

Projects 13 : Nachume Miller : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, August 18-October 11, 1988

Author

Miller, Nachume, 1949-

Date

1988

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2147

The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—
from our founding in 1929 to the present—is
available online. It includes exhibition catalogues,
primary documents, installation views, and an
index of participating artists.

The Museum of Modern Art
New York
August 18–October 11, 1988

projects: nachume miller

13

projects

Designed to present recent work by contemporary artists, the new **projects** series has been based on the Museum's original **projects** exhibitions, which were held from 1971 to 1982. The artists presented are chosen by the members of all the Museum's curatorial departments in a process involving an active dialogue and close critical scrutiny of new developments in the visual arts. The **projects** series is made possible by generous grants from the Lannan Foundation and J. P. Morgan & Co. Incorporated.



Above: *Untitled*. 1987. Pencil, watercolor, and chalk on paper, 15 x 12" (38.1 x 30.5 cm). Collection the artist. Photograph, Kate Keller

Right: *Landscape*. 1986. Oil and graphite on wood panels, overall 8 x 16' (243.9 x 487.7 cm). Collection the artist. Photograph, David Allison

Cover detail and outside left panel: *Untitled*. 1986. Pencil and graphite powder on paper, 42½ x 69" (108 x 175.3 cm). Collection the artist. Photograph, Kate Keller

nachume miller

I love painting with a passion and I want to consume it all. . . . Each time I am exposed to a new revelation in a picture or discover a new artist I have to "win" it to my side. That is why I have an equal appreciation for so many different artists of various taste and content. I feel, though, that they almost cancel each other out, and I am left by myself to confront the canvas.

—Nachume Miller, 1988

A prolific artist who has worked in almost all of painting's genres, Nachume Miller has mastered a diversity of influences with considerable fervor, absorbing them and integrating them into his own art. Now, however, after working for years with the figure and with art-historical references, Miller has turned away from allusion to artistic precedent to pursue a deliberately personal version of the landscape. The character of these new pictures contrasts significantly with that of his previous paintings, which were heavily encrusted canvases densely packed with figures and symbols. In the present works, which range from small pencil drawings and oil sketches to mural-size paintings, Miller's emphasis on line and gesture represents a shift in his sensibility.

Miller likes to refer to these recent works as landscapes, although in a strict pictorial sense most of them are not. Even in the few compositions in which a conventional land-and-sky orientation is discernible, such as the untitled drawing at left, it is clear that the artist is not interested in portraying realistic scenes. Here he uses a clichéd landscape only as a point of departure, and synthetically introduces a lacy network of lines that begins to define expanse itself. Miller's fascination with atmosphere as an active and turbulent space has led him in most of his new paintings to dissolve the horizon and dispense with terrestrial subjects altogether. Yet these works are landscapes because they are about nature, and they are about nature because they are about turmoil, which for Miller is as much a part of nature as any tree, mountain, or ocean.

In their ethereal intensity Miller's recent pictures, like those of some other artists working today, recall the majestic vistas of the nineteenth-century Romantic landscape painters. Among the Romantic painters, Turner came closest to achieving painting as total atmosphere, retaining only the vaguest representation of a landmark, a ship for instance, as a residual object. But Turner's atmospheric masterpieces remain tied, however tenuously, to the global, whereas Miller's visions of chaos seem the result of pure intuition. Further, to render his atmospheres Miller relies not on a broad palette of colors but almost exclusively on line. Although the use of line to depict a boundless, fluid subject is a curious choice, it has certain perceptual advantages. It allows the artist to schematize the turmoil: the repetitive, undulating strokes become almost a topology of light, liquid, or gas. The parallel lines contribute to the illusion of depth, allowing the viewer to trace the cyclonic patterns of Miller's gestures and to penetrate the depicted space, to feel enveloped by it. Miller builds a sense of drama in his elaborate and vigorous renderings of forms that appear to weave and swirl in deep space.

The energetic, gestural character of Miller's line relates these works to Abstract Expressionism as well. The full sweep of the artist's arm is most impressive in the large paintings, a format he has always preferred and whose sheer size contributes to the sense of vastness the compositions impart. However, while many Abstract Expressionist paintings by artists such as de Kooning and Pollock evoke landscape themes, they are fundamentally about the painting process itself, with an emphasis on the qualities of paint and surface. In Abstract Expressionism gesture can exist for its own sake, to activate the surface, to create texture and visual interest. What differentiates Miller's recent work is that the gesture as line always describes form, form in an extreme state of flux.

The force of these dark and turbulent works lies not only in this energetic line but also in their



allusive richness, in their power to evoke many different realms. They could be describing events taking place on a microscopic level or on a cosmic order. The dynamic churning patterns could equally be evidence of animate being, such as the movement of the artist's hand across the canvas, or depictions of interactions of the elements—air, water, fire, and earth. The work might well express the turbulent upheaval and collision of forces that occur when boundaries are eliminated. Through the constant repetition of a single gesture Miller creates illusions of depth and veils of darkness that impart an ominous and disquieting energy, eliciting feelings of fear and apprehension. The ability to simultaneously provoke a sense of fascination and awe before the unknown gives this art its multidimensional character.



The importance of line in these pictures is that it reveals the artist's considerable involvement and sustained activity in his efforts to depict chaos. By deliberately rendering each line, often with grand gestures, Miller continues to reiterate the act, lingering in it, physically participating in the turmoil that is his subject. It is this manifestation of the artist's physical presence and persistence that makes the works so convincing and impressive. He has discovered a way to give structure to nature's turbulence: the long, sweeping lines, by virtue of their gracefulness, seem accepting of chaos. Through the act of drawing Nachume Miller has found a gestural equivalent for a significant aspect of nature.

Cara McCarty
Assistant Curator
Department of Architecture and Design

biography

Born Frankfurt, West Germany,
January 28, 1949

Resides in New York

education

School of Visual Arts,
New York. BFA, 1975

selected individual exhibitions

- 1988**
EXIT ART, New York
- 1981**
A & M Artworks, New York
- 1976**
Rina [now Bertha Urdang] Gallery,
New York

selected group exhibitions

- 1988**
David Beitzel Gallery, New York
New Work
- 1985**
Barbara Toll Fine Arts, New York
Four Painters
- 1983**
LACE, Los Angeles
The Los Angeles–New York Exchange
- 1982**
Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston
The Americans: The Collage
- The Drawing Center, New York
New Drawing in America
- 1981**
The Drawing Center, New York
Selections 14
- 1978**
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum,
New York
*Young American Artists: 1978 Exxon
National Exhibition*

selected bibliography

Frank, Peter. "Nachume Miller at Rina [now Bertha Urdang] Gallery," *Art News* (New York), vol. 75, no. 5 (May 1976), p. 128

Heartney, Eleanor. "Nachume Miller at Exit Art," *Art in America* (New York), vol. 76, no. 7 (July 1988), p. 137

Kuspit, Donald. "Nachume Miller," in *Nachume Miller* (catalog). New York: EXIT ART, 1988

———. "Nachume Miller at A & M Artworks," *Art in America* (New York), vol. 70, no. 4 (April 1982), pp. 136–37

Shearer, Linda. Interview with Nachume Miller in her *Young American Artists: 1978 Exxon National Exhibition* (catalog). New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1978, pp. 45–49

Smith, Roberta. "Worldly Goods: The New York Side of the LA–NY Exchange," in *The Los Angeles–New York Exchange* (catalog). New York: Committee for the Visual Arts, Inc., 1983