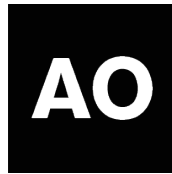


METRO PICTURES

Beer, J. "AO Interview: John Miller on 'Suburban Past Times' at Metro Pictures through March 9, 2012," *ArtObserved.com* (March 8, 2012).



John Miller's exhibition Suburban Past Time at Metro Pictures Gallery combines several mediums in "a continuation of the artist's ongoing sociological investigation into so-called middlebrow culture, which focus on artifice in Western consumer societies," according to the press release. Art Observed was fortunate enough to visit with Miller in the following interview.

Art Observed: After looking over the photos of the work and seeing it in person, there's this sense of the everyday that comes out but there is also this pervasive strangeness that you seem to capture. It's akin to the experience one has in a public space, when you walk through and notice a glimmer of strangeness that you see or feel for just a second—the absurdity of the everyday. Are you concerned with capturing that strangeness?

John Miller: A little bit, yes. A couple things on that note: One inspiration or source for the show was a show by Michelangelo Pistoletto at Luhring Augustine 2 or 3 years ago. Like many of his works he created silkscreens on mirrors, but I had never seen him do anything like this where he had a bunch of images and things that connoted public space like traffic cones and construction webbing, all coupled with images of ordinary looking women, but then they were made slightly uncomfortable because they were with traffic cones in public spaces—and you had to ask, was this an ordinary woman or a street walker? I got into this idea of public space, when a woman waited too long she looked suspect, and it showed a kind of genderedness of space. When a man stands on a corner you think he's just waiting around, he's less suspicious. I also liked the idea of overlaying two spaces—the gallery space, which is commercial space, like a store, and this staging of public space.



Another installation that was a reference point for me, which I never saw in person, was Claus Oldenburg's *Bedroom*, where he made bedroom furniture that was off kilter and he eventually converted the space to a quasi-bedroom but it wasn't completely seamless. You saw the door to the gallery office that was roped off. So I began to play with notions of public space, in a very simple way. It started with the wallpaper, thinking of 1950s style wallpaper murals that were typically nature scenes. I thought 'what if I flipped it around, and showed something man-made, like hi-rise buildings, and put objects that connoted nature into the space?' Which is what I did in the first room. And then I thought, 'I'll make a rock, but it should be a Central Park kind of rock,' and that began to seem like a good idea. Central Park is an artificial landscape and it has a dialectical relationship to the city and to urban space.

AO: It's interesting—as Central Park was being planned the urban space was already designed and growing on its own at that point and planners tried to design a second space to feel natural inside of that newborn urban space. It's a funny thing, now that Central Park has actually grown also and become 'nature' for the five million people that inhabit Manhattan.

JM: I think Frederick Law Olmstead built one of the first suburban housing communities out in New Jersey. Those started to come into existence with the construction of Light Rail commuter lines, which, at first only the wealthy could afford to use. So there's a relationship to urban and suburban space.



AO: The conversation about suburban space in the past decade or two has focused on the idea of suburban sprawl, and with imagining the sprawl, slowness came to mind, a kind of spreading out. While looking through the show, especially with the video piece, I was thinking about the notion of time and how it relates to the whole show. Noticing the strangeness in the everyday comes either a slowing down or a speeding up during that split second experience. Does time play a role in your work?

JM: It absolutely does. The photos I used for the wallpaper came out of this series I've been shooting since 1996, called *The Middle of the Day*. The rules of the series are that I shoot photos between 12 and 2, but I don't shoot every day, but when I do it's during that time. I like that time of day because it's ill-defined, and it's also my least favorite time of day, because I like definition. But it's also not clear whether you should rest or work, and of course that differs from culture to culture, but it's an ambiguous time of day. Some of my photos do show people rushing through lunch but others just show objects passing through this particular time.

AO: As if they have to weather that slowness.

JM: And in that regard, an artist who was really important for me, and still is, is [Giorgio] de Chirico. In his piazza paintings the time of day is ambiguous, but they seem to relate to siesta time—it's the middle of the day in the middle of town and it's deserted. And then on the fringes you see smokestacks and locomotives and signs of industry that are working against the structure of siesta. I like de Chirico more than orthodox surrealists because with the piazza paintings he didn't push things too much, they're more like observations, and rather than looking for a transcendent reality he stayed with the given-ness of things. That's what I attempt to do, in my own way.



AO: As a painter myself, de Chirico was one of the first painters that affected me in a formative way. I was struck by that emptiness in his pictures. I never would've guessed there was a connection to him in your work. We were talking before about the order you created the works in the show and you said you created the wallpaper pieces first. Do you work in one medium at a time or work on a few different things at once?

JM: I produced a mock-up for the show using Google Sketchup, and some elements in the show were carried over from recent shows. In Germany I had shown file cabinet pieces and I had shown pieces of printer paper before. I was able to design the show very quickly, just in one afternoon, then, it was just producing it. This show was a little bit of a break—earlier I had used patterned wallpaper that I purchased, but this was the first time I made it. So I did a couple new things. Making the rock was a new thing, and I had made carpets before but never so shaped. I conceived everything based on past works while trying to come up with some new elements. The weird thing is how much it resembles the Google Sketchup model in the end. The thing that's the most different is the rock—I used rocks from the Google Sketchup 3-D Warehouse, and first there were two, but I settled on one.

AO: Did you base the rock off one in Central Park?

JM: No, I was working on it free-form, and the rock had the most modifications from the original plan. It's based around a wooden frame and it took the longest time to realize that the frame needed to be nuanced. First, I started with a box, then...I play with a country band, and at a rehearsal at my studio they were calling it the fort, and I realized it wasn't good enough. Then I angled the top, and then it was split into two parts and curved to give it a more organic feel. And once that was down it came together pretty quickly, modeled in blue foam. Greg Smith, who works with me, was really good at being able to see form. We had rough forms in mind and Greg would carve in cracks and things and lock it in.

AO: And how did the rest of the show come together? Was it just about managing production?

WE ARE BOTH LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR TOGETHER.

JM: It was a fairly expensive show for me to produce. I tried to time things—I didn't want to be thinking about everything at once in addition to managing my financial outlays. The room with the videos was least expensive because I have the software and Takuji [Kojo] and I just send files back and forth. With the other two rooms, there wasn't a particular production order. I did the wallpaper, then the rug, then the file cabinets and the tree. I'm not sure if I explained there are two performers in the gallery at peak hours, and they just inhabit the space, not doing anything special and it's been read as a negative gesture. I hired two students who are artists, two young women, who are either reading or sketching most of the time. If they want to talk to people they can, or if they want to lay on one of the plinths they can, but most of the time they just sit in the chairs. It's up to them. The only restriction I made was not to use handheld devices, because I wanted them present. Looking at an iPhone is different than reading a book even.

AO: Was the performance aspect conceived from the very beginning also?

JM: Yeah, and different people have had different reactions. Some saw it as a negative thing; a friend of mine sent his class to see the show and write reviews, and one person wrote that I was preempting the viewer, along the lines of Michael Fried and the idea of theatricality in that there was a presence already waiting for you. To have a person in the room occupies the space of the viewer. One of the inspirations for the performers was a lesser known work by Michael Asher, who I studied with. He did a piece back when California had a welfare program for artists called SEPA and what he did was he had a show in an alternative space and he hired six SEPA workers and created a waiting room. It had a coffee machine and a table with magazines and some folding chairs around the table. The idea was to have performers, and to put unemployment compensation on display as well. The upshot of mine is a little different, by having students who are being paid, but they still inhabit the space. In critiques of public space there is tension between the aerial view and the gridded out plan versus the person on the street that walks through. Michel de Certeau talks about how the pedestrian produces meaning just by walking and interacting on a ground level. That also corresponded in a way to George Bataille's on [Andre] Breton's notion of Surrealism as a transcendent thing. Bataille talks about the mole versus the Surrealist eagle, he was implying that the eagle had a fascist overtone whereas the mole burrowed in and had a real experience rather than a false overview. The inhabitation of that space turns both of the rooms into tableaux and theatrical spaces.



AO: The spaces do have a tableau quality, and I think the first association for many people will be a department store display, or something along those lines. I enjoyed that subversion, the twisting of that association, especially with the carpet. Today you wouldn't be that surprised if you saw a Staples advertisement with file cabinets on a pedestal, but the idea of putting a carpet in that declares how wrong the space is, the declaration of 'NO' can mean so many things. I read it as if it was trying to say you need to know this is something different, it's not like everything else. And that leads to discovering that each object is not the same as in the real world—the file cabinets are powder coated with this glittery auto body finish, but it isn't even normal auto body finish, it's a 'hot rod' finish. It adds to the everyday surreal quality that characterizes a specific part of American society that you don't think of everyday. How do you collect your ideas? It's obvious that there are a lot of literary and theory-based ideas involved, but where do you find the visual counterpoint to that?

JM: In this case, it was just playing with things in Sketchup. When my friend Takuji saw the show he said it looks just like a mall, and I liked how both buildings that appear in the wallpaper acted as wallpaper. You see a tree surrounded by bricks, and the bricks are a little cracked, and weeds are growing at the base, and I thought, 'that's such a great decorative detail.' When you shoot a photo you get more information than you intend and then some of those details can become operative, especially at a larger scale.

AO: Does photography help you assemble a visual vocabulary when you're putting together an exhibition?



JM: Yes, it's one source. The very first work I showed [at Metro Pictures] were paintings that I thought of as pictures of pictures. I was interested in the normative aspect of a scenario and from there my work went into brown impasto work and eventually became more sculptural and photos have allowed me to get back to this normative picture. I think it's less obvious as photography, and when I shoot pictures I don't try for impressive angles or things that look textbook photographic. I like ordinary scenes with foreground, middle ground, background. For the objects, like the file cabinets, it came from growing up and seeing these hot rod finishes but also seeing California finish-fetish sculpture, so there are a few layers of mediation. Also having been a model-building kid and having metal-flake spray paints inspired me to play with that. The file cabinets were concepts that drew off of those memories.

AO: Does being from the Midwest originally function as a source or play a role in your studio practice?

JM: I get back there less and less as time goes on. The town I'm from has more of a New England feel. Where I grew up was more like a village than a suburb. I think the way it's influenced my art making was growing up without manufactured toys and just going out in the backyard with my brother and playing with rocks and sticks, or playing in the creek. That was always much more fun than being in the house with blocks. I think I just like putting materials together.

AO: I think being a part of American culture means dealing with ideas of 'returning to nature' and also an aesthetic infatuated with the readymade. As a culture I think we're split between those things. Before we were discussing the details in a photo—the cracks in the pavement around a tree—and I was thinking about the fact that people are a lot more drawn to that as opposed to the tree in the urban plan, where the materials are always perfect. Your tree maintains the icon of the tree more than a tree in actual space, yet your tree occupies actual space. Baudrillard talks about being presented with two different versions of reality—how it is and how it's understood. Does this relate at all?



JM: The last large scale piece I did was this artificial ruin, and it definitely has this simulacra quality. It was one of the last gold pieces I did. I designed columns and I covered everything with beer cans because I didn't want it to be so literal, like teenagers had a party in the ruins, but everything was gold. I suppose its connection to this show was that it created a real space with these artificial elements.

AO: It seems to me that a lot of your work deals with intermingling, whether its objects or language. Sometimes combining things that wouldn't necessarily be found together, like how information collides in an urban space. By information, I mean even something like words scrawled on a bathroom wall that just appear next to a sign which appears next to a sink. All of those things collide to form that space. In a really interesting way I see that collision not only in your objects but in the wordplay in your video pieces, and even in the title of the show. How does wordplay find its way into your practice?

JM: The title of the show came from describing the rock I was making to a friend. He said that it reminded him of the rocks used for covering swimming pool pumps, and how it became a suburban pastime to build these things. He said, 'that's a perfect title for the show' and I thought to just break up 'past' and 'time,' in the sense of something occurring after, in the way that things occur after the fact.

AO: The separation allows you to realize that past and time are two distinct ideas, both in the way we experience them and in what they mean to us.

JM: I think the wordplay started after living in Germany, about 20 years ago. I had never lived there before and I was completing work for a show in Berlin, and most West Germans at the time spoke decent English but it wasn't identical to that of a native speaker. Some things translated and some things didn't. I did a catalogue there called 'Rock Sucks, Disco Sucks,' and at the time the slang word 'sucks' was foreign to most people—they didn't know what 'sucks' meant. I came up with a lot of pun titles, like Transylvanian Choo Choo rather than Chattanooga Choo Choo.



AO: Did a lot of wordplay come from being exposed to German language?

JM: Learning a little German was about getting over this phonetic hump—and once you learn you can see correlations between German and English. Because a lot of the language goes back to Latin, things made sense. Also with etymology, things have a certain historical depth. Terms change through context in both place and time. I recently reread a Douglas Crimp essay, and it discusses all the different meanings of presence. He talks about the Modernist sense of presence as ‘being there,’ but there’s another sense of presence like a ghost, something that’s there by not being there. All of a sudden the term can come to mean its opposite. Another language can often give that sense of dimension to something in the way that meanings are arranged. Sometimes it’s harder to make a title than to make the actual piece. A bad title can be profoundly embarrassing.

AO: With work like yours the title becomes very important, as the conversation between the viewer and object is all internalized. The title can be a crux for that interaction. Where does the text come from for the photographic and video work?

JM: The video work was an intermingling between American and Japanese cultures. The text comes from personal ads on the web. We’re trying to do something that’s analogous to the way people use those ads. Trying to form a picture of who that person is through the ad, and making music and setting a tone is a way of embodying that person—dealing with the ad in an anthropological way. There’s also an intermingling in the style of music, and the electronic voices.

AO: What’s next for you?

JM: I’m going to go do a show in May in Los Angeles; it will be a different batch of work with a few elements that are the same. It’ll be mostly paintings, drawn from reality TV of people crying. I’ve shown this work in Germany before. I’m also planning on showing some of the cabinets and a new pedestal piece.