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John Miller

Paintings from the early 80's to the present

10.09. – 29.10.2016

John Miller belongs to a generation of US artists who, at the beginning of the 1980s, broke loose from Minimal Art and Conceptual Art and went their own ways. At this time, the "Pictures Theory" emerged, exemplified by the work of Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman, Allan McCollum and Sherrie Levine – among others. Miller was more closely aligned with a later group of Los Angeles artists who he studied with at CalArts: Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw, Tony Oursler and Christopher Williams. He went on to develop a formal language all of his own, which, while concerned with the media and consumerism, also calls into question the role of the artist vis-à-vis specific societal and economic conditions. Although his work spans a range of media – video, painting, photography, collage and sculpture – painting from the very outset holds a fundamental significance in his oeuvre and functions as a recurring element.

Miller's first paintings in particular – which he nicknames his "regionalist" work – are examples of this ongoing argument with, and dissociation from, the socially prevalent notion of what an artist is. For this series Miller decided to produce one painting every day, seemingly choosing his subjects at random, from portraits through street scenes to landscapes. What concerns him here was a kind of second-guessing, the attempt to capture – as he puts it – "pictures of pictures," namely the perspective of the proverbial man or woman on the street. Deliberately avoiding bravura painterly technique on the one hand and avant-gardist confrontation on the other, he tried to cultivate a sense of the normative and to expose this as an ideological predisposition. In this way, Miller works counter to the idea of the artist as a genius who slaves away in his studio, continually endeavouring to produce an aesthetic masterpiece. Instead, he embeds the prospect of painting in an economically oriented world that has long since been geared to reproduction and quick tempo.

Two brown paintings hanging at the very entrance to the exhibition space evince a sensibility similar to the "regionalist" works. If an artist mixes all the colours available to him on his palette, then what he gets is not – as expected in terms of physics – the colour black, but brown. Miller exploits this process for his own ends: he produces large-format pictures that are monochrome or in part still shot through with traces of the original colours. Above all, the thick application of colour, applied over textures formed from modelling paste, almost compels the observer to think associatively of faeces. Miller himself calls this trope an "excremental impasto". With this, the artist creates an aesthetic model via Sigmund Freud's contention that artmaking is a sublimated anal impulse. Because nothing can be totally desublimated, in Miller's procedure, the artist is condemned to failure, given that ultimately neither the colours nor the "natural" application of paint remain.

This failed desublimation can be seen not only in the context of art, but also in mass media. In the late 1990s, Miller began painting the protagonists and settings of game shows such as "The Price is Right" or "Jeopardy!". While the sets of these programmes are intensely colourful, Miller renders their contestants in a drab combination of grey and sepia. He carried this technique over into his "Everything is Said" series, which highlights people crying on reality tv programmes – which can be seen as a new kind of game show in which reality is constructed as a game. Despite the theatricality of these images, what comes across is randomness, whateverism, a husk of dead time.

Miller's latest series of pedestrian paintings derives, in part, from his ongoing "The Middle of the Day" photo project, begun in 1996. The latter are photographs shot between the hours of 12:00 and 2:00 pm. Since many photos in this series feature pedestrians, Miller decided to use them as references for paintings. For these, he makes shaped panels, so that the figures appear as cut-outs. Early works in this series were about ¼ scale, but gradually Miller worked up to life-size and began installing these figures with their feet touching the gallery floor. This created quasi *tableaux vivants*, yet because eliminating the background removes these figures from their temporal and spatial context, one wonders where the figures originate from. This in turn may lead viewers to consider the private exhibition space in which these paintings are hung in terms of a potential public and the discourse that allows this public to understand itself as such.

Yvonne Scheja