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**HYPERALLERGIC**  
Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## What Doesn't Add Up Adds Up To Allison Miller's New Paintings

by John Yau on September 29, 2013

1. This is the second exhibition of Allison Miller — an L.A.-based painter — at [Susan Inglett Gallery](#) (September 12–October 19, 2013). I was struck by the quiet independence of her first New York show, which I reviewed. The recent show further convinced me that Miller — who refuses to make work that is stylish, seductive, charming, nostalgic, retro, ironic or hip — is up to something. It is not that we wouldn't recognize a Miller painting as such, it's that she refuses to give her work a look. And in order to do this, and to keep everything in play while

working on a painting, she seems to understand the necessity of exploring a territory that hasn't been colonized by discourse, that hasn't been snatched up and packaged by critics and theorists as the latest example of postmodern capital. I am further impressed by the fact that she refuses to affix a spiel to her work. I become distrustful when the artist resorts to a verbal component to deliver the enlightenment.



Allison Miller, "Wave" (2013), oil and acrylic/canvas, 36 x 36 in. (all images courtesy Susan Inglett Gallery, New York)

In the catalogue for the group exhibition *Made in L.A. 2012* (Hammer Museum, 2012), which included Miller's work, Kurt Mueller points out that "Miller's interests and affinities lie at the edges of painting's history," and that it focuses on three divergent possibilities: "optical (Edouard Vuillard), pictorial/linguistic (René Magritte), and material/spatial (Lucio Fontana)." If painting is a language, which I think it is, then Miller's is an amalgam of contradictory and cancelling phrases, with neither style nor subject matter occupying the center.

Miller's process — her way of putting together a painting (or, to continue the metaphor, a sentence or paragraph) — is incremental, following no set plan. She seems to want to reach an impasse where the next move would destroy the stand-offs that she has created, where the tensions established by various figure/ground relationships have become the focal points of a painting. She is deliberately inconsistent on a formal level, but in a way that does not evoke collage. It is as if she went from speaking German to Mandarin in the same sentence.



*Allison Miller, "Untitled" (2013), Oil, acrylic dirt and pencil/ canvas, 66 x 60 in.*

2. In Miller's current exhibition, she uses oil, acrylic, dirt and pencil. The palette is dominated by black, which is found in every painting. Other colors include copper-green, turquoise, viridian, tan, dirty salmon, pale blue, bright yellow, red and deep blue. Some colors are drab and institutional, calling to mind the dreary corridors of schools and hospital built during the Eisenhower years. Other colors are sunnier, one might say, bright and perky. None of the bright colors dominate a painting — they usually peek through or are confined to the edges.

Obstruction is one of Miller's recurring motifs. A rectangle within the painting's rectangle might suggest a piece of cloth or a frosted window. She will cover a pattern — which reminds me of a shower curtain — with a layer of black paint

punctuated by porthole-like openings revealing what's underneath. In "Untitled" (2013), she painted three irregular black rectangles marked by repeating white, semitransparent diagonal stripes.

Could these rectangles be pieces of cloth or metal windows pierced with slits (the kind you might see in a sci-fi flick of a dystopian future)? They are neither of these things, of course, and both. Looking is akin to archaeological sorting, to extricating and fitting together. In Miller's paintings the figure-ground relationship has become hopelessly entangled, like a ball of yarn a cat got hold of.

"Untitled" stirred up an association with tenements, and the layers of wallpaper and paint applied by succeeding generations. It could be a metaphor for painting — which is a history of covering and uncovering. At one point I felt like I had a pleasant case of Attention Deficit Disorder, with my eyes flitting about, like butterflies. In "Untitled" Miller seems to be shuffling the sequence, leaving viewers unable to tell when what got painted.

3. In "Lean" (2013), the three unevenly scalloped black forms can be read as objects, tilting the painting towards the representational without fully sliding into that domain. Slowly, however, the viewer realizes that "Lean" is neither fully representational nor fully abstract, that the black scalloped forms become both things to see and a set of obstructions that overlay other obstructions. This perception speaks to the state of confusion that currently permeates the art world as well as our larger sense of things.

Miller seems intent on interrogating the languages that make up painting, on exploring what makes a shape look like a thing, and when it is simply understood as layer of paint. It is as if she wants to get to that place where language hasn't hardened into this or that way of reading — a fluid realm where there are no names of categories for everything we encounter. By mixing up various connotations, she reaches a place where distinctions between the visceral and visual collapse, where we are looking at dirt as color, surface and thing.

One of Miller's preoccupations is the figure-ground relationship. In "Lock" (2013), she makes two white circles, each nestled in one of the two large, porthole-like openings in the black layer of paint that covers the ground, which is made of at least two colors. In "Lock," our attention is drawn toward the ragged edges between the black layer and diagonally arranged white circles. In this work, I sense that Miller is critiquing that strain of painting that emphasizes the optical and reaches for states of disembodiment. Seeing, as Miller would define it, is a force compelled to probe, to try to find what else can be discerned. Such seeing is comparable to a dog sniffing for a bone; it's a visceral activity, rather than a purely optical one.

In "Magnet" (2013), our attention shifts between the alternating blue and black bands of varying lengths at the top and side edges of the canvas, to the layer of dirt occupying much of the painting's interior, which pushes against the bands. Miller complicates this reading with the thinly painted layer of blue along the bottom edge of the painting, which evokes the sky. Attention zooms in on the interstices between the large forms and fields. It is as if we wanted to give equal consideration of the space between clouds.



*Allison Miller, "Lean" (2013), oil, acrylic, and dirt/canvas, 60 x 48*



*Allison Miller, "Magnet" (2013), oil, acrylic and dirt/canvas, 30 x 26 in.*



*Allison Miller, "Repeater" (2013), oil and acrylic/canvas, 66 x 60 in.*

In "Repeater" (2013), the black, torso-like shape covering the patterned ground is perforated with wing-like openings. A white semicircle protrudes in from the painting's left side, mirrored by a black semicircle entering from the right. Are we supposed to look at, look through, or look all around? I suspect that Miller is inviting us to look in all these ways and more, realizing that perhaps the incremental steps she has taken don't add up to a solution or destination. Rather, she reaches a stalemate, where figure and ground attain a co-dependent authority, and stays there. Instead of following the by now familiar line of philosophical inquiry that arrives at either/or, Miller finds her own way to both/and.

*Allison Miller continues at Susan Inglett Gallery (522 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) until October 19.*