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Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting by Bob Nickas

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Allison Miller

Is the hand of an artist more visible to us when drawing and line are central to her paintings? It's a question that can be raised and answered - in the affirmative - by the work of Joanne Greenbaum, and it's very much true for Allison Miller. Mapping out territory in their own distinct ways, you would never confuse one artist's works for the other's, and yet they are connected in an approach that is instinctual, searching, and based on the hand-painted line. Miller might be the more intentionally hesitant of the two, and she uses this to her advantage. She refers to her paintings as "uncomfortable," and confesses, "I'm suspicious of my own habits." Miller applies paint in a way that looks as if it was drawn (she also uses marker): lines are rendered freehand, favoring short vertical and horizontal marks/dashes that give her paintings, with their visual dynamism, the intimacy of works on paper. The large dark form poised on the bottom edge of the canvas in *Eleven* (2008) and pointing out toward three of its corners has a sense of movement in the way it is tilted and activated the frame, but also because of the flurry of marks that give it an internal energy. The form has both lightness and weight. There is also a balancing act of sorts, and it happens not only here but in many of Miller's paintings. This may have something to do with one of her habits: she frequently rotates the paintings when she's working on them, and so they have different orientations before she settles on their final hanging. The canvas is always a standard size, but some of the paintings are vertical, measuring five by four feet, while others are horizontal, four by five feet. And although it's tempting to try and look at them "the other way around" (the double ziggurat that rises up and descends from the bottom and top edges in *Purple and Orange*, 2008, might be an exception), the way they sit on the wall seems to offer the optimum reading of the image.

Miller says that the paintings are not planned out in advance, and it's clear that there is something organic about the way that they seem to have "grown," whether on the purely associative level of the image - as with the looping, suspended vegetation of *Vegetables* (2008) - or in formal/exponential terms, evident in the concentric necklace forms that echo and spread from the corners toward the center of *Green Pink Grey* (2008). A painted line connecting four balls, one at each corner of the painting, is somewhat tangled but serves to tether each "mooring" that holds the image in place. A similar visual effect is achieved in *Block* (2008), where the image, seemingly open-ended but actually action-packed, makes sense because of the black line that spatially delineates and traverses the frame. There is a horizon of sorts, a sky that might have been a ground at an earlier stage (the vertiginous aspect of Miller's considering an image from different points of view?), two prominent dark clusters at the top - an ominous double wasp's nest and the sense that we are looking out across the hood of a car. But heading where, exactly? Miller says that every successive painting is meant to counteract what she has done before, but that, "in the end they can be related to each other." This is what many painters are after; it's what links her to artists who arrive at very different visual conclusions, and it's the reason that each of her paintings generates another and can still be its own new fact. When asked which artists hover

around in her mind and in the studio, she speaks of folk art and American craft, mentions that her mother is a quilter, and says that she admires the quality of line in the work of Ben Shahn. She cites Vuillard, James Ensor, Morris Louis, and George Catlin. While it's an usual group, she admits that on any other day the same question might result in an entirely different response. In this case, perhaps the least likely inspiration ends up being the most apt. Catlin, famous for painting the Plains Indians in the 1830s, produced many Western landscapes that in their mood, forms and palette, and in how they verge on an eccentric abstraction, have a resonance with Miller's work. One particular painting of his, Bird's Eye View of Niagara Falls (1827), could well be a model for one of her own paintings. For Miller, as with so many abstract painters today, the freedom to do what you want from one painting to another is a matter of knowing where you've come from, and of being open to the purposeful uncertainty of what comes next.