

**Jennifer Duffy**

## **Panoramic Appropriations: The Poetry of Painting**

(An essay on Cynthia Miller's solo exhibition curated by Ron Silliman  
on view April 24 - May 31, 2008)

Cynthia Miller sees her paintings as poems. Instead of playing with words stacked upon one another to create a statement, Miller layers colors and carefully chosen images that create lyrical and serendipitous connections. "My husband is a poet and we love language. The flow of the words and the rhythm create the meaning," she said. "I love the rhythm of a painting. I work in flat images and [they] create a trancelike state that stylized design will afford."

The designs are often appropriations of other art and imagery and they lend that cultural and historical context to her work. "It's not realistic. It's observation and invention," she said. "What they point to is that other space and not themselves at all. I try not to be too critical of what shows up there. It's like automatic writing. You just write. And then you go back. But it doesn't feel like revising when I come back. It feels like I know it better and it tells me what it wants."

For example, in her piece *April, Oklahoma* (2005), Miller painted a Japanese tea pot that she keeps in her studio as a teaching tool. But the object took on new meaning in the painting inspired by a trip to return her mother-in-law to her home after an illness. "It was a happy trip—it was spring and the robins were out," Miller recalled. She painted the tea pot with a lid which later came to signify putting her mother-in-law back in her place. And, perhaps coincidentally, her mother-in-law had also once lived in Japan, so the pot served as a suitable symbol of her. "It just worked out that way," she said. "As I paint, or after I paint, I come to understand that certain associations are part of the painting's meaning to me." The Southwestern pottery piece in the center is not a particular pot, but something she invented, "Coming from Arizona, Oklahoma doesn't seem like the Southwest—but it is from an Eastern viewpoint."

The objects Miller depicts in her work—often animals, pottery or fabric designs—are carefully chosen for their aesthetic qualities and color, but somehow they almost always impart more meaning to the paintings than they possess alone. In the painting *Americas* (2006), she started to paint red stripes like an American flag, but turned them vertically, then added swallows, Mexican pottery, a Guatemalan tapestry and a fern, which reminds Miller of Karl Blossfeld's black-and-white photographs of young ferns. In Miller's *Americas*, the piece became a statement about the identity of "America."

"We always think of the U.S. when we say America, but there's much more. The U.S is just a part of it. What would it look like if it were all one piece, as it should be," she said. Other designs and fabrics that lend historical or cultural significance to her paintings include floral designs inspired by William Morris wallpaper and fabrics (*Trellis*, 2007), Ukrainian folk art (*The Invitation*, 2008) and Navajo rugs (*The Invitation*).

She often uses animals to hint at the idea of movement within what are otherwise still-life paintings. She has a particular love affair with birds and uses them often. "They're such a great

stand-in, a witness . . . and the possibility of their movement is wonderful. I really like their point of view and my paintings are often a bird's-eye-view."

Although Miller's 15-by 44-inch panoramas often read left to right, she usually starts working on the right, only to come back to the painting several times to connect colors with images. The canvas becomes a series of compartments within a panorama, which may be a reflection of her busy day as both a teacher and a mother. Perhaps this is why she prefers to work on more than one canvas at a time. The sections in her paintings may also be a result of her various media: acrylic, chalk pastels and oil paint sticks. Mixing oil and water-based paints—always oil over acrylic—means that she can't work quickly and must respect the nature of the polarized mediums.

Miller's passion for saturated, vibrant color is unmistakable and reflects her own studies of artist Marc Chagall's expressive works. "Color inspires me. It's kind of the DNA in all my work," she said. "The images may change, but the quality of the color is the same." Her love of Chagall's use of color may have influenced a recreated scene from a Paris hotel window in the painting, *The Invitation*. The space under the little table is her homage to Chagall. In that space she mimicked the way he mixed color and applied paint. "Yellow goes into white into red so that the space is active but it's not defined." The rest of the objects bring her personal life and experiences into the Parisian scene while still maintaining their own cultural and historical contexts. For example, the dog in the bottom right corner, which happens to be her dog, is a nod to an English style of animal painting and is just below an English floral pattern. The color blocking along the edges on the left side is similar to the edging on a Navajo rug. She had first painted a Navajo woman on a horse in that area but covered it up because she felt it was too literally Southwestern. Finally, the Ukrainian tapestry adds black and orange while the green and yellow in the tapestry comes from seeing jars with all four colors at the Tucson Gem and Mineral Show.

The spaces between the objects in each piece are precious to Miller, signifying change and transition. "It's time—how one thing becomes another thing, even just by standing still. It can't not happen," she said. "And beauty is just so fleeting. You can't hang onto it. It's just that moment that you get to enjoy and then it's just a memory." Many of those transitional spaces contain images that echo an object in the painting. She calls them "stutters" or "bounces." This is best seen in *Yellow Bird* (2005) as the light blue print almost seems a reflection of the darker blue to its right. It's also the case in *Dos Cuervos* (2008), where the white urn is echoed by the partially seen coral urn to the left, as if it's a vague recollection of the original.

"It's how we remember things," Miller said. "They have a veil, a membrane of an image that tells us what they are. It's how we hang onto them."

*Quotes are from interviews and correspondence with the author.*

**Jennifer Duffy**  
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This essay was written as part of the **Young Art Critics Mentoring Program**, a partnership between AICA USA (US section of International Association of Art Critics) and CUE Art Foundation, which pairs emerging writers with AICA mentors to produce original essays for loose-leaf insertion into CUE Art Foundation exhibition catalogues. The writer, **Jennifer Duffy**, has a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ. She lives in Tucson, where she works as a public relations manager for Loews Ventana Canyon Resort. From 2003 to 2007, she worked as a general

assignment features reporter at the *Arizona Daily Star*, where she dabbled as an arts writer and fell in love with the local arts scene. The mentor was **D. Dominick Lombardi**, whose current body of artworks, begun in 1998, is collectively titled the *Post Apocalyptic Tattoo*. His most recent solo shows have been in Beacon, NY, San Antonio, TX, Richmond, VA and Tokyo, Japan. Feature articles and reviews of his art have appeared in *ARTnews*, *The New York Times*, the *Greenwich Time*, *Art New England*, *zingmagazine*, *THE NEW YORK GAHO* (cover and feature, Japan), *Poetry and Thought* (Japan), *ANIMAL* and *ANIMALNEWYORK.com*, *artnet.com*, *NY ARTS* magazine, *DART International*, *culturecatch.com* and *BLURRED VISION*. Since 1995, Lombardi's features and art criticism have been published in *The New York Times*, *Sculpture*, *Sculpture Review*, *DART* (U.S. Editor), *Art Papers*, *Art Lies*, *ARTnews*, & *magazine*, *Art New England*, *NY ARTS* magazine (Section Editor), *culturecatch.com*, *resolve40.com* and others. Since 1978, Lombardi has curated many exhibitions for a number of institutions, most recently at Galeria Janet Kurnatowski, Greenpoint, NY; Joe Bar, Seattle, WA; Omega Institute Exhibition, Sheraton New York Hotel, New York, NY; the lab gallery, the Roger Smith Hotel, New York, NY; the Shore Institute of the Contemporary Arts (SICA), Long Branch, NJ; and the Castle Gallery, College of New Rochelle, New Rochelle, NY.

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