MIAMI New Times

John Miller's "I Stand, I Fall" at ICA Leaves No Philosophical or Visual Stone Unturned

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2016

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Installation view of "Lost" 2016 by John Miller.
Courtesy of ICA Miami. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio.

Artist John Miller is a slender man with long hair and stylish thick-framed glasses. He is very thorough and detailed as he explains the artwork he's created over the past 35 years on display as "I Stand, I Fall" at ICA Miami. This is the first solo museum exhibition survey of this Barnard professor's work in his homeland. And, man, is it ambitious. The more than 70 works are oddly exciting — not just for Miller, who explains each one as if he just made it, but also for the listener, who becomes a student. The complicated philosophies, amusing motivations, and sometimes political concepts behind each period of his career reveal much about what art is and what it means to be human.

Miller was raised in a Republican enclave outside Cleveland, Ohio, called Chagrin Falls, not far from Kent State University. His parents split up when he was very young, leaving his mother to raise him and his younger brother. She worked as as a checkout girl, then moved to the prestigious Cleveland Clinic, studied hard, and by the time young Miller was in college, began pursuing chiropractic medicine. There were always art supplies around the house, which allowed him to create. His salesman father wasn't sold on the idea of his art-making, though, until Miller gained some recognition.

The 1970 shootings at Kent State were a turning point in the resistance to the Vietnam War but also for the 16-year-old Miller, who wore long hair in high school and ended up bouncing between prestigious art schools on the East and West coasts. He attended the Rhode Island School of Design and CalArts, where he befriended folks such as the late artist Mike Kelley and worked with John Baldessari.

His wife, Aura Rosenberg, is also an artist and has used pornographic imagery in some of her work to address issues of sexuality and gender. When they met at a group show in Buffalo, New York, both were in other relationships — he with Brina Gehry (daughter of Frank). Later, while part of the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program, a country music band and barbecue brought them together. Today they have a 26-year-old daughter who is a budding art historian working on her PhD in 19th-century art at Princeton University. Miller and Rosenberg have spent 26 summers in Berlin, where his art was initially regarded with more fervor than in the States.

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ICA commissioned a mirrored labyrinth in the atrium of the building for "**I Stand, I Fall**." It leads to a sculpture in the center, a

destination for wanderers. “You can get lost in it for just a few minutes,” Miller assures. He met Alex Gartenfeld, ICA Miami’s deputy director and chief curator, when the young curator was a student at Columbia University. They had been planning this show since Gartenfeld worked at MOCA North Miami. From the second floor, where Miller’s work is arranged mostly chronologically, you can gawk at the maze below.

The work in the first room is from the late '80s. As Miller describes the brown sculptures, you can’t help but kind of laugh. About waist-high, *Untitled* (owned by the Whitney) looks like a muddy hill topped with a dilapidated miniature building. As it turns out, many of his works share the same deceptive title — you’d think there’d be so little to say, yet so much thought lies beneath this simple name. Made with things such as buckets, Styrofoam, gauze tape, plywood, plaster, and modeling paste, the work was painted with acrylics to look like poop. “It was supposed to have an excremental or shit-like feel,” Miller informs. “At the time, it was a bit of a provocation. I think the U.S. audiences were much more puritanical than they are now. It was more just to invoke excrement as a reference.” But some spectators told him the work made them feel physically ill. Of course, it was embraced in Germany.

Miller is deeply conceptual. He says things like a theme that runs through his work is “how the figure is deployed as sort of rhetorical platform” and notes that he makes, at times, “pre-postmodern realist paintings.” But he’s not actually pretentious. He’s just explaining the more complicated things in life. A true teacher, if there ever was one.

Standing by an evolved version of the first room's *Untitled*, Miller explains, "One strand that runs through my work is looking at value... I'm influenced by Marxist critique — exchange value versus use value." This goes for political and art economies. He references an essay (possibly by Jacques Lacan) where the reader is introduced to the art auction — how does one "reconcile the presumed incommensurability of the artwork with the market... the idea is to pay a lot of money for something that is presumed to be priceless." Art is both beyond value and basically worthless at the same time. Miller is making art about art — its value and its function. The explanation behind the arresting works are fun and stimulating to both observe and consider.

Realist paintings from photographs in the next room feature a civil rights sit-in, a porn scene (the outlier), and a scene of two women in a band from *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. With these, he's showing the '60s idea of politics "putting your body on the line." This leads him to discuss the part of his work that is "a discourse in sublimation… One of Freud's narratives is that you're channeling libidinal and possibly destructive impulses to socially useful ends." His example is a surgeon may have the urge to cut flesh, but hey, that's a good thing in the operating room. Art is a form of sublimation but can also become a repressive desublimination — a term coined by Herbert Marcuse where art becomes a commodity in a capitalist society, flat and created for instant gratification. Miller thinks that's the era we're living in now.

"John is a conceptual artist who has reinvented what it means to work in every media," Gartenfeld notes. "His work investigates what the notions of signature and value, and the very meanings of

such traditions as landscape, abstraction, and figuration. This survey showcases the breadth of his inquiries." Again, so much breadth.

Installation view of *Glad Hand* (1993), by John Miller.
Courtesy of ICA Miami. Photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio.

Remember the excrement work in the first room? Well, Miller expanded upon that idea. He started thinking about the brown monochromes in a "puristic way" and decided to make them messier by placing objects into the brown goo. There's that thing where nothing seems dirty unless it's up against something clean. Each has themed items stuck to it — school supplies or self-care. He calls them "sort of stupid trompe l'oeil paintings" because there is no optical illusion; they are actually 3D. On the other wall, similar sculptures are mounted, but covered in gold. Miller notes

a Freudian theory that in dreams gold symbolizes shit and vice versa. He first made these in 2005 for a show at PS1 called “The Gold Standard.” Miller thinks of these as “nouveau riche.” He calls them “The New Honeymooners,” referencing the crappy sequel of the immensely popular show *The Honeymooners*: “They [the gold sculptures] are kind of a cheapening of my old gesture.”

In a video, *Mannequin Death*, he created with Austrian artist Richard Hoeck, they push mannequins into a quarry in the Alps. People sometimes cry while watching it. He’s asking, “Aesthetically, what distinguished the sublime from the beautiful. I think is very much a gendered and patriarchal discourse. The beautiful is just the merely pleasing, the sublime has an element of terror in it.” It’s like Kant standing on the precipice — there’s the potential to fall from it — that’s the sublime. In the room, mannequin sculptures compose *Echo and Narcissus*. Echo wears '90s-cool jogging gear, while Narcissus, in a toga, admires himself in a mirror. In the room are hanging globes that look like variations on the home planet of *The Little Prince*.

Probably the most accessible are the large-scale paintings from 2012’s “Everything Is Said,” which depict reality-show stars up close and crying. (Only one, from *Survivor*, isn’t weeping.) They’re funny and sad. Though two are owned by the Rubell Family Collection in Miami, “generally collectors tend to not like them,” he admits. “Something that didn’t occur to me is when you see it on TV, the image gets resolved, but when you see it here, you’re stuck with the crying.” They’re not actors, but the shows are scripted. With this body of work, he returns to the notion of repressive desublimination.

The newest works that have never before been displayed depict life-size cutout paintings of pedestrians. Miller's assistants paint them from candid pictures he shoots. They are extremely detailed — some of the installers thought they were actual photographs. Not so oddly, these works that say so much about humanity, about the body, how we communicate, about art itself — again, "how the figure is deployed as sort of rhetorical platform" — are also called simply *Untitled*.

John Miller's "I Stand, I Fall"

Through June 12 at ICA Miami, 4040 NE Second Ave., Miami; 305-901-5272; icamiami.org. Admission is free. Hours are 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday.