

Howard Halle, "John Miller: The New Honeymooners," **Time Out New York**, January 9, 2008, pp. 68

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Installation view

John Miller, "The New Honeymooners"

★★★★★

Metro Pictures + Friedrich Petzel Gallery, through Feb 2 (see Chelsea)

An artist goes for the gold in two Chelsea galleries.

By **Howard Halle**

When I mentioned to a young artist colleague that I was reviewing John Miller's double show, "The New Honeymooners," she asked, "Who's John Miller?" As dispiriting as her reaction was to someone who's admired his work these past 20-plus years, I wasn't entirely surprised. I suspect that many art-world twentysomethings are more familiar with the output of Miller's art-star friends Mike Kelley and Tony Oursler, with whom he shared a school—Cal Arts—and a sensibility. The latter might be described as a curdled pop-cultural aesthetic informed by underground comics, Saturday-morning cartoons and the Goodwill store. But while Kelley and Oursler devise crowd-pleasing formulas, Miller's approach (which in the past involved covering aggregations of various objects from tawdry plastic statuettes to model-train landscape elements in thick, poo-brown paint) is stubbornly off-putting. "His stuff is just so unlovable," observed another artist I know, who remembers when Miller

first began showing in the mid-1980s. True enough. If you effectively tell people, as Miller has, that their cherished faith in art is full of shit, you're bound to turn some of them off.

At 53, Miller has created an eclectic panoply of works over the course of his career (including more or less Photorealistic paintings based on images of game-show sets). But it's the brown pieces—taking shape variously as wall-mounted panels or tabletop models or free-floating objects suspended from the ceiling with fishing line—for which he's best known, and rightly so. There was always more to them than a simple one-note bathroom joke. Miller's fecal palette sent up the Freudian linkage between creativity and the infant obsession with poop, as well as more recent and fashionable notions such as the theory of the abject, formulated by the French-Bulgarian philosopher Julia Kristeva. (She postulated that traumatic reminders of our materiality—the sight of corpses, vomit or excrement—precipitate a breakdown in our ability to process meaning.) The artist's color choice also carried with it intimations of his hometown, Cleveland, that poster city for environmental degradation and industrial obsolescence. Shit might be the first thing you think of, but Miller's brown can also be read as sludge or rust—which as Neil Young once sang, never sleeps.

With "The New Honeymooners," his most focused effort in years, Miller takes aim at the global march of capital and its art-world spawn, the steroidal contemporary market juiced on money from China, Russia and our own tax-relieved rich. Miller's take on our new Gilded Age is fairly literal. Instead of brown paint, he's applied real gold leaf, but as in his past work, the stuff underneath is cheap. Calling it crap wouldn't be putting too fine a point on it. (And talk about colonic convergence: Recently, the New Museum started to sell ingestible gold-leaf capsules, guaranteed to make your shit sparkle.)

John Miller's new work offers a cautionary tale, like King Midas.

Miller employs Styrofoam cups, plastic plates, bottles and other detritus as a ground for a material usually associated with objets d'art. At Friedrich Petzel Gallery, his pieces assume the form of reliefs; at Metro Pictures, they're small tables groaning with glittering refuse. Although there's overlap between the two bodies of work—ears of plastic corn keep cropping up—a slight shift in content is discernible.

The sculptures at Metro are suffused with toy Uzis and Glockes, as well as discarded costume swords and Roman helmets: a nod to imperialism's role in garnering loot, maybe, but also, perhaps, to some idea that the money's just too damn good these days to let a real war spoil the party.

But overall, Miller seems to be dwelling on the role that finance has taken as the be-all and end-all of today's art—and just as important, how a lot of cash is chasing junk. Actually, make that creating junk: Beneath the evident irony of conjuring an alchemical twist on his own oeuvre, Miller offers a cautionary tale along the lines of King Midas, who turned his own daughter into a golden statue. Art, this work implies, is more valuable than ever, but is it worth anything?

Interestingly, "The New Honeymooners" doesn't necessarily answer in the negative. If that's all Miller were interested in, he could have just used spray paint. Instead, he forces you to consider the genuine allure of gold, not just materially but spiritually as well. There is, after all, a reason Byzantine artists used gold-leaf backgrounds to represent the sacred space of heaven. So, does this mean Miller's work has become more lovable? Not entirely. But it does suggest that his gimlet eye may see something better on the horizon. ■

