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John Millei @ George Lawson

APRIL 5, 2014



No. 29 Head, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 30"

"Painting has nothing to do with thinking, because in painting thinking is painting."

— Gerhard Richter

This exhibition of noted Los Angeles painter John Millei presents eleven works created between 2010 and 2014. The paintings continue Millei's strategic investigation of contemporary figure painting, portraiture and the often-blurry line between abstraction and figuration. Born in 1958, Millei is well into his productive mid-career. It's difficult not to sound Old School, but when looking at Millei, one inevitably considers notions of structure, painterly hand, the historical

continuum that this exhibition probes and the allure of unrelenting confidence in formal skill.

The front gallery holds seven paintings, a suite of five portrait heads and two paintings of bathers in indeterminate landscapes. The paintings draw from historical motifs of figure painting and portraiture, posing fragmented and reinvented recollections and commentary using such touchstones as Velasquez, Picasso, Morandi and Guston. On some level all painting elicits the history of painting and re-presents unique distillations of all that has come before. In part that is how we recognize it. So it may be limiting to make historical context an argument for painting. The motifs upon which Millei hangs this group of work provide scaffolding, but perhaps the richer, more immediate experience is in turning our attention to how the painting looks and to how Millei strategically works in the gap between painting as a picture and painting as an object.

The portraits, in particular *No. 2 Head (2014)* and *No. 7 Head (2014)* seem like blow-ups or close ups taken with a zoom lens. The lines tend to be reductive and precise, functioning equally as shape, plane or mass. Millei's brush strokes are emphatic, rarely random, and each stroke becomes an integral component of his painting's structure. There is no extraneous painting or embellishment; removal of a line or stroke risks collapsing the framework like a house of cards. This reductive tension becomes a drama of control and admirable restraint, of painting only what just holds, nothing more.

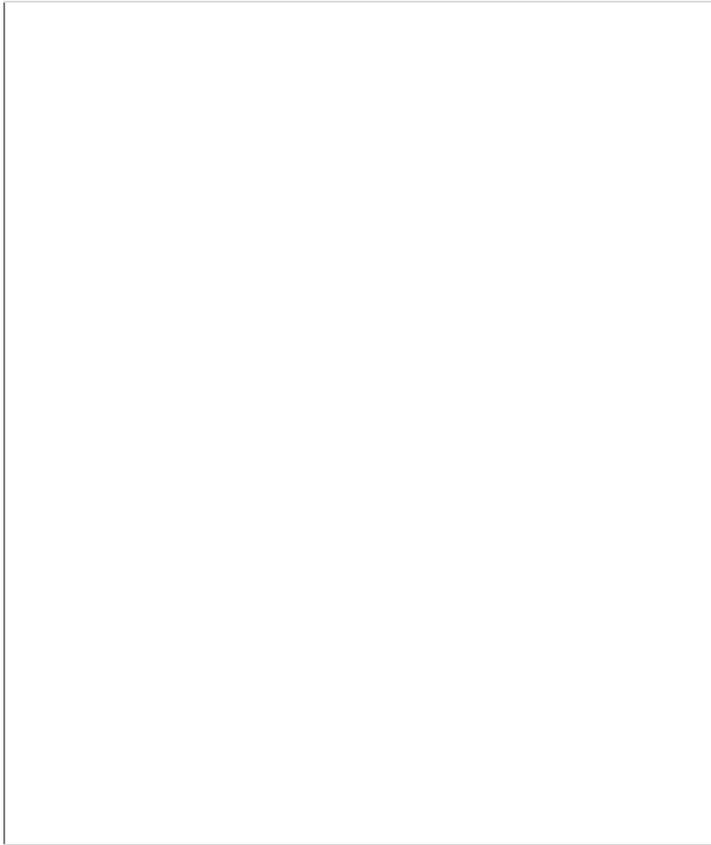


No. 30 Head, 2010, oil and acrylic on canvas, 36 x 30"

Millei's surfaces are a uniformly coherent layering of thick over thin, gloss over chalky, ethereal matte. His painting is driven by his concern for physical truth, with particular attention paid to how pigment is applied to achieve architectural integrity. He doesn't finesse his surfaces to make his paintings appear a particular way. The paint exists simply as substance. Direct, terse, and straightforward, his paintings give no indication of being belabored. To be sure there is consummate craft afoot, but to Millei's credit it's invisible, as if the paint itself were making his decisions.

The smaller back gallery presents four works, most notably *No. 10 Torso (2013)* and *No. 11 Head (2010)*. At 72 by 60 inches, *Torso* is, with the two *Bathers* paintings in the front gallery, the largest work in the show. Using a French palette of muddy browns, grays and anemic peach, he organizes the up-ended figure as a freeway of speeding lines, on-ramps and off-ramps of flesh and gesture. Small flat discs indicating the nipples and

vagina stop the painting from careening off the surface. *No. 11 Head*, (2010) is a sophisticated



No. 31 Torso, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60"

composition of sour green, gunky violet, and his signature muddy brown, all of which is saved by an anchoring patch of cobalt blue, without which the painting would slide off the wall in an overheated heap. Again, the extent to which Millei pays attention to what is just enough signifies a painter-in-full.

The paintings in this show are lean and buff. They are organized, resolved, and focused. They are efficiently drained of problems. But it's their resolution and sense of certainty that takes risk and rich dimensionality out of the equation.

There is no doubt to be found. Millei seems to know what he is thinking, as if he is unwilling to be confused or disrupted. Exposing little of himself, his decisions appear to be mobilized more by strategy than necessity. Millei is

capable of making grand and speculative paintings that hold us in a breathtaking emotional grip. Two earlier series, *Maritime* and *White Squalls*,

are transcendent spectacles of radiance and existential mystery. But who among us can lay claim to consistent greatness? Any serious artist keeps working, building and dismantling, waiting in the working, working in the waiting. And to be sure, Millei is an intelligent painter, a workhorse painter, possessing a dogged belief in painting's power.

–JULIA COUZENS

John Millei: "Selected Paintings" @ [George Lawson Gallery](#) through April 19, 2014.

About the Author:

[Julia Couzens](#) is a Sacramento-based artist and writer whose work has been widely shown, most recently at the di Rosa Preserve. Her drawings and hybrid objects are in museum and public collections throughout the U.S. These include the Achenbach

Foundation for Graphic Arts; Berkeley Art Museum; Oakland Museum; Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina; and Yale University. She lives and works on Merritt Island in the Sacramento River delta.



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