Meliksetian MB Briggs

THE MIAMI RAIL

JOHN MILLER

with Jim Shaw

John Miller, *Untitled*, 1987. Oil on canvas, 180.3 x 146.1 cm. Courtesy of the Artist and Meliksetian | Briggs, Los Angeles.

On the occassion of *I Stand, I Fall*, a comprehensive survey exhibition of the work of John Miller at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami (ICA)—the first of its kind to be presented in an American museum—the conceptual artist spoke with Jim Shaw about his experiences as a young artist in New York in the 1980s, his evolving approach to art making, the exhibition's unique focus, and the powerful influence of some of the mainstays of American popular culture, *Magnum P.I.*, *ABBA*, and reality TV stars among them.

JIM SHAW: The show at ICA is a survey, right?
JOHN MILLER: Yeah, the curator Alex Gartenfeld approached the show as a chronological survey of my work with an emphasis on figuration and how I use that in different ways. We looked at my previous shows in Europe and wanted to do something different—to select different work and put it into a new context.
SHAW: You've produced an awful lot of different work. I just had a survey show, and I know it's hard to put it all into a single exhibit when there's so much variety.
MILLER: We wanted to include lesser-known and early work, but quickly discovered it was hard to get ahold of everything we wanted. The things someone buys twenty years ago or more can easily get lost in the shuffle: the entropy of collecting.
SHAW: I've read you changed your mode of attack, so to speak, over time, because you felt like it was no longer effective, or the strategy wasn't working out the way that you thought it might.
MILLER: The biggest issue in that regard is how I think about sublimation and desublimatory aesthetics. Early on, I was looking at sublimation, of course, from a Freudian standpoint, but also from the aesthetics of the sublime. I guess I was

influenced by the politics of the '60s and the idea that desublimation is liberatory. Even so, even when I was making what I would call my first gestures toward desublimation, I never thought anything could be desublimated absolutely. Rather, you could allude to that possibility.

SHAW: And I think this all goes through a change when actually making things into artwork.

MILLER: Yeah, that's Freud's premise, that you have libidinal and antisocial impulses redirected to a socially useful end. I think the classic example is somebody who wants to cut flesh becomes a surgeon, so the original libidinal impulse is satisfied, yet redirected toward something that benefits society. Freud thought that art making derived from a libidinal urge to model feces. And typically art is thought about as having no function. So you can say, well, how does art serve as a form of sublimation? I thought it proves the efficacy of sublimation symbolically. It's sort of a meta-discourse.

What's happened over time is that American culture became a good bit less puritanical than it was in the '80s and that now there's a lot of stuff in popular culture that is far more desublimated than anything I ever did. I've only watched one episode of the show *Hoarders*. It featured a woman who had accumulated so much stuff she was living inside mountains of waste. But this episode concluded with an otherwise independent person—the hoarder—being institutionalized. It was supposedly done for her own good, but to me it also represented a kind of repression. Gone is the promise of liberation. And that's not an isolated example. So I have to recognize that mass culture has overtaken the kinds of provocations I raised earlier on. And I don't think it means that

work is invalid, but now I take a different approach. We work in specific contexts and, as times change, the meaning of artistic approaches necessarily changes with them.

John Miller, *Untitled*, 1983/84. Pencil on paper, 25.4 x 20.3 cm. Courtesy the artist and ICA Miami.

SHAW: Becoming part of the art world and the art market changes everything for me. It's like the art market is this inevitable maw that eats everything up and changes the meaning of everything.

MILLER: Certainly, those sublimation issues are tied up ultimately in the market. I forget who observed that the escalation of prices in art auctions is paradoxically driven by a sense of the artwork's incommensurability. So does that mean that the artwork transcends the market, or is it defined by it?
SHAW: I remember you talking a little bit about an interest in *Magnum, P.I.* years ago, and seem to recall you being very much into Abba. Would you like to talk a bit about your interest in tropes and popular culture?
MILLER: I got into Abba via Dennis Cooper, because he mentioned them in *The Tenderness of the Wolves*. I had never

heard of them before. When I asked him, “Oh, are they really good? What album should I get?” he said, “Yeah, you have to get them all.” And eventually I did. At that point, Abba’s career was already more or less over; when it comes to popular culture, I’ve never been particularly ahead of the curve. That said, their songwriting is amazing, particularly in the last album, “The Visitors.” “The Day Before You Came” is supposed to be a song of promise, but there’s this undercurrent of sadness that Benny and Bjorn (Abba’s two B’s) really handle adeptly.

SHAW: Your early paintings you made through the idea of painting—they were sort of standard trope paintings. Paintings painted in a kind of average way. And then you also did a number of paintings that were based on Arizona highway photos.

John Miller, *Everything is Said 22*, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 121.9 x 152.4 cm. Courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

MILLER: Yes, there’s a bit of a gap between those batches of realist paintings. With the first ones, what I wanted to do—and it very much relates to Picture Theory—is to paint normative

pictures. But I started doing this before I really knew that term or understood that discourse. Ironically the first New York art opening I ever went was Douglas Crimp's Pictures show at Artist's Space. But I didn't have any context for it at the time. I was coming to it out of video, basically, and I knew a bit about the New York punk scene.

I was working with the idea of scenario in a manner similar to Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, but I was coming to this from literature. Raymond Roussel's *Impressions of Africa*—which Mike Kelley introduced me to—was especially important. In the original edition, an illustration appeared opposite each page of text. Roussel had commissioned an artist named Henri Zo to make these pictures, because he felt the text alone was not fat enough to be a real novel. So he augmented it with scenes like "a parrot on a perch talking to no one in particular" that didn't illustrate anything, but were narrative kernels in and of themselves. I liked that idea, because the narrative went through this scenario concept, or scenario sense of a picture. As a picture of the world, it implied ideology, i.e., a worldview. What I tried to do was to second-guess my viewers and think of pictures that would be sort of normative.

SHAW: Did you have anything to spring off of? Or did you just think harder and harder until you could come up with an image that would make sense?

MILLER: I invented the images under the pretext of imagining what someone else would consider ordinary. But these also had to hold some kind of poetic affect for me, subjectively. Those were my criteria. Some of these imagined images came from observation or memory; sometimes they came from generic fantasies. The hardest part was not actually painting, but

thinking if an idea that would satisfy my criteria.
SHAW: Yeah, that seems like the hardest part.
MILLER: That was exactly it, coming up with the right vehicle. I informally called these paintings "regionalist works". At the time, I was looking a lot at Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Charles Burchfield. I had this two-bedroom apartment on the Lower East Side and when I would finish a batch of five or ten—they were all small paintings—I would walk them over to Metro Pictures.
Once, John Baldessari recommended my work to Ileana Sonnabend. Even back then, in the '80s, she was fairly advanced in age. I said to her, "I'd like to show you my work, but I live in a seven-floor walk-up." And she said, "Why don't you bring your work to me?" So I put it all my work in a shopping cart and wheeled it over to West Broadway from the Lower East Side.
SHAW: [*Laughs.*] That sounds like a perfect subject for one of those paintings.
MILLER: She was very gracious. At the time I was doing artist books, too, and she bought several copies of each. But when it came time for me to do my first show, I finally saw everything together at Metro Pictures. I remember immediately getting a headache because everything looked old-fashioned. I realized my idea of normal was the world of my parents. There were no paintings of people with mohawks or Walkmen or whatever would have been contemporary then. That was a bit of a revelation. I realized that I viewed the developments that occurred during my lifetime as things that had an exceptional quality.
SHAW: It's hard to step back from it, if it's in the present, but I still do images of stuff from before I was born, I think in part

because that's what Pop art consisted of. But by the time TV came along, it kind of got rid of the singular image.
Are you going to show any of your early videos?
MILLER: No, but we're going to show a recent video, *Mannequin Death*, a collaboration I did with Richard Hoeck—I just finished the final cut.
SHAW: Do you ever want to show those videos, or are they something from the past, like student work?
MILLER: I would show them. Some of them appeared in the first show I had in New York, at Anthology Film Archives with Jenny Holzer and Jane Brettschneider. The video world at that point was a really open then. Shigeko Kubota was Anthology's video curator at the time. Shortly after that, Jane became the youngest artist to be included in a Whitney Biennial. Maybe I should put these early videos up on my website, or on Vimeo or YouTube.
SHAW: Yeah, that's a good idea.
MILLER: It's funny, when I was working on my last collection, *The Ruin of Exchange*, with the way publishing was going I was afraid it would come out only a a PDF and not a "real book." Now my feelings about that have changed. I think I would like to put as much of my work as possible online and to make it available for free.
SHAW: When I was looking up your writings on Google, I came across one search result for that book and it was from Walmart.com.
MILLER: Oh really? [*Laughs.*] It's funny because I checked it out on Amazon and it's also available as a Kindle edition.
SHAW: I think mostly in the future I'm just going to collect images that I find on the computer rather than collect anything

three-dimensional or on paper.
MILLER: Computer technology really affects what it means to collect.
SHAW: There used to be this thing—"Oh, I found this obscure recording in a thrift store in Des Moines, Iowa." Now someone has put all those obscure recordings on their blog somewhere and we've lost that nerd sense of pride. But on the other hand, it's opened up all this information to everybody.
Could we talk a little bit about your game show and reality show paintings? I read that none of the paintings of people crying had sold—that seems such a shame, because they're such beautiful paintings.
MILLER: Oh, thanks. The Rubells bought a few, but no one else. These are muted paintings with the figures rendered only in gray and brown. So the figures feel like cut-outs. They have a very flat, attenuated presence, but it's probably the crying that makes them unpopular.
SHAW: So they're not based on the aesthetic of the image itself, it's a palate you developed.
MILLER: Yeah, but what I didn't consider is when someone cries on one of these shows, thirty seconds later it's resolved and you forget about it. But, in a painting, you're stuck with it. I chose this motif because I think viewers have come to associate the breakdown of the ego with reality. That's the kernel of reality in this programming.
SHAW: It's kind of like the money shot.
MILLER: A little bit, yeah. [*Laughs.*]
SHAW: Do you remember the show *Queen for a Day*? All these just horrible stories of poor housewives who had to deal with all this misery—

MILLER: Yeah, I was just thinking of that. And whoever had the most tear-jerking story would win. Reality TV begins with that and with *Candid Camera*.
SHAW: You know Alan Funt? He was an art historian, and saw the show as a Surrealist effort.
MILLER: Oh, really? When I was at RISD, my roommate's father was on *Candid Camera*. They had a revolving door and they set it up where they could put rods through and trap people on their lunch break. He happened to have been a Golden Gloves boxer. So when they let him out and the host said, "Smile, you're on Candid Camera!" he just punched the guy and kept walking. [*Laughs.*]
SHAW: [*Laughs.*] I wonder how rare that was—that they got punched.
MILLER: I think it's very rare because with this kind of media function it's obligatory to accept the premise. The other thing is how the whole reality TV ethos has moved into politics in volatile and unpredictable ways. Like reality TV stars like Palin and Trump waging their ideological battles based on the shaming that's intrinsic to reality TV's game structure. Or like ISIS conducting its campaigns—its beheadings—along these lines.
SHAW: Do you want to talk any more about *Magnum P.I.*? Anything else we should cover?
MILLER: Well, the thing that I was going to say about *Magnum P.I.* was that I would watch it when I would stay with Mike Kelley when I came out in LA.
SHAW: [*Laughs.*] Because he was watching it?
MILLER: No, no, I got him to watch it. What I liked about it was that it was one of the first shows that featured a gay subtext.

"Magnum" was supposed to be a straight heartthrob but he lived with a bookworm, Higgins, who was always scolding him, perched on one of those rolling library ladders. Mike just watched it because of me and he always said, "There's too much Magnum and too little Higgins."
SHAW: When Magnum was on he was basically wearing a gay mustache and that was the costume that they gave him at the time. But I'm not sure where the Hawaiian shirt fits into that.
MILLER: It was shot in Hawaii. That was also an excuse for Magnum to be wearing short shorts.
SHAW: Right, right. We actually bumped into him and his daughter at the liquor store when we were in Hawaii setting up a thrift store show.
MILLER: Oh, really?
SHAW: He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt and still had a mustache.
MILLER: So, maybe now we've covered everything.
SHAW: [*Laughs.*] Certainly now.