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Keeping Her New Works in Line

By David Pagel, Special to The Times
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Allison Miller follows her eye-opening solo debut from last year with new works that are meatier, more vigorous and -- despite being abstract and utterly free of imagery -- increasingly open to narrative. At ACME., eight canvases tell moving stories about perseverance, self-doubt and stubbornness. They draw viewers into dramas whose consequences have as much to do with the ways we live our everyday lives as with the artist's capacity to wrangle charged compositions from the simplest of elements.



The heart and soul of Miller's art is line.

Each line in each painting is clearly handmade, without the help of a ruler, masking tape or stencils. Every inch of every line embodies the shaky uncertainty of explorations made by go-it-alone individuals who are neither brave nor foolhardy -- nor sensible enough to resist setting out on adventures that are as likely to end badly as well.

Made with paint and pen, Miller's lines proceed cautiously. Their anxiety-riddled tentativeness is palpable as they creep across broad swaths of canvas. To follow one closely is to travel back in time to the moment it was made. It isn't difficult to imagine the quivering brush or pen, or the smallness of the gesture in relation to the 4-by-5-foot canvases on which Miller always works. That's the size John McLaughlin (1898-1976) settled on after experimenting with other dimensions, and it serves Miller well, a sort of default setting -- and bodily scale -- that focuses attention on what is visible.

As Miller's lines accumulate, almost always by following alongside one another, they form concentric triangles, diamonds and other shapes. They recall cross sections of tree trunks, pebbles splashing in ponds and sound waves echoing toward infinity. The oddness of Miller's shapes increases as incidental details grow into substantial forms -- like hard-to-break habits.

Miller then takes such shifts in shape to the next level, playing blocky sections, serpentine segments and geometric fragments against one another to construct off-balance compositions that are tense with visual energy yet sufficiently freewheeling to leave viewers plenty of room to maneuver.

ACME., 6150 Wilshire Blvd., (323) 857-5942, through Oct. 20. Closed Sundays and Mondays.
www.acmelosangeles.com.