



There is an artistic theory of knowledge different from a scientific or philosophical one. The artist can direct his attention to what he is sure of. This is not an idea, not an eternal object, it is actual, and it has immediacy. Art permits you to accept illogical immediacy, and in so doing releases you from chasing after the distant and the ideal. When this occurs, the effect is exalting.

—Fairfield Porter, *Against Idealism* [1964]

Tales of Wine-Dark Seas...

Paton Miller

Paintings 1989-91

Paton Miller ascribes to the notion that painting, the empirical philosophy that evolves from the loaded brush applied to canvas, is a process of discovery. Though Miller's visual fictions might translate well to a medium such as filmmaking, at present he is satisfied with the daunting challenge of making paint speak about a multiplicity of experience. Taking on humankind, in all of its contradictions, nonetheless turns out to be a rewarding adventure for the viewer, as much as it is evidently pleasurable for the artist himself.

When describing the *Los Caprichos* etchings by Goya, Jean-François Chabrun wrote that "there had never before been an engraver who, like Shakespeare in his plays, combined realism, satire and poetry at one stroke." *Los Caprichos* could be considered Goya's reflections on "a world of reality as it appeared to him after it has passed through the sieve of his personal judgement." In this instance, Miller shares with Goya the vision and ability to conjure up a world of images that attempt to represent a full range of human experience; lived, observed and embellished. Miller is particularly fascinated with equatorial climates; rural, earthy places, island cultures, people living in profound conjunction with the sea. Dogs, cats, horses, animals domestic and otherwise, figure prominently in Miller's scheme of things, as their presence denotes a culture that still maintains a purposeful, mutually dependant relationship between human and animal life. Such a world could be construed as a nostalgic look back at an idyllic paradise, if it were not for the perpetual struggle for survival within which almost all of Miller's characters find themselves.

Miller is also preoccupied with extremes of behavior, those indulgences in excess that are the essential fodder of the satirist's art. Like Daumier, Miller has an uncanny eye for the telling gesture and facial expression that conveys, with simplest means, the often humorous or tragic aspect of human endeavor.

The time that Miller spent living in a fishing village on the Pacific coast of Mexico several years ago still has significant resonance in his work. *Cockfight* depicts a group of rowdy gamblers at the instant before their fighting birds are released to do battle. The link between excessive drinking and violence is deftly portrayed; an aproned waiter serves a pitcher (of tequila?) with shot glasses, as if these wildly gesticulating, shouting characters needed any more stimulants to enhance this moment of confrontation. Their gestures are aggressive and defensive at the same time, betraying the vicarious pleasure they derive from the struggle of their trained killers. Miller conveys this microcosm of violence with a singular passion; the contorted and shadowed faces, the man who holds a jug in one hand and money gripped in the other, all embody a perverse thrill in the anticipation of death. On a smaller scale, *Duck Thief* is a parable of street crime. A wounded victim raises his walking stick to strike in vain at the fleeing

perpetrator, the forlorn duck cradled in the culprit's arm. Reminiscent of the harsh, unflinching realism of Luis Bunuel's *Los Olvidados* or Hector Babenco's *Pixote*, Miller presents a quintessential scene of the random dangers of city (large or small) street life. *Drunk and Fat Guys* are like pages from the painter's journal; reflections on Miller's encounter with what he describes as "loaded moments" translated into images of excess.

Though Miller's work is not specifically narrative or allegorical in intent, he is a vivid storyteller, a fabricator of elaborate, mysterious fables. In *Burlesque*, a cat (likely a female, in a skirt with hoola hoop), performs for a motley crowd of men and mammals, some in carnival costumes, rallied to a frenzy by a dunce-helmeted church official. The masks and cast grey shadows lend an ominous air to an otherwise comic gathering. The viewpoint from behind the stage adds to the uncomfortable threat of the bellicose, unruly throng, the cat's future as an entertainer seriously in doubt. One wonders about the reward for the hard working protagonist in *Pushing the Mule*, who unceremoniously confronts the hindquarters of the stubborn beast while being serenaded by a guitarist in the background. Perhaps his deed will live on in a popular folk song.

For most painters, technique is a means to an end, and Miller's reuse of his old canvases is part of the process of finding or locating an image. Miller's paintings often go through several stages of development; canvases are inverted or scraped down several layers, until a wall of fragmented shapes remain that might inspire an entirely different picture. This continuous search for images is the crux of Miller's invention; his receptivity to the emerging composition makes it as much a "found object" as an act of will. The monochromatic *Shipwrecked* seems to have gone through multiple changes, the remnants of its other lives casting ghostly shadows across the painting.

For Miller, drawing is, as Ingres is purported to have stated, the probity of art. Miller's contour carries with it the dramatic import and rhythmic fluidity of all of his figurative paintings. Without it, works like *Fishing Off the Pier* would be simply genre pictures, but the graceful treatment of form allows it to transcend, as with Daumier, a mere rendering of a picturesque scene. Often Miller prefers the raw look of charcoal on canvas, typified by *Pacific Northwest Painting*, the recollections of his youth spent in Seattle, resurfacing in a child's theater of puppets with animal and human features derived from Northwest (Tlingit?) Indian totemic sculpture and masks. Forms are clearly defined for maximum impact so that color, in this instance, is superfluous.

Miller's use of color is deceptively simple; it serves as an expressive element in each painting, providing emphasis and accent to pictorial events. Emotive rather than descriptive or decorative, color functions as an element of surprise, bringing unexpected harmonies and dissonances to his paintings. Perhaps most significantly, Miller employs primarily earth colors, which reinforce the impression of vital street activity, bringing a sense of veracity to the scenes of labor and the various modes of distraction of the working class which the artist chooses to depict.

Studying the recent paintings, it is clear that Miller envisions the ocean as having a magical calming and restorative power that landlocked society cannot compensate for with entertainment, sport or spirits. For Miller the sea represents a degree of serenity, as in the lyrical *Big Catch*, that can offer solace against a troubled world, even if it can only be experienced in solitude. The artist, like the lone figure in *Shipwrecked*, recognizes the beached sailboat as an opportunity to confront the unknown, or the blank canvas, as the surface upon which all lives, real or imagined, are played out.

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