

ALLISON MILLER

Encountering one of Allison Miller's paintings is like conversing with someone for the first time. One experiences a series of seductions, dead ends, surprises, bouts of awkward laughter, and witty ripostes. Take, for instance, *Invisible Painting* (2011): A clumsy depiction of a netlike structure "hangs" over a white, wall-like ground. Patterns fill some of the net's diamond-shaped openings, seeming to beckon you to disparate spaces behind what now appears to be a single and solid but decorated surface. In another moment, a nodal point of the net rests just so over a circular form to suggest that the circle is also a sphere, and the net is again distinct from, and a barrier to, the white ground. As you negotiate this syntax—the erratic relationship between the planes and parts of the painting but also inevitably between your body and the painting—you may not know *what* you are looking at, but you are very aware that you are *looking*.

This experience of engaged seeing is analogous to Miller's process of producing each painting. She applies oil and acrylic to canvas without preparatory drawings or plans. Rather, her approach is akin to questioning and answering. Working on multiple paintings simultaneously, she develops each work incrementally, responding to each new layer of paint, each pattern, each move, and its effect on the overall space of the canvas—though not always as one might expect.

Weighing her options at each step, Miller proposes alternatives often contrary to her training and painterly habits. She consciously counteracts obvious hierarchical or harmonious resolution of a composition with garish color, riddling pattern, and bold and effacing forms. She deploys red herrings, shifting visual priorities and upending the viewing experience with dead center or asymmetrical imagery; paint medium that is either washy and thin or mixed with dirt; and inconsistent boundaries between foreground, middle ground, and background.

This improvisational play of trumping and contradictory gestures is an intentional effort to reach unanticipated endings and test the possibilities of her medium. Miller's interests and affinities lie at the edges of painting's history, its bends optical (Edouard Vuillard), pictorial/linguistic (René Magritte), and material/spatial (Lucio Fontana). Of particular interest is the failed virtuosity but imaginative potential of folk art, in which, as she describes, "you are aware of what was supposed to happen and what actually happened," a place where representational images take on abstract qualities.¹ In her own paintings Miller inverts this relationship. She achieves an "uncanny in abstraction," making the unfamiliar familiar through a triple entendre: parts of a work can function as (1) paint, (2) a form, or (3) a form that is a thing. In Miller's paintings, abstract painted forms can take on representational qualities. They become depicted objects subject to depicted gravity, light, and decoration. In *Actor* (2011), a black patch of paint also reads as a shadow cast by concentric (or stacked) squares positioned above, and in *Solid* (2011), a flat, elliptical orange gradient appears wreathed in tartan, becoming a 3-D-like mound and a pedestal for the white form that lingers above its top edge.

Miller will often similarly suggest a form, often rectangular, within a painting as a depiction of a painting, or a veil, or an obstructing cloth. In the resulting shift in comprehension from surface to structure and back out to the rectangle that frames it all, she claims unexpected pictorial and conceptual terrain, producing sculptural space and ontological doubt within the parameters of abstract painting—the pleasures of small talk turned philosophical inquiry.

KM

Notes

1. Allison Miller, conversation with the author, November 5, 2011.

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