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Allison Miller, Susan Inglett Gallery

By Jenny Wu



Allison Miller, *Blood Knot*, 2023, oil stick, acrylic, coins, and safety pins on canvas, 72" 70".

Seven of Allison Miller's intuitive, sign-laden, and loosely geometric paintings were featured in "World," the artist's sixth solo exhibition at Susan Inglett Gallery. Among them, *Tree* (all works 2023), with its mottled, muted-green surface recalling a grass stain, stood out. In contrast to the other canvases, three of which were trapezoids—a familiar shape within Miller's repertoire—the borders of the composition's almost perfectly square picture plane do not announce themselves readily. What results is a verdant vista that appears to unfurl in all directions.

The relationship between the various signifiers and imagined space in *Tree* creates a kind of vacuum for meaning: Symbols for socially constructed systems of exchange (monetary, linguistic) neither fully harmonize nor distinctly clash in the mellow, lawn-like ground of the Los Angeles-based painter's work. Sewn onto the bottom-right quadrant of the canvas is a silver nickel (with Thomas Jefferson's head flattened at the top). Placed beside it are a strip of lace and a string of safety pins that droops like a necklace—the nickel resembles a pendant in a magpie's jewelry collection. By extension, the graphemes surrounding the coin—gold-painted *S*s, round-topped *A*s, a cluster of *Y*s, and four verdant *G*s hiding in the greenery—call to mind uncanny counterfeit logos, while the five large, color-block *D*s on the left side of the canvas seem to scream out "DESIGN!" à la 1960s supergraphics.

Miller's world—a stylized, synthetic, and symbol-littered take on nature—is depicted in a more circumscribed fashion in *Blood Knot*. Here, a cool-blue pool of water sinks into a deep, squarish receptacle, whose rounded topmost corners echo the lower edges of the canvas. We see more foliage, flat and hard-edged, as if applied with a stencil, with additional coins interspersed within. Also evident is a homespun polish in Miller's, hand painted lines—orange, blue, yellow, and green—which gently guide one's eyes along the painting's borders. Fittingly, a "blood knot," used to join two pieces of fishing line, is composed of complex loops and coils that, when pulled taut and trimmed, appear seamless.

Near the right edge of the painting is a peach-colored *C* inscribed in oil stick. The mark is mysterious and off-center, but it is not at all marginal. Read in relation to a nearby work, *Smoke and Smoke*, which was covered in linked curves shaped like f-holes (openings in the bodies of stringed instruments that project sound), the *C* could be interpreted as a musical pitch. Combine the sonic evocations with the dynamic diagonal vectors and enigmatic notations scattered across the exhibition, and one had the score for a raucous performance. Though just as Miller seems more interested in knots than in fishing, she seems to prefer the specialized codes of the score to the music itself.

No element, regardless of size or color, dominated Miller's pictures, which, in a sense, lacked subject matter and were composed exclusively of salient synesthetic details. Altogether, "World" struck a balance between semiotic esotericism and sensual lucidity by countering tangled signifiers with visual repetition. Snippets of floral-printed fabric were, for example, collaged in multiple paintings, including *Jalousie*, *Smoke and Smoke*, and *Elevator*, in which a maroon textile, adhered to a crimson surface, invoked the lush monochromatism of Matisse's 1908 *The Dessert: Harmony in Red*. The sparest, most understated painting in the show, one that reiterated the diagonal lines and oranges, blues, yellows, and greens in other pieces but on a creamy off-white surface, *Jalousie*—named after a style of window with built-in shutters popular in Southern California—was another cipher that unified this body of work. Like windows, Miller's latest paintings mediate between the indoors and the outdoors, the familiar and the strange, signifiers and their unruly multiplying meanings.