhibition space. Miller here took inspiration from Giorgio de Chirico's still lifes, in which fruits tower up in the foreground against a remote landscape, symbolizing de Chirico's "plastic loneliness", indeed the "double life of a still life, not as a pictorial subject, but in its supersensory aspect, so that even a supposedly living figure might be included", as he once wrote.

These disruptions of continuity and notions of displacement can also be found in Miller's other works, which take *Public Works* as a theme at Meyer Riegger in Karlsruhe. In 1994, Miller began his series *The Middle of the Day* as an ongoing project in which he takes a photo most days between noon and 2 pm in the "grey area" of the public sphere – the time of day between "leisure" as a "managed and manageable form of consumption" and "work", which not only Miller as an artist likes the least. For example, Miller once wrote about how the drummer in Todd Rundgren's song *Bang on the Drum* turns to drumming to free himself from the constant need to produce and consume:

*I don't want to work.
I want to bang on the drum all day.
I don't want to play.
I want to bang on the drum all day.*

With Miller's diaristic reservoir of still lifes, city squares, storefronts or people roaming around – basically a counter-archive of what Allan Sekula called the utilitarian functionality of a "shadow archive", – he draws attention to the significance of places, so-called "ideological non-sites" (Miller), which often generate meaning in an unspectacular way and below the "threshold" of ordinary perception, which is sometimes not far from the "absolute threshold" of "the lowest

level of stimulation an organism can perceive". Or in Lefebvre's words: "The everyday is the most universal and the most unique condition, the most social and the most individuated, the most obvious and the best hidden." This is roughly the image of a woman that Miller captured with his camera as she crossed the street in front of the Kamps bakery chain. She appears absent-minded, lost in thought, while a man in the background enjoys his midday coffee and seemingly watches her (or his own reflection?) through the bakery window.

Just as with Miller's graphite drawings, which Christopher Williams once compared to "dentist's office art": "so unburdened by the appearance of intentionality and virtuosity" – Miller's *Pedestrian Series* also uses the reservoir of *The Middle of the Day* as a source. Often depictions of a random collection of people lingering at intersections, even waiting for the traffic lights to turn green, with their realistically painted grayscale hues and shaped life-size panels touching the gallery floor, they look like characters from a tableau vivant or "standees" from a heist movie poster. This makes Miller's *American League* (2013) seem almost like a more down-to-earth version of Steven Spielberg's *Ocean's Twelve* (2004).

As if taken out of context, the pedestrians transported into the gallery space illustrate the compulsion to present the self (and impose external ascriptions) in public space, whereby each of them seems to have internalized Shoshana Zuboff's ever-smarter surveillance capitalism, even in the most private of crevices – as if they were constantly "on stage". This aspect was already anticipated in Miller's infamous game show paintings (started 1995), in which abysmal TV consumption stages inspired by game shows like *The Price is Right* were contrasted with American southwestern landscapes as patriotic yearning for the sublime. The same applies to a series of reality TV show paintings (started 2012) – close-up portraits of the typical howling expression of people's pain-contorted faces, who seemingly reveal everything on TV, as Miller already observed in the game shows: "Without tight shots of the faces of hysterical women overwhelmed in their newfound riches, the game show would lose its 'human' interest."

What runs through most of Miller's work is that his artistic methods adapt and change in tune with the development of technology around him. Whether it is switching from analogue to digital cameras, newer iPhone models and integrated editing apps, what he uses is the widely available: the gear of a dedicated amateur rather than that of a professional photographer. His PowerPoint series deploys the globally ordinary mainstream presentation medium as a continuation of the seemingly endless and fragmented nature of his accumulated photographs. Sometimes too fast or slow-paced, contextualized and yet incongruous, anonymous yet autobiographical, Miller's image-text slides have an eerie hauntological presence. Without ever running the risk of lapsing into aesthetically pretentious or a programmatic approach to art, Miller prefers to lose himself here as an alienated consumer in the self-reproducing masses of the public: "I'm sick of all this tourist kitsch. But I have to admit ... there is something about this bear." He coupled this statement with a closeup shot of a keychain from which hangs a miniature, stuffed bear – a souvenir signifying Berlin.

Elisa R. Linn