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John Miller, *but the flesh is weak*, Metro pictures, New York, From Nov. 17th to dec. 15th

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NEW YORK

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It's a shitstorm out there and John Miller wants us to know about it. Wants to stick our noses in it. Which would be just too fierce a gesture, too much a preemptive strike against our expected sensibilities, if Miller were not so obviously willing to stick his own nose, his own artistic *raison d'être*, into the crapper as well. This is not his first exhibition in which the display of fecal-looking surfaces and objects has greeted the unsuspecting audience. But whatever subversive rise he can extract from his scatological imagery, Miller's intentions clearly go well beyond the mere shock value of Père Ubu shouting "Merde!" in the middle of a crowded Paris theatre.

The act of defecation remains one of our most stringent and inviolable taboos, right up there with injunctions against sex and violence. Concurrently, there is something undeniably comic in the public display of feces that transcends the transgressive to reach for an embarrassed hilarity. Perhaps because we are more willing to say shit than to show it, excremental imagery has found a more receptive home in the avant garde literary tradition rather than in the arts. The Marquis de Sade mined a lot of feces in his *120 Days of Sodom*, as did absurdist playwright Alfred Jarry in the aforementioned *Ubu Roi*. George Bataille and John Miller's namesake Henry both employed shit, as well as sex, to push the limits of expression in an attempt at wisdom through excess, an embrace of the unmentionable that could ultimately lead from æsthetic liberation to a liberation of the soul.

In the art world, shit has been more of a snickering dirty joke, a one liner. Back in the 1960s, Piero Manzoni packaged his feces in cans and sold it as art, although his claim to fame does not rest on this one excremental gesture. Similarly, some of Dali's early psychosexual canvases incorporated scatological imagery, and Francesco Clemente's ongoing obsession with the body's orifices and their excretions hovers on the brink between bad boy randiness and Tantric transcendence. The entire earthworks movement, if we extend the materiality of mud to its ultimate fertilizer, could lead us down the path of tactile excremental reference, and to a pervasive, literal *nostalgie pour la boue*.

Miller does not employ the real stuff of defecation, but rather a skillful simulation of feces, the texture and the color, covering his art with thick, impolite smears of acrylic paint in a shade that can only be described as "doo doo brown" (from a song by rap group 2 Live Crew). Miller's particular brown, developed over the years, is almost as specific to him as a certain patented shade of blue was to Yves Klein. In fact, the first object one encounters upon entering the exhibition is *Brown Paint*, a 55-gallon steel drum with one lip askew (as if it had previously been opened) that is filled, the price list informs us, with latex acrylic paint. This, then is the materiality with which Miller wants to cover, or perhaps the better word is bespatter, the world.

In his essay on the anal, Freud suggest that the act of defecation provides the infant mind with its first experience of production, creativity and ownership, and that it is only parental disapproval and authority, in the form of potty training, that prohibits the child from the continuing pleasure of playing with his own feces. This social conditioning erects a super-structure of propriety that deflects the child's original and uncomplicated contentment with the display, handling and sharing of excrement, and effects a transference of the work / play object to toys, pets, games and eventually to school, career, marriage, shopping and all higher cultural pursuits. Which, of course, includes the production of art. In the commonly held cliché for artistic inspiration, the artist is that magical being somehow in touch with the child within, who reaches back to those first creative moments as the basis for expression. Miller takes this to a logical but arch culmination in his scatological objects, which postulate an ultimate reversion to the infant's antisocial tendency to doodle with its own feces.

In this ironic conceptual model of the ur creative impulse, shit or the simulacrum of shit becomes the chief expressive material of the artist, and all art is an adult extension of slathering the crib with feces. This provides a fashionably pessimistic and disaffected view of both the contemporary art object and the contempo-

Photo : E. Page Wilson

John Miller, *The source*, 1990. Mixt Media ; 11" x 48" (diameter). Metro Pictures.

rary situation in which it is produced. But if shit is being presented as the sine qua non of the moment, then what exactly does Miller make of all this shit ?

He seems attuned, at least iconically, to earthworks and environmental art, in that the majority of his wall, floor and free floating constructions are landscapes in distress or upheaval, seemingly in the immediate aftermath of some cataclysmic, apocalyptic disturbance. Under their thick brown impasto, Miller's pieces display a rich, lumpy assortment of objects that allude both to the natural and the manmade : stones, twigs, houses and fragments of houses such as foundations, porches, arches and cupolas, toy guitars, banjos and cameras, human figurines (toy soldiers), tiny toy guns, blocks and monoliths. Miller is positing some end-of-the-world scenario, the apocalypse in a sandbox, in which the shit really hits the fan and primal forces are unleashed to explode through a veneer of order and decorum. Wake of the flood indeed.

This explosion is graphically rendered by an untitled piece, in which an upthrusting, phallic eruption culminates in a globe with a group of tiny figures (survivors / explorers of some devolved or assassinated planet ?) gathered on top. And the theme of planetary devolution is further realized in *Storage Area*, a large suspended globe, the entire surface of which is covered by a detritus of toy bricks, barrels, drums and containers, conjuring the image of the earth as a toxic waste dump, depopulated and inert.

Despite these cautionary earthscapes, which envisage the end of civilization amid incipient environmental collapse, let's not be too quick in consigning Miller to the ranks of Greenpeace or the Sierra Club. His attitude to the apocalypse is too emotionally detached and intellectually ambivalent to suggest environmental activism and he imbues his confrontation of oblivion with a certain dry, affectless black humor. Or should we say brown humor ? *Brown door*, for example, is mounted along a gallery wall as if to allow for quick egress (an escape hatch for spectators alienated by all the shit). Or possibly it offers up compromised transcendence in a fecal dig on William Blake's doors of perception (cleanse off the shit and see infinitely). In *The Source*, we are invited to share our reflection in a mirror ringed with fecally smeared, 19th century mittel European figurines (the peasant, the washerwoman, the waterboy) that similarly regard their own bespattered images in the limpid pool.

Miller's primary gesture is to address the oblivion of the mind and devolution of the spirit rather than any external environmental collapse. His sandbox apocalypse, after all, is an artless and unconvincing illusion, a parade of toy soldiers, toy guitars, miniature architectural fragments, and primitive cameras crudely fashioned from cubes and cones. Art objects that are this purposefully schematic, haphazard and lacking in æsthetic virtuosity must, by default, point us in some other direction, and draw their instructive power from this very artlessness. The artist's fragmented representation of civilization is obviously and unapologetically a model, transforming the gallery into a classroom demonstration of Miller's science fair project on psychic and æsthetic regression.

If shit is the hidden filth that Miller makes visible by symbolically removing it from inside the body and displaying it on gallery walls, there is related emotional dirt that he chooses to sift through. This brutalized underbelly of depraved appetite and desire, of emotions stunted within the arena of consumerist machinery, is as apt a forum for contemporary regression as the

physical correlative of painting with shit. In *Property Values II*, one of the few works in the show that is not encased in excrement, Miller again employs a text that he has recycled in various forms throughout his career, even once having it printed on a room divider. Here presented as a lithograph on paper, the piece displays a polarity of found items that were originally advertisements from the personal columns of magazines. The upper, "Apollonian" text, allegedly from a wealthy corporate president, seeks a relationship with a woman "rooted in kindness and toleration, leading to a deep friendship that evolves into permanent union." The "Dionysian" text, printed upside down at the bottom of the page, exhorts, "ATTENTION WOMEN ! ... You will have large clitoris, long hanging pussy lips... I prefer pussy that is wet, creamy and very scummy", and goes on to demand, "Send used panty".

It's hard to be neutral about this piece, which elicits a dichotomy of revulsion and hilarity and assumes a transgressive, gate-crashing presence familiar from Miller's shit-stained work, although the libidinal arena has shifted from the iconography of feces to the written word. But the focus remains the same : the eruption of desire, whether anally or genitally fixated, that has not been successfully sublimated into the fabric of polite discourse. Desires that rip through the veneer of the quotidian to attract our scorn, rage, sympathy, horror or laughter.

The dourly perverse pleasure that Miller seems to take in exhibiting these brutalized, regressive pieces implies a commentary on social and cultural dysfunction. Like Mike Kelly and Andreas Serrano, to name but two contemporary practitioners of the conceptual excremental object, Miller elevates the base matter of bodily waste to the pedestal of æsthetic discourse. But on being confronted with all this shit, we can't help but ask whether it constitutes a new movement, or just that same old rite of passage.

POLLY APFELBAUM, WIVE'S TALES, AMY LIPTON GALLERY, NEW YORK, FROM NOV. 24TH TO DEC. 22TH

Physically transgressive imagery in neo conceptual art is not exclusively the province of John Miller and kindred male artists, as recent work by Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith and others attests. But a more typical feminist response in art seems to be predicated on an equivocal stillness and subdued, formal decorum that bristles with underlying tension, analysis and judgement, whether the chosen medium is photography (Lorna Simpson), painted assemblage (Susan Silas) or sculpture (Polly Apfelbaum).

Apfelbaum is the most whimsically formal of these three. She is the quintessential artist as shopper, allowing a chance encounter with a curio in a garage sale, church bazaar, antique shop or flea market to activate her imagination regarding that object's origins, purposes, linguistic connotations and collective memories. Apfelbaum is not unpreoccupied with the beauty of form that can be found or induced in the humblest objects. Her sculpture, whether fabricated or found, is typically reminiscent of simple geometric shapes or easily recognized tools and artifacts, often with a folk art source, and usually arranged in ranks, rows or other hieratic groupings that suggest the ethnographic museum as much as an installation of fine art. But in collecting, arranging and altering these objects for their presentation in a gallery setting, Apfelbaum seems primarily interested in the way these objects "think", in the associations and existential ramifications that evolve, or can be conjured, from the contemplation of the everyday.

In past exhibitions, the artist has exercised a wide-ranging materiality to inform her wall and floor pieces, everything from glass, string, ribbons, beads, marbles, paper, needle and thread, chicken bones, and fortune cookie slips to the more conventional fabricated wood and cast iron. The overall effect is one of stillness, slightness, ephemerality and paradox, but tempered with gentle, insistent prodding toward whatever point Apfelbaum is trying to advance. In her last exhibition, Apfelbaum questioned the notions of traditional gender associations by constructing pieces that employed decorating, arranging and beading: what has traditionally been considered woman's work. In the current show, entitled "Wive's Tales", this line of inquiry continues, as is evident in the *Wallflower* pieces, each of which uses small paper flowers that were handmade and

colored in Mexico. By coiling their wire stems and tacking each flower to the wall on concentric circles as wide as six feet in diameter, the artist presents a new wrinkle on the custom of flower arranging.

The iconography of wall installation, complete with pencilled markings for correct placement, evokes the minimalist strategies of Sol LeWitt. But this high art reference is subtly imploded by the actual content of the piece: the mannered emotionality inherent in flowers, and the folk art craftmanship of their fabrication in paper. Apfelbaum seems ready to allow the internal dialogue of her flowers to interfere with the precious minimalist void, and compounds this treatment by associating the flower colors with their conventional connotations. Thus the white wallflower grouping is subtitled *Purity*, the red *Passion*, and the multicolored circle is called *Mixed Emotions*. "Wallflower", of course, refers to the lonely girl at a social gathering who keeps apart, at the fringes of conversation. Yet Apfelbaum's flowers seem quite content, in their enclosed, concentric arrangement, to conduct a private and self-sufficient discourse which we are welcome to enter if we choose.

A double-mirrored piece, entitled *Old Wives Tales, Parts I and II*, slyly addresses the ambivalence of self perception. A funhouse mirror, all convex curves, presents us with the expected freakish caricature, our worst features exaggerated and our dreaded inadequacies revealed in public. Next to it is the rational alternative, a small oval looking glass framed in white. This juxtaposition of mirrored images highlights our internal uncertainties regarding external appearances, and revives the old Jekyll and Hyde doppelganger of monster outside, angel within (or, of course, the converse). The funhouse image offers us a welcome respite from the everyday, but it can engender latent fears that promote a crisis in identity. On the other hand, the conventional image in the oval mirror, while it complements our internalized composure and focus, can be too constricting and mundane, a framework we need to break through.

The ambivalent ebb and flow continues in *Drown The Clowns*, an installation of three clown suits tacked to the wall in ascending order of size, from the smallest, *Princess*, to the largest, *A Penny of a Star*. Sort of a nu-

Polly Apfelbaum, *Princess*, 1990. Cloth, flowers ; 38" x 24".
Amy Lipton Gallery.

clear family of clown suits that, in their flaccid materiality, frontal presentation and emptiness, suggest the grey felt suit of Joseph Beuys.

Clowns, of course, are the ultimate anarchic entertainment, running the emotional gamut from happy to sad, angry to meek, victim to aggressor. They are id personified, prone to extremes of behavior and sudden fits of laughter or violence. But Apfelbaum's suits are spookily decontextualized and given a strange lack of affect by the simple strategy of hanging them up as husks or empty shells, all that remains of the energetic personas who once animated them with the potential for fright and delight.

Memory hangs heavily over these suits, as it can with any display of used artifacts. Where are the clowns who once inhabited them ? Apfelbaum heightens the pervasive aspect of memento mori by pinning corsages on each suit, fresh flowers that are left to fade and wilt over the course of the exhibition. A poster from a circus sideshow might well have exhorted us to drown the clown (three throws for a quarter), but here their memory is elegiacally celebrated, drowned only by the waters of time. These pieces exemplify what is best in Apfelbaum's work : the formal resolve of found or familiar objects that acquire heightened piquancy or shading of significance through the delicate interventions of the artist.

STEVEN KAPLAN