

Meliksetian MB Briggs

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Newsmaker: John Miller

BY HUNTER BRAITHWAITE, MODERN PAINTERS | FEBRUARY 13, 2016



John Miller's "The Lugubrious Game," 1998.
(Howard Ursuliak)

Though John Miller has spent 30 years examining American consumer culture—from game shows to reality television, from mannequins to paintings of shopping bag-laden pedestrians—his work hasn't been the subject of an American museum exhibition until now, with "I Stand, I Fall" opening February 18 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami.

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The show, which includes more than 75 pieces, is an in-depth retrospective that looks at Miller's evolving treatment of the figure and subjectivity. Here, the artist, writer, and musician speaks to Hunter Braithwaite about several bodies of work that will be on display, how his paintings occasionally make people sick, and writing about his friend Mike Kelley.

HUNTER BRAITHWAITE: *Tell me about what's included in this survey.*

John Miller: We want to do something different from shows I've had in Europe. I've had two surveys there before, at Le Magasin in Grenoble back in 1999, and then in 2009 at the Kunsthalle in Zurich. [ICA curator] Alex Gartenfeld didn't want to repeat what's been done. He's been digging out lesser-seen works. He's talked about it from the standpoint of figures and figuration, but I think he may be thinking about it in terms of object-oriented ontology, or Speculative Realist ideas.

HB: *Is that where you're coming from as an artist?*

JM: In some ways, with my background, I'm a little bit invested in what the hard-core Speculative Realists oppose—a linguistic approach, which they would see as being too anthropomorphic. When I was in school, that was what was theoretically really exciting. I got into it and studied linguistics at Brown. A lot of what I've done is informed by a linguistic approach. In that sense, what I'm doing is opposed to that, but then I try to point out how some of the goals of the Structuralists and Post-Structuralists were similar to what Speculative Realists are doing now, apart from the embrace of language, or looking to language as a structure. I guess my answer to that is yes and no. It would depend on who was looking at my work. Take a writer like Alain Robbe-Grillet. His idea was to try and reduce anthropomorphism in narration. His writing was the model for Roland Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero*. On the one hand, the goal of making a completely literal language is delusional in a way, which is kind of the way he pushed it in his later work, but he did reduce the way that metaphor conventionally functions.

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HB: *The show is titled “I Stand, I Fall.” What are the ideas behind those four words?*

JM: It has to do with this thing between horizontal and vertical axes that plays out in some of my work. I would say that the paradigm for that is Jackson Pollock. You know, making work horizontally, and putting it up in a vertical orientation. I guess I’m especially interested in when it starts to have to do with stature and the act of standing as the existential posture. That becomes explicit in the work of someone like Robert Morris; some of Gilbert & George’s work has to do with that, too—this kind of odd quality of standing, which is a very basic state of being.

HB: *A couple of years back, you and Liam Gillick were talking in Bomb, and the discussion touched on the Occupy movement. Is this idea of standing politicized in any way, or is it more of a formal thing?*

JM: It probably was—I hadn’t thought of it that way, to tell you the truth. You know, it’s funny to compare that to the older notion of the sit-in, where it’s a much different posture while occupying space.

HB: *Well, now we have die-ins, the completely horizontal. Anyway, how are you going to occupy the space of the ICA, which is in Miami’s Design District?*

JM: I suppose I’ve thought about the atrium, which is unusual architecturally. We’re still not sure if I’m going to do a labyrinth down there or not.

HB: *Is that The Bog of Eternal Stench [2008]?*

JM: It might mutate into a completely different piece. These mazes have to be designed to the space that they’re going to be in. They can’t just be transposed from one spot to another, unless it’s a huge floor or something. So, if we do the maze in Miami, it’ll be a completely redesigned one. In the Japan version, I have a ball covered with plastic fruit in the center. That may or may not be in my storage out in Brooklyn. I was talking to Gartenfeld about it, saying, “If we can’t find

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the ball, I could substitute a quasi-figure that I covered with fruit.” He thought that that would actually be better than the ball, and after thinking about it, that that might be a better solution, too, because it’s more like a figure, more like a minotaur. So, I don’t know if it makes sense to maintain the same title if we change the figuration and the central figure.

HB: *Could you tell me a little bit about the concepts behind your work incorporating gold?*

JM: I don’t know if you’re familiar with this period of brown impasto work I did. It was intended as a provocation, where the brown impasto would have an excremental, or shitlike, quality. At the time, I was playing around with psychoanalytic and linguistic ideas, so what I wanted to do was look at that in terms of sublimation and the Freudian idea that the artwork was a kind of sublimated anal impulse. I was thinking of that in terms of some of Marcuse’s ideas about sublimation and desublimation.

Especially if you’re looking at it with a 1960s lens, desublimation was often associated with liberation, wanting to have pleasure here and now rather than deferring it to a kind of higher end or something. So, I used this motif with the idea not that something could really be desublimated, but I was gesturing toward the paradox that presents, because conversely—and this is probably where I would part company from hard-core Freudians—I don’t think sublimation works absolutely. It seems like it’s a partial fix. Anyway, that was the intent of the brown work, and then when I was doing that work, I did a few gold pieces that I considered contrapuntal gestures. I did a couple pieces—a globe covered with gold, a phallus. It was kind of like the logic of displacement.

HB: *You started exhibiting the brown works in the mid 1980s. How were these received?*

JM: When I was doing them, people were much more puritanical, especially in the U.S. Even though it was just acrylic paint on plaster and modeling paste, when I first started showing the work, some people

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would come up and say, “You know, I just have to tell you, your work literally makes me sick.” Part of my idea was to make something that had characteristics in common with excrement, but which could never be mistaken for it. It was a symbolic gesture, so I thought that it was funny that people would have a visceral reaction to it. It wasn’t the case in Germany. There, that work was embraced. So, early in my career I had more attention in Germany.

HB: *How does this relate to your paintings inspired by reality television?*

JM: I suppose that if I think of a show like *Hoarders*, it’s desublimation vis-à-vis repression or liberation. I’ve only watched one episode of that show, and it was way more hard-core than anything I’ve ever done in my work. In one episode a woman had put all of her hoardings in her bathroom, and started urinating and defecating in another room, which structurally damaged her house. She had layers of stuff that was infested with rats and excrement. The show ended with her being institutionalized. That was the intervention of the *Hoarders* team. There was this horror all around, but there was this desublimation for a vicarious entertainment purpose that ended in a kind of real institutional repression. For me, that’s a sign that the stakes are much different than what I thought they were in the 1980s.

HB: *You’ve also been a prolific writer for decades. Last year, Afterall published your book on Mike Kelley’s 1995 sculpture Educational Complex.*

JM: Just dealing with his suicide was an undercurrent to the whole thing. It was also intellectually quite an interesting process because sometimes if you’re close to someone or something you might not see as much of it, or see it as objectively as an outsider. When Afterall invited me to write about a work of Mike’s, I started thinking how *Educational Complex* represents a real turning point in his work. I think it really is his most important work. It’s funny, too, because it’s an uncharacteristic one. It doesn’t have the feeling of excess or preposterousness of the works leading up to it, or the works that followed it. There were

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rhetorical claims that he had attached to the piece, but basically, you're just given fairly anonymous architectural models and left to deal with that. I think the balance in that piece is really significant. Part of the idea of going to art education as a kind of model (Mike never used the term *apparatus*, but I think since he was so influenced by Burroughs, I see it as an apparatus, and as a repressive mechanism that operates through a supposedly liberal mandate—you know, “you're an artist, just be yourself,” kind of an impossible mandate in a way), I think it really goes to the heart of the problematic of being an artist now. How does one look at what one does systemically? All those things are implied in that work. As much as I like the work that followed, I think that point is made strongest with *Educational Complex*.



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