

Yau, John, "Ways to Proceed", HYPERALLERGIC, 3 March 2012.

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## Ways to Proceed

by [John Yau](#) on March 3, 2012



Allison Miller, "Monday" (2011), acrylic and oil on canvas, 48" by 60" (all images courtesy the artist and Susan Inglett Gallery)

[Allison Miller](#) is a young abstract painter who lives in Los Angeles, a city of few pedestrians. It is a vast, sprawling circuitry of vehicles and traffic jams, of getting from one place to another in the shortest and most efficient manner. You can still find neighborhoods to live in, but you cannot

walk very far. Poor people take the bus. Taxis need a GPS. Wandering is not permitted.

In her paintings, Miller offers a radical and simple alternative to this organization of daily life. She refuses to take the shortest route, physically, and aesthetically as well, having rejected developing a recognizable style, sign or logo. She doesn't advertise who she is, or where she is going, nor does she reach for a fashionable product, such as airless hard-edged abstraction or provisional painting. She isn't trying to fit into any one of the currently hip narratives, whether taught in art schools or regurgitated in art magazines. Even in this day and age of anything goes, that is a quietly heretical act.

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Allison Miller, "(Winter x Spring)" (2011),  
acrylic and oil/canvas, 29 1/4" by 25 3/4"  
(click to enlarge)

Allison Miller starts *here* (on an empty canvas) and goes *there* (a painting). She brings along certain materials to enunciate the journey she undertakes — acrylic, oil and dirt. The materials come in different colors (black, red, green, pink, yellow and a little bit of pale washy blue) and densities (from thin washes to opaque and glossy skins). She is not a purist. Her paintings are palimpsests of translucent layers that are covered by, or adjacent to, areas thick brushstrokes of color. For all their affinities, the paintings in her exhibition at [Susan Inglett](#), New York, are more different than alike.

Miller's acts of enunciation range from dashes, lines, and loosely painted grids to irregular and

sagging rectangles, diamonds, triangles, circles and trapezoids. She often paints a thin line adjacent to a thicker line (or dash), which gives it body. The vocabulary is unadorned and direct, without flourishes or elaboration. She is interested in plain things, simple patterns, and layered space. Sometimes, as in "(Winter X Spring)" (2011), it is difficult to tell the painted line from the drip. It is also likely that she worked on this painting, which is 29 ¼ x 25 ¾ inches, from all sides.

One of the pleasures of Miller's paintings is that they invite inquiry. We want to examine their mechanics, and see if we can learn how they were put together. They invite intimacy and slow looking.

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Miller clearly knows about the history of painting in Los Angeles, particularly the [Pattern and Decoration movement](#), which the fiercely independent art critic and theorist, Amy Goldin (1919 – 1978) helped launch. In 1969, as a visiting professor, she taught a seminar at UC San Diego. Robert Kushner and Kim MacConnell were students in that class.

Although [Amy Goldin: Art in A Hairshirt, Art Criticism 1964 – 1978](#), the first collection of her influential writings, has just been published by Hard Press Editions, Goldin's theorizing remains to a large degree hidden and untold. There is one passing reference to her in [Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945 – 1980](#) (edited by Rebecca Peabody, et al., 2011). In addition to Goldin, I think that Joyce Kozloff and Miriam Shapiro, both of whom were central to the birth of Pattern and Decoration and the Feminist Art Movement in L.A in the early 1970s are part of the history that Miller has absorbed.

During Miller's journey from *here* to *there*, she initiates conversations with various painters in the Pattern and Decoration movement, as well as with Henri Matisse, particularly the paintings he did, such as "Interior with Eggplants" (1911), shortly after seeing an exhibition of Islamic Art in Munich in 1910.

From the outset, the differences and divergences between Miller and those she talks to are apparent. She is not interested in the exotic—her patterns tend to be grids and her repetitions are usually a cluster of short parallel lines. If the sources are actual pieces of printed cloth, they are the kinds that are mass-produced and available in discount stores. She doesn't use collage or any traditional "women's" techniques such as sewing. It is all paint.

The fact that Miller meanders in her paintings, that she doesn't follow a program or a procedure, distinguishes her from her Pattern and Decoration forebears. In her use of line, layers of washy color, and coats of glossy paint, Miller has brought together aspects of drawing, watercolor, and house painting together.

It seems to me that Miller starts out with thin washes of color. She adds linear marks, which are generally slightly denser than the wash. She introduces simple patterns, often contained within a



rectangle done in a different color. As she proceeds, she uses thicker paint, which she does not scrape down. She is both constructing a layered space and closing herself out of the painting.

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Allison Miller, "Jungle Strip" (2011), acrylic and oil/canvas, 29 1/4" by 25 3/4" (click to enlarge)

In "Jungle Strip" (2011), seemingly the last thing Miller did was add layers of black, each increasingly thicker, but covering less area of the painting. The edges of the initial washy black layers peek out from the last coat of glossy black. And from beneath both of them peeks a patterned transparent wash that is evocative of a gauzy, printed cloth. There is something jolting about the decisiveness of Miller's decisions.

In "Monday" (2011), it's as if two identical, overlapping, flimsy rectangles of fabric, both outlined in black, have been hung near the top of the painting. The left top side of the rectangle is a thin wash through which we see Miller's previous marks. In each rectangle is a diamond, the top half of which is a dense black, while the bottom half is a pale tan. Although the painting is straightforward, it doesn't become literal. It stirred up thoughts about covering and uncovering (as an artistic goal), detail, repetition and decoration, and Michel de Certeau's book, [\*The Practice of Everyday Life\*](#).

Here, I want to advance that Miller should consider expanding her palette, as it will gain her access to different states she has yet to explore. But this is at most a suggestion, not a criticism.

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Miller's unpredictable combinations of opaque and translucent layers compel us to constantly refocus, in order to locate the things in the painting. This echoes what happens when we are pedestrians — we thread our way through the streets, conscious of the tactile and visual, the physical and the fleeting. Our experience is kinesthetic and active, which is rare in contemporary painting. It is different from watching.