

# STONE GRAVY

curated by DAVID PAGEL

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525 West 22nd Street New York NY 10011

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# Meat & Potatoes and Mushrooms on Speed

STONE GRAVY *answers the question “Where does art come from?” indirectly and matter-of-factly, neither beating around the bush nor oversimplifying things.*

This point-blank question sounds as if it might come from a child, particularly one who specializes in asking head-scratching puzzlers—those innocent inquiries in which the no-nonsense directness makes you feel stupid, even a bit mean, if you don’t take the time to think twice about something that had, until that very moment, seemed too obvious to bother with. But children don’t ask about the origins of art. When it comes to life’s mysteries, what they want to know is where babies come from. Adults often answer that question with more fumbling discomfort than necessary. And for some reason, we deal with art similarly, stumbling and stalling and talking around how art came to be present in our lives by telling ourselves all sorts of stories, half-baked and otherwise, about its use and significance, its materials and markets, its intentions and influences, its forms and contexts, its histories and institutions.

There’s nothing wrong with that, if you care more about peripheral issues than art’s heart and soul, its *raison d’être*, its purpose, power and consequences. These unfashionable ideas (though not as unfashionable as they once were) are grown-up inquiries that bring us to the fundamentals, to the essential core of creativity, to the elusive magic or unnamable poetry that are intrinsic to the various ways various artists make matter matter.

When that happens, it seems as if they have made something out of nothing. In many religions, that's the job of a god, or a good number of them. In *Stone Gravy*, it's what artists do, every day of the week, and without any illusions about being divine, omnipotent, omniscient or any of those fantastic qualities folks commonly bestow upon on their creator, or, if the task requires a team effort, creators. Unlike gods, whose identities are defined by their ability to make something out of *absolutely* nothing, the nine artists in *Stone Gravy* make art out of *nothing much*, or *nothing special*—just ordinary supplies and substances, like clay, paint and canvas, not to mention sweat, stubbornness and faith—in their own experiences and thinking, which are meticulously observed, rigorously analyzed, and constantly second-guessed. Doubt counts, often above all else, in their art, which follows no formulas and is never impressed with—or comfortable to rest on—its own achievements. The work they do in their studios is pragmatic and pedestrian, both playful in its initial aimlessness and perverse in its relentless focus: salt-of-the-earth stuff that is often labor-intensive, sometimes effortlessly easy, and always a labor of love. Delusions of grandeur play no part in the appeal and impact of their art, which is unassuming and humble, its ambitions and aims worlds away from the egomaniacal entitlement and pretentious sanctimony that go hand-in-glove with people who take themselves too seriously.

In contrast, the earthly—and earthy—endeavors of the artists in *Stone Gravy* are of the value-added sort. Starting with very little, these painters and sculptors transform basic materials into works of art that are so much more than the sum of their parts that viewers cannot help but be drawn into the worlds they inhabit. Or not. (That's the chance artists have no choice but to take; in a democracy, it's impossible to force people to appreciate art.) If you do happen to fall under its spell, or into the reality it conjures, something wonderful—and wonderfully unfathomable—happens, without undue decep-

tion or too much trickery. In *Stone Gravy*, these ordinarily unsavory attributes intensify art's affects, adding resonance and richness to its repertoire of effects. Explaining such experiences may be another art altogether. Whatever the case, it's futile to try to compel others to partake of art's pleasures and satisfactions by making a rational argument. Other means are necessary. Stories, anecdotes and parables are often better suited to this purpose.

The story of *Stone Gravy* starts with the title, which refers to a folk tale by way of a colloquial expression, otherwise known as slang. The folk tale is an old one, whose original tellers are unknown. "Stone Soup" begins with privation. In various versions, a handful of hungry travelers arrive in a village, where the locals have barely enough food to provide nourishment for themselves, much less to give handouts to strangers. So one of the enterprising travelers fills a large cooking pot with water, builds a fire beneath it, and tosses in a rock. A curious villager approaches, inquires about what they are cooking, and is told "stone soup," a delicious dish that would be even better if a garnish were added. Neither a boldfaced lie nor the full truth, the traveler's statement combines a peculiarly American love of truthfulness (think George Washington and the cherry tree) with an equally deep appreciation of the complexity of case law, despite our disdain for the legions of lawyers who practice it. In any case, the villager rushes off to his cellar and returns with some carrots, which he adds to the soup. This scene is repeated several times as individual villagers stop by, inquire, run off, and return, each adding a single ingredient, including potatoes, peas, beans, turnips, herbs and, in some versions of the story, meat. In the end, the travelers get what they want: Their appetites are sated. And the villagers get something unexpected: a savory feast that turns into a joyous celebration of shared purpose, communal spirit and convivial cooperation. In the process, stinginess, suspicion and small-mindedness give way to openness, participation and civility. What began in privation ends in plenitude, not because of heavenly beneficence or dutiful supplication to an

external or otherworldly power, but because of human activity, group dynamics and the willingness to share something held dear.

The other half of the show's title likewise emphasizes the something-from-nearly-nothing aspect of the folk tale, but with a difference. It spins the earnest message of the story about cooperation and shared purpose, toward an outcome that has a lot less to do with self-determination, sensible sustenance and the common good. The gravy part of the title raises deep questions about the links between causes and effects that the folk tale relies on to teach its lesson of productive, socially beneficial sharing, which is a secular version of the biblical story of loaves and fishes—with, of course, civilized sociability replacing divinity as the source of the bounteous feast. In contrast, gravy brings a sense of the miraculous into the picture while remaining true to the earthly ethos of "Stone Soup," which leaves divinity on the sidelines, out of action, beside the point. That slight but significant adaptation leaves humans in godless territory, where art's pagan powers work.

In colloquial language, or slang, "gravy" refers to excessive or unjustified benefits, to pleasures and perks that are beyond what is due or deserved, and often so above-and-beyond belief or reason that they seem to come out of thin air. The beauty of gravy is that it arrives unexpectedly and in great abundance. No amount of dutifully punching the clock, paying your dues or putting in long hours ensures its arrival, which is unbidden, outside anyone's control and nearly random, like fate. Gravy is a bonus that defies logic and understanding. It does not trickle in slowly and steadily, like some deceptive economic theory, but pours forth plentifully, raining down on our imaginations as if there's no tomorrow and nothing left for us to do but to be awed by its splendid bounty. Americans who worship work are suspicious of gravy for the same reasons that they are suspicious of art: It does not follow the rules of a balance sheet, it defies bean counting and, when it works, it seems all too easy.

Here's how it works in *Stone Gravy*. Polly Apfelbaum, Kim MacConnel, and Richard Allen Morris boil art down to the basics. Each uses the simplest of materials in the simplest of ways, eliminating superfluous flourishes and every hint of fanciness to lay bare the all-or-nothing decisiveness at the heart of their art. The take-it-or-leave-it immediacy of their one-shot compositions leaves no room for compromise, fudging or playing both sides of the fence. It's as close to an absolute as you can get while keeping your feet firmly planted in reality.

The abstract paintings by Brad Eberhard, Annie Lapin and Allison Miller are all about starting fresh, with no expectations, and starting over, with the goal of getting it right this time, after many wrong turns. In their delicious arrangements of punched-through picture planes, scraggly shapes and mistake-obliterating brushstrokes, the opposition between unfettered originality and ad hoc adaptation dissolves in a fluid stew of down-to-earth idealism. Pragmatic Romanticism describes their aesthetic philosophy, whose hopefulness is well worn but hardly worn out.

Gravy's inexplicable, out-of-nowhere pleasures take gorgeous shape in Ron Nagle's pint-sized pieces, David Reed's light-saturated paintings, and Matt Wedel's three-dimensional pictures. The labor-intensity of these savvy works is notable, but next to nothing once you give yourself over to their deep satisfactions. They let you forget about such pedestrian endeavors as painstaking labor because their payoff is so above-and-beyond—so abundantly over-the-top that all else pales in comparison.

The something-from-nothing generosity embodied by these pieces, like all of the works in *Stone Gravy*, is a gift that is worth thinking about, whether or not you get it. When you do, the question “Where does art come from?” loses its urgency and is replaced by the more important, and consequential “Where does it take you?”

DAVID PAGEL

*David Pagel is an art critic who writes regularly for the Los Angeles Times. He is an associate professor of art theory and history at Claremont Graduate University and an adjunct curator at the Parrish Art Museum. An avid cyclist, he is a three-time winner of the California Triple Crown.*

## ALLISON MILLER

*Allison Miller's first solo show, in 2006, included only six paintings. Each measured 4-by-5 feet, was hung vertically or horizontally, and stood on its own as a heart-warming testament to the pathos we feel when we see people strive for goals far beyond their God-given talents.*

Miller (b.1974) did this with pencils and marking pens. Most of her draftsmanship seemed so unsure of itself that you found yourself rooting for each quivering line, hoping that it didn't run out of gas before it made it across a perilous expanse of forlorn emptiness or peter out before it joined forces with enough other lines to make a shaky pattern whose geometry, far from ideal, embodied homegrown charm.

A year later, Miller followed up with an exhibition of eight works, still 4-by-5 feet, that were bolder and beefier yet equally riddled by the vulnerabilities, risks and sentiments that were quickly becoming the heart of her art (which she still wears on her sleeve). Her tentative, anxiety-laced lines formed concentric triangles, diamonds and circles, the oddness of each segment growing in proportion to its distance from the center. These compositional building blocks added up to off-kilter abstractions whose architectural solidity was tense and jittery yet sufficiently freewheeling to leave viewers with ample room to maneuver.

That sense of movement—of nearly dancing back and forth, around an animated composition—takes shape in Miller's latest paintings, which manage, very deftly, to share with viewers the embarrassment embodied by the lines in her early works. Rather than inviting us to be sympathetic witnesses to someone else as she stumbles through a task outside her comfort zone, paintings like *Diptych* (2010), *Sail* (2011) and *Solid* (2011) draw us into the picture, eliciting interactions that can't be had from a distance. A fairly high dork quotient suffuses Miller's new works, in which she forgoes her standard, 4-by-5 format for different dimensions including squares. Dopey plaids, toy-boat sails, chain-link fences and pigment mixed with dirt—along with confident, swiftly applied lines—set the stage for participatory dramas that go beyond appearances to get to what's real, even if it's embarrassing.

I. *Diptych*, 2010, Oil, acrylic and gesso on canvas, 48 x 60 inches

II. *Sail*, 2011, Oil, acrylic, dirt and gesso on canvas, 48 x 48 inches

III. *Solid*, 2011, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 54 inches





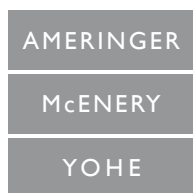
I.



II.



III.



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Ameringer | McENERY | Yohe  
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