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For decades, John Miller has been recognized internationally as an artist and critic whose work continually unpacks the claims of the day's prevailing artistic approaches—to say nothing of the seemingly inexhaustible detritus of culture at large—but only this past fall was the breadth of his own production put on display in an incisive survey. Artist **MATT KEEGAN** offers his take on the ruins, mannequins, paintings, and photographs recently on view in Miller's retrospective at the Kunsthalle Zürich; and for a specially extended version of *Artforum*'s 1000 Words feature, Miller speaks about the installation's unique staging of his artmaking over the years.

This page: **John Miller, *Mannequin Lover*, 2002**, mannequin, wig, clothing, 74¾ x 20 x 13¾". Opposite page: **View of "John Miller," 2009, Kunsthalle Zürich.** Foreground: *A Refusal to Accept Limits*, 2009. Background, from left: *A Powerful Prayer*, 1994; *Untitled*, 1986.

MATT KEEGAN

DURING THE PAST FIVE YEARS, Howard Street in New York City's SoHo has gentrified rapidly, but Canal Street, one block south, is a different story: It is a sea of T-shirt merchants, questionable stereo and jewelry stores, and roving counterfeit-handbag vendors. John Miller, whose studio is on Howard, once noted to me that a business on Canal that sold anything of use was sure to close. These days, Canal Plastics seems to be the only thriving nonbootleg operation on the block. Lee Lozano said it best in one of her drawings: KANAL ST. THE ASSHOLE OF N.Y.

I was Miller's part-time studio assistant from 2004 to 2008 but realize only now just how important this neighborhood was to the work he made during that period, even if this significance manifested itself in two entirely different registers. On the one hand, Canal's abject excess was mirrored by Miller in a group of works that got under way in 2006: his gold reliefs. These gilded amalgamations of plastic jewels, masks, belts, toy weapons, shoes, fake food, and other miscellany—useless shit, foreshadowed by Lozano's imagery, most of it purchased right near the studio—are directly descended from Miller's sculptures and wall reliefs of the 1980s and '90s, which are also composed of synthetic low-end merchandise but are encrusted in lumpy brown paint. But if the shift from there to imitation gold leaf seemed to perform—ironically—the classic maneuver of fetishism (excremental dregs transformed into treasure), elsewhere Miller worked on a project that appeared to have nearly clinical systemicity and precision from the start. In the midst of sizing and gilding in preparation for "The New Honeymooners," his 2007 exhibition of reliefs and sculptures at Metro Pictures and Friedrich Petzel galleries in New York, Miller could be found sitting at his computer processing images for *The Middle of the Day*, an ever-growing photographic archive of images of Canal Street (as well as greater Manhattan and many other cities), all taken during the first two hours of the afternoon. Started in 1994, *The Middle of the Day* was originally photographed with a medium-format camera, but in recent years the images have been produced digitally. The methodical process of downloading the photos, batch processing, color correcting under a light-neutral viewing station, and printing the images (one artist's proof, one exhibition print, and one backup print) seemed antithetical to the messy and improvised manner in which the reliefs were fabricated. In the studio, the nearly disassociative split between the two bodies of work was made literal by a long and narrow storage unit that separated the debris-heavy part of the space from the dust-free zone.

The same dialectical vacillation between the handmade and the programmatic ran through Miller's recent retrospective at the Kunsthalle Zürich, but here, the underlying connection between these two aspects was made apparent. The show included works dating back to 1983: paintings of game-show stills and southwestern landscapes, brown and gold reliefs, diorama-like floor pieces, and, exemplifying Miller's career-long collaborative proclivity, short animations made with Takuji Kogo and a video made with Richard Hoeck. In addition, sixteen hundred images from *The Middle of the Day* were presented as a slide show on a flat-screen monitor. It was the most comprehensive exhibition of his work to date and featured his largest and most theatrical gold work yet. Seeming to merge Canal Street with European architectural history, *A Refusal to Accept Limits*, 2009, is an installation of broken and toppled faux-gold-leafed columns. The title is an allusion to hubris, not heroic ambition: An "invented ruin," in Miller's words, the work variously references Frederick the Great's folly Sanssouci, Robert Smithson's vision of suburban entropy, and Third Reich architect Albert Speer's theory of "ruin value," which suggests that you should consider how everything you build will look as it falls apart.

Installing *A Refusal* only two rooms away from *The Middle of the Day* stressed the extent to which the latter project, too, is about ruins—not just urban decay but the decay of social space and its functions. Both are formally premised on the idea of accumulation. What Alexander Alberro and Nora M. Alter observe in reference to the *Middle of the Day* images, in the Zurich exhibition's catalogue, could be easily applied to the reliefs: "[They] depict an accumulation of moments, a wide range of ephemeral objects and settings. Some of the places and things represented are recognizable. Many are not. Most barely seem worthy of representation. . . . [A]rchitecture, commodities and trash are placed together."

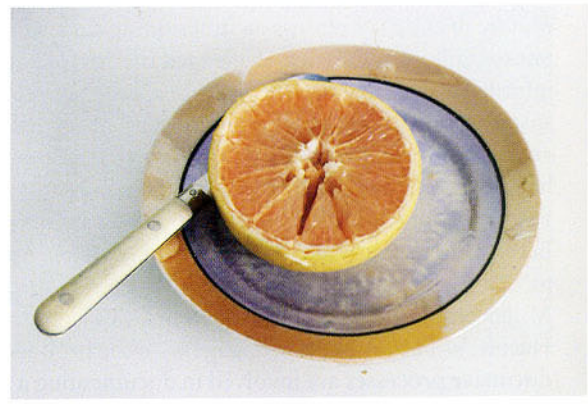
But beyond those commonalities of strategy and subject—accumulation; commodities and trash—that link the *Middle of the Day* photographs to the reliefs, there is something more fundamental: the sheer vastness of the surpluses they navigate. Working on the reliefs for more than two years required occasional brainstorming for new thematic veins to mine—covering each door-size panel demanded a large quantity of stuff to leaf and affix—but the problem was less thinking of what to include than sorting through almost innumerable possibilities. (A nautical selection that included ropes, buoys, and fake fish was a crowd-pleaser among the studio's inhabitants for a long stretch and inspired Miller to make a similarly themed iTunes playlist that kept us buoyant.) This material surfeit is matched by the seeming endlessness of places, items, and people that are out there in the world, available to be documented between the hours of 12 and 2 PM. Inexhaustibility permeates both projects, allowing for a continuous stream of images, an ongoing (re)assembly of objects. In this light, for all his penchant for perverse humor, Miller has long been seriously engaged with (sometimes against) the historical legacy of Conceptual and post-Minimal art, and a look at that engagement now further illustrates the complex interplay between material and representation, sculpture and photography, in his practice.

Consider his observations about Douglas Huebler, with whom he studied at CalArts. Huebler famously addressed concepts of inexhaustibility, contending with the fact that there are so many things to buy, to see, to take pictures of. Referring to Huebler's *Variable Piece #70, (In Process) Global, 1971*, a proposal to photograph "everyone alive," Miller noted in conversation with me that one point of overlap between his work and Huebler's is a concern with

> the bottomless nature of photography. Huebler couches that as a certain futility, i.e., the project to photograph everyone in the world. I couch it more as accumulation based on the fragmentary. Huebler implies, however facetiously, that given the wherewithal he could photograph everyone and this would be a complete set.

But for Miller, there's no such thing as a complete set: "From my point of view, you can only make bigger fragments from smaller ones. I guess both viewpoints have a relation to futility."

Miller further proposes a political dimension to the discussion. Seeking to photograph everything everywhere, Huebler, Miller notes, tapped into the camera's capacity for policing and surveillance—making of the artist a kind of "cipher for the collective." As stand-in for or representative of a social collective, in other words, Huebler performed the role of modernity's photographer-subject—foot soldier in a kind of surveillance army. "In that vein consider the hyperlinks to Google Earth where you can click on a spot and then view all the photos that users have uploaded of that place." The key word here is *performed*:



Spiral, clockwise from top left: **John Miller,** ***Untitled (11-19-04)***, color photograph, 8 ½ x 11". **John Miller,** ***Untitled (08-15-95)***, black-and-white photograph, 8 x 10". **John Miller,** ***Untitled (01-20-05)***, color photograph, 11 x 8 ½". **John Miller,** ***Untitled (05-21-05)***, color photograph, 8 ½ x 11". **John Miller,** ***Untitled (07-16-97)***, color photograph, 10 x 8". **John Miller,** ***Untitled (05-30-05)***, color photograph, 8 ½ x 11". **John Miller,** ***Untitled (06-06-97)***, color photograph, 10 x 8". **John Miller,** ***Untitled (01-20-05)***, color photograph, 8 ½ x 11". **John Miller,** ***Untitled (06-11-97)***, color photograph, 10 x 8". From *The Middle of the Day*, 1994–.

Appearing to fall into step with photography's disciplinary imperatives, Huebler in fact resists them.

For a model that discerns this resistant capacity and that has influenced his own approach to photography, Miller turns to the writing of Vilém Flusser. (The theorist's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* was a touchstone of Miller's 2006 essay on Huebler in *Artforum*.) In Flusser's view, which Miller sees as highly informative with regard to Conceptual photographic practices, the camera is essentially never in the service of the photographer, but always in the service of the "camera program"—which is nothing less than the theoretically finite but in reality inexhaustible sum total of all the photographs a camera can take. Each new photograph realizes one possibility in the program and thus serves the imperatives of postindustrial capital, which places a premium on *information* above all. At the same time, each new photograph expands what Flusser called the "photographic universe"—essentially, the sum total of all photographs in existence, a construct that Miller conceptualizes as a kind of map, a "Cartesian system" with a point-to-point relationship to the world. (Of course, Google Earth has to an astonishing extent made this a reality.) Crucially, for Miller, practices that begin with an acceptance of Flusser's premises can negotiate, resist, and attempt to work against the totalizing completeness of the "program" and the "universe," and their purely instrumentalizing imperatives.

How do these ideas operate within Miller's photography? He has discussed his *Middle of the Day* photos as functioning on a similar social terrain to tourist photography and has acknowledged the complexity of how such photographs inform the way we socially produce space: "Photos don't just passively record space but enter into the way it is conceptualized, thus used, thus how that space exists phenomenologically." At the Kunsthalle Zürich, the presentation of sixteen hundred *Middle of the Day* images had the pacing of a postvacation slide show, but the incongruous locations, people, and moments, including a scene from Berlin's Love Parade and a shot of a lone duck in a pond, dislodged any attempt to view the images as a comprehensive set and illustrated the fragmentation that Miller highlights and that distinguishes his approach to photography from Huebler's. The reliefs, too, engage with the produced landscape. Collective and discursive processes are involved in documenting a neighborhood photographically *and* in purchasing items from its merchants; the photographer and the shopper are operating in a social field, interacting with others. In both cases, there is an engagement with the neighborhood's current function—its utility. A photograph of the overcrowded sidewalks at the southwest corner of Canal and Broadway actively supports and facilitates the idea that this area is designated for a particular type of exchange. (Jane Jacobs wrote three chapters just on the various uses of sidewalks in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.)

But if we pan away from the corner of Canal and Broadway and follow Canal from west to east, from Tribeca to the Lower East Side and, beyond that, to the cities all over the world that *The Middle of the Day* documents, we can see that this archive and its accumulation are not tools with which to navigate and define a particular territory. The camera's program is the same as that of the Google Earth enabler, but Google is not interested in minutiae or real social interface; it is invested in order and continuity. Both *The Middle of the Day* and the gold reliefs are invested in variation, in the ruptures that might produce disorder and discontinuity. The time frame of 12 to 2 PM and the predetermined size of the hollow-core panels respectively set parameters, but within those defined fields what gets documented or gilded is vast and unhomogenized. Considered as an archive or as a series presented for exhibition, neither photos nor reliefs evince a singular intention or voice, but rather a plurality that is discordantly choral. Low noon is a gray area, neither real leisure nor total labor, in the middle in all respects. Such an in-between requires more time and inference than a satellite map can provide and is better suited to the improvisatory, on-the-ground maneuverings of Michel de Certeau's pedestrian tactician.

Watching the *Middle of the Day* slide show in Zurich emphasized, further, that one of the crucial variations in these images is their shifting vantage point; there is a constant oscillation among still lifes, aerial shots of city plazas, and midrange shots of storefronts or people. This variation finds its counterpart, in Miller's nonphotographic works, in shifts in scale from the miniature to the near monumental. In Zurich, installation strategies that played with stage and theatrical tropes reflexively framed the viewer not only *as* a viewer—placing him or her self-consciously in the role of spectator—but as a navigator of various orders of magnitude. *A Refusal* was one of a small number of life-size works, and the largest installation presented. Its bright and particularly acidic golden patina covered pillars strewn with detritus, as well as an arch tall enough to walk through. Positioned in the middle of the exhibition, this work was preceded and followed by several sculptures composed of the kind of miniature houses and trees used for model-train sets. Floor-based, these works position the viewer in a godlike perspective, surveying their brown impasto landscapes.

In an interview with curator Beatrix Ruf, printed in the Kunsthalle Zürich catalogue, Miller discusses installation decisions he made when hanging drawings in his earliest solo exhibitions. These comments also resonate with his most recent survey:

> I considered them to be installations because the accumulation of images addressed the subjectivity of the viewer, i.e., it suggested that the viewer's subjectivity may be interpolated through a succession of images, through pictures of the world. This might constitute "a world view"—or a model of it. At the same time, I was interested in the prop-like aspect of the normative picture. In this vein, you might say the pictures prop up individual subjectivity.

On entering the retrospective, visitors were greeted by a male mannequin (*Mannequin Lover*, 2002). This ubiquitous retail stand-in addressed us as we left as well, almost as if to remind us that he was there before we arrived and would be around after we, and the show, were gone; there was no escaping this figure that was clearly, on some level, a proxy for each of us, the subject as such. Regardless of how the work varied in material and scale, the installation constantly implicated the viewer; whether by reflecting him or her in mirrored surfaces or through prompting identification with a mannequin, with a character in a video or photo, or, as Miller suggests, with a potato sitting within a vast stretch of red carpet. The constant request to position oneself within a constructed landscape or a set of images, or alongside life-size characters, also implicated the exterior world. The unnerving familiar that Miller documents, coats, and gilds makes us pause and question our own standing within these environs—only to realize that nothing, including our own position, is stable in the sea of images and commodities that Miller sails. —*Matt Keegan*

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