

Yau, John. "The Center Does Not Have To Hold: Allison Miller's Recent Paintings," *Hyperallergic*, 24 January 2016.

# HYPERALLERGIC

## The Center Does Not Have To Hold: Allison Miller's Recent Paintings

by [John Yau](#) on January 24, 2016

As Robert Creeley once said: "You can't derail a train by standing directly in front of it, or, not quite. But, a tiny piece of steel, properly placed ... " The piece of steel in this case is the work of Allison Miller, an abstract painter who began showing her paintings in Los Angeles in 2006, a decade ago. She had first exhibition in New York City in 2012, followed by another the following year. [ALLISON MILLER: Speeds](#) at Susan Inglett, the venue of all her shows, is now her third solo in New York (December 10, 2015–January 30, 2016). I reviewed the first two exhibitions and, after seeing her current one, feel compelled to do so again.



If you are wondering about the train and who is on it, it is that massive shadow that has been circling a cultural landscape marked by pastiche, citation, just plain copying, or the semblance of being provisional. It is full of passengers who are trying to dream up the next gimmick, since using a fire extinguisher as a "brush," incorporating chewed gum as a medium, or laying work on the floor so that viewers can walk on it, have already been taken. These days, in order to become an attention-grabber, you have to convert the studio into a fashionable hybrid of Smart Ass Pranks and Romper Room.

Miller isn't another hip passenger trying to find a niche in this strip-mined terrain. Nor — to her further credit — has she aligned herself with the "sincere" side of the tracks. You know, the ones standing in front of the train and gesticulating wildly, claiming to be the true heirs of Albert Pinkham Ryder, Arthur Dove, Frank Kline or (insert name of "outsider" artist here). Moreover, Miller is not trying to make aesthetically correct, postmodern abstractions that take their cues from Pop Art or jam together different historical styles together for a pleasing visual potpourri.

This is what got my attention when I first saw her work:

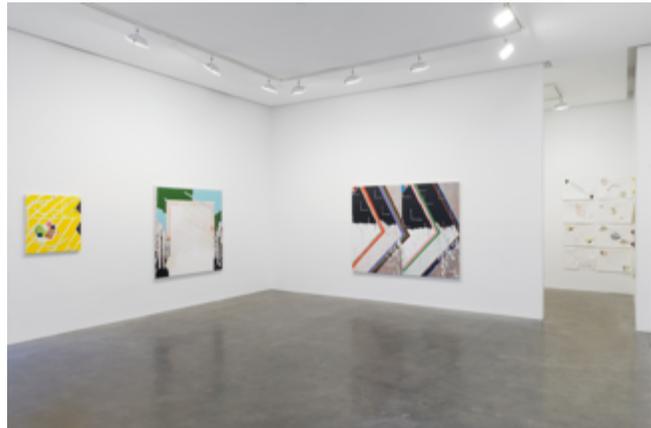
She refuses to take the shortest route, physically and aesthetically as well, having rejected developing a recognizable style, sign or logo. She doesn't advertise who she is, or where she is going, nor does she reach for a fashionable product, such as airless hard-edged abstraction or provisional painting. She isn't trying to fit into any of the

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currently hip narratives, whether taught in art schools or regurgitated in art magazines. Even in this day and age of anything goes, that is quietly heretical act.

The paintings and works on paper in her current show are unexpected, confounding, and witty. The range of allusions is wide and never overstated.

In the nearly square painting "Flush Arch" (2015), Miller uses oil paint, oil stick, acrylic, and pencil to evoke a piece of raw canvas affixed to a studio wall. I only came to this reading of the painting after I focused on the three turquoise bands, which extend from the painting's ground to the seemingly "raw canvas." The vertical bands on either side of the "raw canvas" evoked the bare areas left after strips of masking tape covered with paint have been



pulled up. Miller makes a series of colored lines in these bare bands, which confounds our ability to place them: are they in front, behind or beside the plane of surrounding them? Elsewhere, Miller uses masking tape to puncture a layer of paint she has put down, which is different than how it has historically been used in hard-edge abstraction.



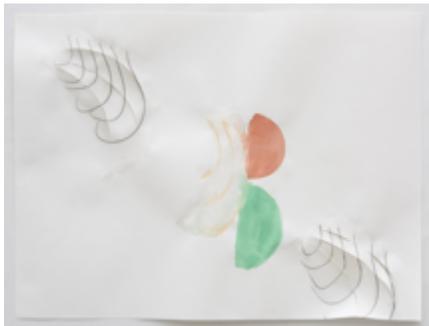
Miller's process isn't to cover the canvas with paint so much as to cover and uncover it, to interrupt, upend or subvert an expectation. For her, a canvas isn't a surface to which another uniform surface is applied, but a kind of diary where things are added, covered over, uncovered — a combination of construction and archaeology. To assemble her paintings, she has transformed aspects of trompe l'oeil, hard-edged abstraction (the use of masking tape), patterning and repetition, transparency and layering, as ways of assembling her paintings. She also seems to have gotten something from the French *affichiste* artist Jacques Villeglé's use of torn posters in his decollage. All these possible sources are subsumed into the painting; there is no citation, irony, or nostalgia, only the present tense of the painting, with the whitish rectangle framed on the top edge and part of both sides by two tawny bands of color.

A stack of evenly spaced linear pencil lines descends diagonally across the surface of the "raw canvas," echoing the tilted orientation of the longest turquoise band, which cuts across the painting's upper right hand corner, "affixing" it to the ground (or what can be

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read as wall) beneath. The pencil lines suggest that the framed "unpainted" rectangle can be covered further, that this finished painting is not quite "finished." It occurs me to that "Flush Arch" can be read as Miller's response to provisional painting, as if to assert that one can be lyrical rather than literal about the makeshift, because that kind of obvious thinking is a continuation of Frank Stella's "What you see is what you see." Such thoughts and actions are authoritarian; they deny the viewer's imagination.

There is instability running through Miller's work. What do I see beneath the coat of white painting that takes up the middle third of "Scratch Arch" (2015)? Seeing, the artist reminds us, is not all of a piece; it can be incremental and constantly shifting. We must disassemble the transitional state that Miller puts in front of us, focus on the parts and layers, and see how they contribute to the whole, while maintaining their individual identities. Everything in the painting is contingent, but never in any obvious way. Looking becomes archaeological, we begin uncovering the artist's decisions, finding where she once laid a piece of tape, pulled it up, but then covered over the bare spot and surrounding area with another layer of painting, leaving the ridges as a trace. Seeing becomes a way of tracking one's thoughts, of trying to determine how the painting came into being.



The paintings are complimented by two sets of sixteen individually numbered drawings titled "Doubles" (all 2015). Each set is installed on adjacent walls, eight to a side. In the drawings, Miller often cuts and peels back a similar pair of geometric shapes, drawing and painting on the obverse side. This doubling makes the gesture of cutting less precious, more part of a system, though what that scheme might be is never clear. It seems to me that Miller's drawings are a way to accumulate a vocabulary of abstract shapes and marks.

When I mentioned that Miller's work is like a tiny piece of steel, I did not want to suggest that she was being heroic. Rather, I was advancing that she was being quietly subversive, just as Thomas Nozkowski had been in the late 1970s, when he began painting on prepared canvas board measuring 16 by 20 inches. For a long time the art world did not notice what Nozkowski was up to, because it was too busy celebrating the Neo-Expressionists and their achievement in the market place. Now, thirty-five years later, it is evident that painters such as Eric Fischl and Julian Schnabel are period artists, stuck in their time, just as Jim Dine is stuck in an earlier period. Instead, it's when artists who keep moving that they attain staying power. Miller is one of those artists. I will gladly cross the street to see her work.

[ALLISON MILLER: Speeds](#) continues at Susan Inglett Gallery (522 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through January 30.