

METRO PICTURES

Piejko, Jennifer. "Bad Conscience," *Art Agenda* (February 14, 2014).

**art
agenda**



View of "Bad Conscience," Metro Pictures, New York, 2014.

Over the decades, John Miller has produced a body of work that is semi-ambiguous in concept, yet is—in terms of deadpan humor and wry observation—unwaveringly his own. In the 1980s, he made pieces that appeared to be caked in human waste, like paintings with brown splotches and appropriated objects covered with brown plaster; in recent years, he has gilded junk and composed melodramatic portrayals of reality-television-show stars—all of which play to the middlebrow taste and artifice that he critiques. However, Miller's latest endeavor at Metro Pictures, "Bad Conscience," an expansive and varied group show he has curated, suggests that it might simply be impossible for his practice to be represented by his artwork alone.

Illustrating the work of a significant number of his previous collaborators, sixty-five works are spread across the gallery's immense rooms, most of them clustered in conceptually interlaced compositions. One constellation of banal images, richly treated in oil paint—Caleb Considine's *Hairdryer* (2013) and Marilyn Minter's *Paper Curls and Untitled (Porcelain Photo)* (both 1976)—are hung opposite from a mix of photographs either weighed down with self-conscious unease or unmoored by their subjects' reckless oblivion. Adjacent is a wall that includes Walter Robinson's *Impression Cheeseburger* (2012) and Greg Parma Smith's detailed painting of a Swiss army knife, *Greg P. Smith* (2006). Low-lying malaise courses through another grouping in the gallery's second room: a painting from Frank Lutz's "Drunk women in public" series (2010–ongoing), whose intoxicated figures are completely devoid of self-awareness; Nicolas Guagnini's *cell* (2009), a casual snapshot of what appears to be a teenager on her phone, ignoring her visibly frustrated mother standing next to her; and Leigh Ledare's *Personal Commissions: 'Trophy needs polishing. Attractive, intelligent, sweet and caring midwestern SWF, 25 seeks man to take me to my potential. Quiet and shy person, but have another side. Looking for man means, a leader'* (2008), in which the artist himself confronts the viewer with a languishing gaze while lounging on a sofa. The occasional isolated work—like Aura Rosenberg's *Untitled (Fishnet Stockings, Large Version, B/W)* (2012), an inkjet print of blunt seduction painted over in acrylic, or Guagnini's *Meyer* (2013), a darkly shining sculpture marooned on a pedestal in the center of the room—obliquely echo the feeling of alienation that many of the works on the highly populated gallery walls engender.

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Typifying both Miller's curatorial aesthetic and his own approach to making work, the artistic partnerships and interferences traced across all these pieces are interwoven with his personal history. For example, several of the participating artists are former students, making Miller's transition from teacher-as-organizer to teacher-as-curator a natural one. In *Clementine* (2013), Ledare—perhaps the star pupil of what one might call the John Miller School of Collaborative Intervention—gave children crayons so that they could scribble on the artist's provocative snapshot of his mother as she lies suggestively in bed. In surreal fashion, Guagnini also collaborates with the late, mid-twentieth century psychoanalyst Melanie Klein on *Mom with Hand on Bed*, Edition 2/5, reworked with intervention by Nicolas (2004–08), which consists of two parts: a framed, oversize photograph masked with circular cutouts and a copy of Klein's posthumous anthology *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works, 1921–45* resting upon a simple wooden pedestal on the floor. Borrowing Ledare's eroticized style, Rosenberg, Miller's wife, photographs their teenage daughter Carmen in *Leigh Ledare/Carmen Miller* (2008), and follows the same pattern of influence and interconnections among friends with Allan McCollum/Joe Ahearn (1996–98); this being New York, Lena Dunham also makes her cameo, appearing defeated in *Laurie Simmons/Lena Dunham* (1996–98). Matthew Watson's *N.G. and J.K. (Portrait of Nic Guagnini)* (2012), a comparatively straight depiction of Guagnini with an unnamed artwork in the background, further complicates things with a title that is as laconic as it is cryptic.

While "Bad Conscience" does not include any of Miller's own work, the show expands on a number of his styles and lines of inquiry, fully illustrating his central position within a constellation of artists from several generations. At Columbia University, he was a professor to Smith and Cara Benedetto, who are both participating artists here; he was a student of Michael Asher, John Baldessari, Douglas Huebler, and Yvonne Rainer; a band mate of Mike Kelley and Tony Oursler (*The Poetics Project*) as well as Tony Conrad and Jutta Koether (*XXX Macarena*); a critical writer on the work of fellow artist Ilene Segalove, among many others; and not to mention, a collaborator of Richard Hoeck and Takuji Kogo. These diverse working relationships demonstrate that multi-generational entanglements of artistic exchange and subject/audience interaction can fruitfully emerge from one's teaching and plethora of interpersonal relations. First formed during Miller's years as a student at the California Institute of the Arts, and later cultivated by his personal and professional lives in New York, Berlin, and elsewhere, these connections are pronounced by an uncanny recognition of style and approach that reaches back to his Midwestern roots, decades before his artistic career began, and will no doubt stem decades into the future.