

Meliksetian MB Briggs

frieze

Issue 169

John Miller

MARY BOONE GALLERY & METRO PICTURES, NEW YORK, USA



Here in the Real World', 2014, exhibition view at Mary Boone Gallery

Just what is the real world? For most adults, it's a challenging place, where there is no guarantee that anything will work out. Some of the most memorable art provides a momentary escape from the real world's difficulties, and critically oriented art has the potential to get us couch potatoes to wake up to the ways in which the media's industrial-grade fantasies influence our behaviour.

John Miller's two-gallery exhibition at Mary Boone and Metro Pictures, titled 'Here in the Real World' (after a 1990 song by Alan Jackson), focused on different aspects of entertainment and experience. Metro Pictures has represented Miller since the 1980s, and this exhibition is the first of six that curator Piper Marshall will put together over the next three years for Mary Boone. Both shows featured images from television, particularly US reality and game shows. Even though the sources of these paintings (dating from 1997–2014) were from home entertainment, Miller cropped and flattened them out in ways that made them look like documentary evidence. Other works in the

Meliksetian MB Briggs

exhibition –including sculptures made from store-bought objects, wallpaper printed on vinyl and, at Metro Pictures, cut-out paintings based on photos of pedestrians and a video – complemented and expanded on his somewhat detached treatment of commercial media. Miller’s paintings emphasize the artist’s role as observer and the importance of seeing and being seen in contemporary life. They bring to mind the voyeuristic catchphrase ‘I like to watch’ from the 1979 Peter Sellers film, *Being There*.

At Mary Boone were a number of digitally printed game show pieces, based on screen grabs of the TV shows’ garish sets, emphasizing their abstract elements; several of the canvas stretchers are rounded in shapes imitating pre-HD TV aspect ratios. They are generally depopulated, with a few exceptions – an arm in *40 Dollars* (2014), a person with a microphone in *5, 100, 15* (1997). Most of the paintings zero in on the jazzy yet vaguely alienated art direction and use of numbers – contestants’ scores and money – with an occasional prize, such as the car in *Aspiration* (2014). Miller made the earlier printed pieces with sprayed acrylic; the more recent ones are jet-sprayed on polyester fabric.

The paintings in the series ‘Everything Is Said’ (2012) depict close-ups of people in emotional distress – participants on well-known reality TV programmes. Thinly painted, in monochrome or fairly neutral colours, their hand-painted surfaces give them a personal touch, although their sense of emotional detachment and distance is similar to the game show paintings. A kiosk-like sculpture in the middle of the gallery, *Public Display* (2013), featured repeated, mirrored pictures of a crying woman; a model for a monument to televised personal anguish. The large vinyl wallpaper work (*Untitled*, 2014), based on Miller’s digitally altered photo of a street in New York’s Chinatown, was large enough for that part of the gallery to become another kind of stage set, with visitors sometimes taking selfies in front of it.

At Metro Pictures, the ‘Pedestrian Series’ (2014), comprised a roomful of slightly smaller-than-life monochrome cutouts of people, painted on shaped panels. Unlike the cropped pictures of game show sets or close-ups of reality TV contestants, the subjects of the ‘Pedestrian Series’ appear without any background at all. They are based on photographs that Miller took himself, rather than being taken from screen grabs or Google image searches. The cutouts emphasize his subjects’ upright posture and their presentation of self, and are somewhat reminiscent of John Ahearn and Rigoberto Torres’s casts of Bronx neighbourhood residents or Michelangelo Pistoletto’s painted figures on mirrors.

Metro Pictures also featured paintings from the series ‘Everything Is Said’ and paintings from a similar series titled ‘Project’, alongside another vinyl wallpaper piece showing a loading dock and a readymade-like sculpture: an upside-down table on top of a Buckminster Fuller book, plopped down in the gallery like an inside joke. There was also an entertaining video projection by Robot, Miller’s collaboration with artist and curator Takuji Kogo, called *I Like to Make People Laugh* (2014). Based on a dating profile that has been set to music, it shows another aspect of the interplay between public and private information in contemporary life.

Miller’s work is not allegorical or didactic. It manages to be both critical and fun, and Miller does not imply that he and the art world are superior to what he’s representing. Rather, he’s showing that while there may be a gulf between the fantasies of TV contestants and those of artists and collectors, there’s overlap and continuity as well.

David Reisman
March 2015