

METRO PICTURES

Morrissey, Siobhan. "At ICA Miami, Artist John Miller Looks at Life with Double Vision," *MiamiHerald.com* (May 5, 2016).

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The first American museum exhibition dedicated to highly influential conceptual artist traces his use of the figure throughout his career to incisively comment on citizenship and politics, and the conventions of realism in contemporary art.

Since early Christian times, the labyrinth has served as a path to enlightenment. The journey to the center, despite many wrong turns, reveals the inner self. The Greeks imprisoned the half-man, half-bull minotaur at the center of their labyrinth, forming a mythology around man's need to hide — and yet still recognize — his basest animal nature.

American artist John Miller chose a Carmen Miranda-esque mannequin covered head-to-toe in fake fruit as the minotaur of his elegant mirror maze now on exhibit at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami. "I was hoping to convey abundance with the peak ripeness that immediately precedes decay," Miller, 62, says. The 984-square-foot maze is the largest he has made to date. "You could get a little bit lost in it, which I like."

Miller's maze, titled *Lost*, is on display at ICA through May 15. The remaining works on the second floor of the museum will be on view through June 12.

The show, *I Stand, I Fall* is curated by ICA's deputy director and chief curator Alex Gartenfeld, a longtime champion of Miller, whose work can be found in such prominent collections as the Whitney Museum, the Carnegie Museum, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.



Gartenfeld met Miller when he was an undergraduate at Columbia University and the artist was teaching at Barnard College. Although Gartenfeld included Miller in two other shows that he curated, this marks the first time a museum in the United States mounted a solo retrospective of the artist's work. The show reveals Miller's depth as an artist, with a varied display of sculptures, paintings, drawings, photographs, computer images, installations and video art.

Miller made good use of the space. The design of the Moore Building, where ICA is temporarily housed, afforded the artist the opportunity to include the viewer as part of his work. "Since ICA is on two floors, people who are up on the main space could look down and see people in the maze," Miller says. "They could see what people in the maze could not see, namely the way out and which way to turn. It has a kind of double viewpoint."

In a way, the show also provides a double viewpoint of the artist. In a nearly completely chronological display, the show begins with an exhibition of the artist's early "brown works," which are painted in burnt sienna because it is the closest color Miller could find to replicate red iron oxide, otherwise known as rust.



It's also on occasion the color of human excrement. There are several sculptures that feature what appears to be heaping mounds of human waste. (It's not.) They represent both bodily waste and that of an overconsumption of non-biodegradable goods. The works form a response to Sigmund Freud, who in his *Civilization and its Discontents* claimed that art originates from an infantile urge to sculpt with one's feces. In making art that resembles excrement, Miller turns the tables.

Despite the images Miller creates, he is not one of those artists who produces his own raw materials. His scatological sculptures come courtesy of modeling paste mixed with sienna brown paint. The modeling paste enables him to make sculptural collages of found objects — such as toilet seats, tennis racquets, globes and other castoffs. The initial sculptures, created in his 20s, are uniformly brown. As Miller progressed into his 50s, he began experimenting with imitation gold leaf.

"I was thinking of a paradoxical relationship between brown and gold," Miller says. "Freud talks about how excrement and gold can represent each other in dreams." The same holds true in real life. "When I first started doing the brown work, a lot of people hated it," he says. "Then it reached a tipping point and it kind of became a trademark for me. Then collectors really liked it. It started out as a provocation and then it kind of became the reverse of that."

He then began mocking his own work by creating similar images in gold. "In some ways I thought of the gold being a cheapening of that, even though it looks like the opposite, but I was thinking of it being something a little bit cheesy."

The show provides a survey of these works, as well as images that recall the turbulence in this country during the 1970s. One untitled painting — of a group sit-in ringed by police armed with batons and wearing riot helmets — touches on similar tensions today. "That material looks incredibly loaded today, especially because John loads it with this heavy realist style," curator Gartenfeld says.

But perhaps the most arresting work of the show is that of a video that depicts mannequins being pushed over a cliff into a rocky ravine by a barely visible mannequin hand. Miller collaborated with fellow artist Richard Hoeck to create the nearly three-minute long video, *Mannequin Death*.

The setting is high in the Austrian Alps. A deer ambles in the foreground. The ambient sound of traffic echoes from the switchbacks.

During the filming some of the drivers apparently had difficulty keeping their eyes on the road. "The people who were driving by really thought they were killing people in the mountains, and they called the police," Gartenfeld says. Wisely, the artists had gotten advance permission from the government to do their project.

Miller maintains the video is meant as a spoof on the role of fashion in contemporary consumerism. "I thought it was humorous," he says, "a little bit like some dated horror films, with the mannequins doing the pushing."

As with the gold-plated garbage, Miller seeks to begin a discussion on what society values. In an effort to make the mannequins as chic as possible, the artists dressed them in styles from one of Vienna's more fashionable boutiques. That may have made them too readily identifiable to some people, Miller laments.

"It's funny," he says. "Where you and I would see humor, just from patterns of consumption, buying patterns, some people may have identified more closely with the mannequins because of the styling."

He wasn't at all prepared for how some people viewed the mannequins as people, even though they are so obviously made of plastic and plaster. Even the video soundtrack is exaggerated, the way landing blows sound in a martial arts movie.

"There was one man at the opening who said, 'This is what Hitler did,' and he stormed out of the show," Miller says. "In some ways some people can identify with the mannequins more strongly than images of real people. I had also shown the videos to some friends in Berlin and they said, how can you do this after the German Wings crash, where that pilot flew the plane into the Alps?"

A mystified Miller muses, "Maybe it can be read two ways. When I got those reactions, I certainly wasn't expecting them."

The one sure thing is that the viewer can expect to be challenged by this exhibition, exposed to images that may provoke anger or laughter, but will not disappoint.