

Meliksetian MB Briggs

ARTFORUM

September 2016

John Miller

RICHARD TELLES FINE ART



John Miller, *Untitled*, 2016, acrylic on Gatorboard panel 74 × 42 1/2 × 2".

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When one thinks of John Miller's work, excrement is one of the first things to come to mind. Miller gained notoriety in the mid-1980s and early '90s for his series of paintings and sculptural works thickly coated with smears of chocolate-brown acrylic impasto. Fellow artist Roy Arden quipped, "So much did the substance come to unify and symbolize his oeuvre that 'John Miller Brown' or 'J.M.B.' became a trademark of sorts . . . a materialist antidote to the I.K.B. or 'International Klein Blue' of Yves Klein's cosmic monochromes." Whereas Klein had cunningly sought to capture (and market) experiences of metaphysical transcendence through his patented blue pigment, Miller mired viewers in the muck of his chosen material while also riffing on Freud's theory of artmaking as a sublimation of the urge to play with one's feces. If these early pieces—which were recently on view in a comprehensive survey at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Miami—pivot around notions of desublimation, commodity fetishism, and libidinal economies through an exploration of (base) materialism, Miller's recent output, as presented in Telles Fine Art's "Relations in Public," reveals a different set of concerns, ones driven by questions regarding photography's role in the representation and circulation of discourse in the public sphere.

Life-size figures cut from Dibond-mounted Gatorboard, about two inches thick, were mounted on the four walls of Telles Fine Art's main gallery. These works (all *Untitled*, 2016) featured men, women, and children of different ages, races, and ethnicities rendered photorealistically in gray scale using acrylic paint. The subjects sport street clothes. Some are caught mid-stride while others stand still, as if waiting for a traffic light to change. The works, banal in subject matter and tone, depict pedestrians captured in Miller's ongoing "Middle of the Day" series, begun in 1994, for which he shoots photographs between noon and 2 PM. Twice removed from their originary contexts—first from the street where they were photographed, then again from the photographs from which the cutouts were extracted—the painted figures function as ghostly simulacra of their human referents. Some of the figures' feet touched the gallery's floor, occupying both the representational space of the wall and the real space of the gallery. These figures seemed to represent a "public," collected as they were in the same physical space, but they were also isolated. They appeared ensconced in their own spheres of private thoughts and concerns, set adrift in the blank exhibition space of a white cube. The implications of the installation were ambiguous. (Can a group of people without any discursive engagement constitute a "public"?)

In the gallery's annex space, Miller's PowerPoint presentation *Reconstructing a Public Sphere*, 2016, was projected in a darkened room. The photo-and-text essay deftly interweaves a history of New York's Battery Park City as a planned community (construction began in 1980) and includes an autobiographical narrative about the artist's move into the development with his family in 1997 and their flight after the terrorist attack on the neighboring World Trade Center on 9/11. Through a rhythmic

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sequence of photographs and texts, the work poignantly meditates on the artist's recent visit to the area, during which he muses over the control of public remembrance through memorial designs and urban reconstruction, and on the involuntary memories that spring up when one moves through once-familiar sites. The work also self-reflexively includes a side note about Microsoft's launch of PowerPoint in 1990 and its surge in popularity among artists and art historians as a communicative medium—as well as the concurrent slip into obsolescence of 35-mm slides and other analog technologies in favor of digital photography. One of the slides states: "Every new medium—or technology—serves not only to represent reality, but also to shape social relations." Relatedly, Vilém Flusser reminds us that any given photograph must be understood in relation to the apparatus that produced it. From this point of view, *Reconstructing a Public Sphere* refers not only to the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan post-9/11 but to the reconfiguration of social relations and the possibilities for public discourse as photography adopted a new apparatus in the digital age.

—Kavior Moon