

Meliksetian MB Briggs

TANK

[TANK Magazine](#) / Books issue, 2020

John Miller



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The mannequin, with its vacant pretty face and smooth stiff body, has been the emissary and the subject of John Miller's consumer critical art for more than two decades. In his recent show entitled *The Collapse of Neoliberalism* (2020), the Ohio-born and CalArts-trained artist has photographed his small band of docile collaborators before backdrops of devastating anonymity. Miller's multilayered images of familiar non-places like high-rise residences and office parks emit such an aura of forlornness that the viewer even empathises with the inanimate inhabitants of this world, a lesson in artifice and emotion, with a dose of dark humour.

Interview by Claudia Steinberg
Portrait by John Miller

Claudia Steinberg The title of your show refers to people worried about the consequences of the privatisation and deregulation espoused by neoliberalism. But looking into your mannequins' blank faces, your current images perhaps reflect a more generalised anxiety – a horror vacui.

John Miller My slightly apocalyptic – and bombastic – title alludes to a pervasive mood of unease in our consumer society and destabilised political order. However, I think that the mood in the pictures is much gentler than what we're actually experiencing during the pandemic.

CS Still, your pictures also exude a sense of imprisonment in a soulless and hermetic world of our own making, which brings to mind Slavoj Žižek's frightening quote that we can more easily imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

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JM I'm trying to achieve that feeling of entrapment through normative characterisations with clothing and wigs and the arrangement of figures in space. I'm striving for a mood of "repressive tolerance", a term coined by Herbert Marcuse, who thought that instead of direct confrontation through censorship, it would be more efficient for liberal democracies to ignore the source of criticism and to just let it die out.

CS You place your mannequins in front of generic backdrops of cityscapes and corporate interiors, looking for the normal, as you say. What are the signifiers of that normalcy?

JM I'm influenced by my teacher John Baldessari, who explored the normal from the perspective of the art consumer. His work, *Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell*, includes still lifes, but no dead birds, for example. Russian artists Komar and Melamid once patched together a Frankensteinian-monster painting based on polling Americans what they wanted to see in pictures: George Washington, a blue lake, mountains, and so on. In the 1980s, I created a series of small paintings based on the notion of giving the audience what they want while still making something meaningful for myself. I realised that normal to me meant the iconography of my parents' generation – what was there when I came into the world. In other words: there is relativity to normalcy. Working with prefabricated backdrops I didn't have to make it up. The sellers, we're trying to meet the presumed needs of our consumers, like a wedding backdrop or a corporate setting for a conference. That gave me ready-made representations of a normal image.

CS Your tableaux vivants have a cinematic aspect to them: the careful positioning and costuming of the figures, the lighting, but the frozen scenes remain enigmatic and maybe even a bit spooky. Is that also what you want to convey as normal?

JM I'm very much interested in exploring everyday life – as lived experience and in theoretical discourse. In his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Sigmund

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Freud argues that we don't ordinarily recognise significant elements that are present in everyday life because they are so close to us.

CS He used the word "uncanny", a term that describes your alienating but familiar spaces very well.

JM One of my students recently made a connection between Brecht's alienation effect and the Freudian uncanny – I've never seen his alienation effect discussed in psychological terms.

CS One piece in the gallery spills into the third dimension, revealing your methods, so to say, breaking illusion in the Brechtian sense. Why did you step onto that meta-level?

JM It was an act of self-theatricalisation, partly as a retort to minimalist sculpture and also in reaction to Michael Fried's critique of Brecht's epic theatre, which he disparagingly reduced to self-consciousness of the viewer before the artwork. I see that as a good thing. It was also a way to qualify all the other photographs that purport to be illusionistic even though their backgrounds are flat, and the people are mannequins.

CS In the Brechtian piece you use the backdrop of an ancient temple as reminder of the origins of theatre and the downfall of cultures. How much is the thought of the inevitable end of our time on your mind?

JM Very much so. I'm interested in the motif of the ruin as an allegory for the hubris of civilisations. We often think of buildings as permanent, as transcending time.

CS The average lifetime of a New York skyscraper is just 50 years.

JM The ruin has also been politicised: Albert Speer hated Bauhaus architecture because it would not look noble as a ruin. The allegory of the ruin also refers to entropy – the facts that everything will be at some point reduced to its most

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simple state. The Roman general Scipio Aemilianus besieged Carthage for three years and when it was burned to the ground he wept, knowing that the same fate would befall Rome, too.

CS In your four-minute film *Toll Free* the camera repeatedly swivels around a busy New York intersection – it’s not quite dizzying, but definitely hypnotic – one feels the same sense of surreal entrapment as in your still photographs.

JM I mounted my tripod and the camera on a display turntable, so it turns pretty slowly. I was interested in the 360-degree pan; it creates a kind of cinematic panorama that also claims to be objective, in the sense of surveying a particular site.

CS At the same time you destroy any documentarian notions by bringing floating phones and a mannequin onto the scene — it’s a strange marriage of these two elements.

JM I wanted to show how the phone looms in one’s consciousness, and how these calls present an aggressive interruption. In a short autobiographical text called “The Telephone”, Walter Benjamin wrote about how, as a child, it disrupted the life of his family. Bret Easton Ellis’s novel *Less than Zero* about yuppie culture in New York also came to mind; in it, “I fax you an apology” is considered the ultimate rudeness. Now sending a written apology seems polite. I’m not sure whether the cell phone is an intimate or an alienating thing – I guess it’s both.

CS You always use the cheapest and most common mannequins, which are white. You describe their faces as an idealisation – like the recent phenomenon of “Instagram face”. It’s a new amalgam of features that women ask from their dermatologists: Asian cheekbones, African lips, European eyes, but the face reads as white, multi-ethnically enhanced. Has this new ideal entered the mannequin market?

JM There are Asian mannequins, but they are pretty expensive and rare even in

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Asia, even though most are produced in China. The stores that use realistic mannequins are mostly on the low end; they don't seem to care about self-representation.

CS You have called beauty tricky: it is repressive, you say, but nobody can forego it.

JM Beauty is conformist and promotes a kind of social hierarchy. Thorstein Veblen, an American sociologist of the Gilded Age, wrote a famous book called *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, and in the chapter “Pecuniary Canons of Taste”, he argues that aestheticism is linked to extravagant capacities for waste – that’s one reason for my ambivalence about beauty. Another is the gender dichotomy between beauty and the sublime in classical Western aesthetics: beauty, as merely pleasing is ascribed to femininity, while the sublime is supposed to be masculine. But I cannot imagine giving up beauty or the pursuit of an existence that’s beautiful in some way.

CS One of your images references a *Twilight Zone* episode in which a mannequin does not know she is not human. It seems to touch on the common notion that dolls are scary, that they may even be evil because they are manmade and we cannot trust our powers.

JM Children project their desires and stories onto dolls, pretending they are alive while knowing that they’re not. The uncanny may arise if the projection becomes true and the doll takes on a life of its own. Animators invoke the “uncanny valley”, which came into play with the movie *Avatar* where the created characters were initially hyper-realistic. Test audiences didn’t like them because they came too close to being alive. That’s also an inherent potential in figurative sculpture.

CS One of the most ominous images in your show features an empty hospital bed with a rusty old stool in front of it, to which you added clumsy mannequin hands exchanging money. How did this mysterious found picture of a medical environment inspire this intervention?

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JM I thought money changing hands made this suspicious-looking scene even more suspicious. Some people read it as a critique of the healthcare system.

CS You also have a huge oeuvre of “midday photographs”, even though you don’t like that time of day.

JM It’s a point in the day when you feel like resting, but my Protestant work ethic makes me feel guilty about it. With the *Middle of the Day* photos I gave myself a kind of work assignment. I feel drawn to siesta cultures where time is set aside for quietness. Giorgio de Chirico’s paintings evoke the middle of the day in the middle of town, in spite of the long shadows. I always liked his work; you can say it’s because of the siesta. But on the periphery you often see smokestacks or a train – signs of industrialisation that come into conflict with the siesta culture.

CS Instead of the piazza, you capture the street, the site where photographers have searched for the extraordinary, but where you look for the ordinary. What grabs your attention?

JM I find that a lot of times I’ll respond to spatial relationships when I’m moving; that’s an emotionally charged experience for me. But sometimes the camera can’t convey a particular space. Last summer I made a trip to Bruno Taut’s Weißenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart. It’s a dramatic structure, but my photos didn’t convey that in the least. I’ve had that experience so often and then conversely, a lot of times I’ll just shoot something in an off-the-cuff way, and there’s really something there for me. I’ve been doing this since 1994, but I never know what’s going to work and what’s not. ●