



ART REVIEW: Steve Miller Works Fulfill Promise of Applying Science to Art

April 4, 2016
by Eric Ernst

Viewing [Steve Miller's](#) recent works at [Sara Nightingale Gallery](#) in Water Mill, it is difficult not to be reminded of the ongoing debate about the relationship between science-based technology and the evolution of art and the aesthetic creative act.

A personal story has some bearing on the issues involved. My father, the painter [Jimmy Ernst](#), happened to be visiting the Soviet Union on a cultural exchange program in 1961 when [Yuri Gagarin](#) returned to Earth after being the first human to successfully orbit the planet. At a celebratory banquet, a Russian general turned to Jimmy and boastfully asked, "Isn't science amazing that it has now taken us into space?"

"It's not that big a deal," my father replied, "artists have been there for decades."

Since that time, of course, the impact of the development of digital media and its influence on the direction of works by artists worldwide has grown exponentially, as has the intensity of the discussion over whether this is a positive or negative development for art and creativity.

On the one hand, even in the contemporary world, many artists respect Henry David Thoreau's admonition that "Men have become tools of their tools." From another perspective, [Pablo Picasso](#) observed of technology that "computers are worthless. They can only give you answers."

Still, one can find other viewpoints. Sociologist and literary critic Lewis Mumford observed that "to curb the machine and limit art to handicraft is a denial of opportunity." And Bauhaus artist [Oskar Schlemmer](#) saw technology in art as "an instinctive repudiation of chaos and a longing to find the form appropriate for our time."

Considering he was among the first wave of artists to experiment with computer generated images in the 1980s, it isn't difficult to determine on which side of this cultural/technological divide Steve Miller comes down. He has long been considered an important voice in the SciArt movement.

His works on view at Sara Nightingale Gallery are derived from his recent series titled *Health of the Planet*, and feature emotively configured abstract works that juxtapose elegantly expressive applications of color and line with x-rays of various flora and fauna.

Miller effectively uses these mixed media techniques in balancing painterly and technical impulses to create highly orchestrated yet still spontaneous tableaux that are simultaneously visually energetic and quietly meditative. In this way, the works highlight the duality of both positive and negative aspects wrought by technological development in Brazil and other developing countries.

In *Conditions of the Flow* (mixed media on canvas), for example, the black and white central image of x-rays of flowers placed near the center of the canvas serves to stabilize the composition, while thin washes of color that ebb and flow around the central image provide a graceful sensibility that is profoundly ethereal. These washes are balanced by energetically expressive, calligraphic trails of silver paint that weave throughout the picture plane, thereby completely obliterating the distinctions between foreground and background in the work, while still creating a profound sense of depth.



“Conditions of the Flow” by Steve Miller. Mixed media on canvas.

By contrast, *Banana Bonanza* and *Cidade Baixa* (both inkjet, pigment dispersion and silkscreen on canvas) eschew a central focus within the composition and instead use x-ray images of flora to echo themselves from the corners of the works while floating over delicate splashes of blue colorations.



“Banana Bonanza” by Steve Miller. Inkjet, pigment dispersion and silkscreen on canvas.



“Cidade Baixa” by Steve Miller. Inkjet, pigment dispersion and silkscreen on canvas.

The same compositional structure is used in *Swearing Softly* (pigment dispersion, silkscreen, and inkjet on canvas), while *Your Version, My Version* (inkjet, enamel, and silkscreen on canvas) provides a more central configuration of the compositional structure as a cacophonous intermingling of linear elements to dominate the grey panel that accentuates the impact of the x-rayed floral imagery.



“Swearing Softly” by Steve Miller. Pigment dispersion,

inkjet, silkscreen on canvas.



“Your Version, My Version” by Steve Miller. Inkjet, enamel, silkscreen on canvas.

Health of the Planet (carbon ink jet, enamel, and silkscreen on paper) is of particular interest for its relationship to the pieces the artist made based on the work of Nobel Prize winner in chemistry Rod Mackinnon that has been the foundation of much of his output over the past decade. As Michael Rush wrote in the catalog for Miller’s 2007 exhibit at Brandeis University, titled “Spiraling Inward”: “If ‘collision’ is a proper word to describe the interactions of particles within the body, so, too, do Miller’s canvases reflect a collision of forms, gestures, methods, and materials.”



“Health of the Planet #575” by Steve Miller. Carbon inkjet, enamel and silkscreen on canvas.

Also on exhibit at Sarah Nightingale Gallery is a re-creation of the gallery’s booth at the 2016 Spring/Break Art Fair. The booth featured entertaining and whimsically dark ceramic sculptures by [Monica Banks](#) along with [Christian Little](#)’s subtly erotic paintings that meld abstract impulses and Japanese erotic prints from the 18th century.

BASIC FACTS: Works by Steve Miller remain on view through April 30, 2016.

A Reception takes place on Saturday, April 16 from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.

Sara Nightingale Gallery, 688 Montauk Highway, Water Mill, NY 11976. www.saranightingale.com

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