

Art in America

REVIEWS JUN. 03, 2016

John Miller

MIAMI,
at Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami
by Wendy Vogel

John Miller:
First Place,
1987, plaster
and gold leaf,
12 by 4 by 4
inches; at the
Institute of
Contemporary
Art, Miami



John Miller (b. 1954) is a quintessential 1990s artist. The '90s aesthetic might be described as cerebralism disguised as effortless—pastiche-riddled fashion, indie culture occupying a space between the mainstream and the avant-garde, hybridity that tried not to try too hard. Miller's art, writing, and music share this quality. Like the '90s—sandwiched between the glitzy '80s and the gleefully consumerist early aughts—his punk-inspired practice snaps into focus in the context of that which it is not: in group exhibitions; in his writing about other artists, from Mike Kelley to Andrea Fraser; and in art scenes in Europe, where the American artist has had several surveys.

Meliksetian MB Briggs

“I Stand, I Fall” at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, is Miller’s first museum retrospective in the United States. The exhibition comprises nearly one hundred objects, tracing his career from the period immediately following his years at the California Institute of the Arts, from which he received an MFA in 1979, to the present. Miller and peers including Kelley and Jim Shaw attended CalArts around the same time as several Pictures Generation artists. It’s surprising but not impossible to imagine the Pictures artists, with their cool affect, and Miller’s crew as Valencia classmates. A selection of Miller’s works from the early ’80s purports to contextualize his development in relation to the appropriationists. But these early pieces—drawings of various architectural forms, and colorful paintings of social realist subjects (a hanging, a nun, civil rights protests)—are compelling only in relation to the direction Miller’s work would go as it took on American culture and class stratification.

With Kelley and Paul McCarthy, Miller shares a scatological obsession and devotion to psychoanalytic theory. His best-known sculptures are studies in textbook desublimation: accretive or phallic forms covered with gold, shit-colored material, or fake fruit. One of the earliest examples is *Untitled (small totem)*, 1985, a turgid nineteen-inch-high plaster object whose length and base are covered with brown acrylic paint. *First Place* (1987) depicts a similar, twelve-inch-high form wrapped in gold leaf. From there, Miller expanded to wall-hung reliefs featuring objects covered with gold leaf or earthy pigment. *When I Kissed the Teacher* (1993) concerns a subject of forbidden love; against a background of sludgy brown paint, the assemblage displays school supplies and a romance novel. Still, for work about the most primal urges, Miller’s reliefs remain politely scaled, never spanning beyond the size of a large canvas.

Miller is a theorist of gold and shit; for him, their symbolic powers never lose their potency. Writing about Piero Manzoni’s *Merda d’artista* (1961), he could have been penning his own artist’s statement: “Since Sigmund Freud understood art making as a sublimated anal drive, according to him, all artworks have an overdetermined relationship to faeces. In the infantile imagination, faeces, the first thing a child produces, also counts as a primordial gift. The obverse of this may be Karl Marx’s declaration that under capitalism even the greatest artwork is worth only so many tons of manure.”

Meliksetian MB Briggs

Miller's ambivalence about the value of art in a consumer-capitalist society infuses many of his artworks. *Echo and Narcissus* (1990), a set of two brown-clothed mannequins posing in front of a mirror, is displayed to full effect in the show. The mirror reflects the windows that overlook the upscale Design District stores, situating the mythological figures in their ideal modern-day habitat. Miller's series "Middle of the Day" (1994–) consists of banal photos taken each day around noon, while his sepia-toned "Reality TV" paintings (2009–) depict highly manufactured emotional moments on television. Ultimately, Miller seems to be interested in how art exists as one of many representational modes.

And yet, Miller's work is tied precisely to the mechanisms of art, the artists he surrounds himself with, and the artists whose work he discusses in his writing. Again, his thoughts on Manzoni's canned shit are key to understanding his own work. "*Merda d'artista* enacts its greatest violence not on the art object, but instead on the discourse in which it is ensconced," Miller wrote. "His gesture anticipates that criticality will become a recursive guarantor of value." Miller's conceptualism may take psychic depths, punk aesthetics, and gendered self-display as its themes, but it's ultimately art about the rules of art, slyly subverting from within.