

John Miller - November 7, 2011

The following is an edited conversation that took place in Michael Scott's studio in Long Island City, New York on November 7, 2011 between Michael Scott and the artist and writer John Miller.

John Miller (JM): I don't know if this is a reference point to you, but do you know Dan Graham's "Schema"?

Michael Scott (MS): No, I don't.

JM: This was one of his first publication pieces, a numerical sequence that comprised two rows in each line. The top numbers indicated the line of the row; the bottom counted up to the number of that line. Since each line was slightly longer than the one before, so this schema produced a kind of pyramid that expanded until it reached the bottom of the page. In part, this came out of concrete poetry: stripping the poetry down to enumeration and the limit of the page as a boundary.

MS: That's an interesting concept. Even though I don't know the work, I guess it would, or I would say that it definitely relates to what I have done. The idea of placing a set of rules that govern the way you work and then just allowing whatever comes out of that to be the piece – where everything that happens within that framework is allowed. When I did the circle paintings in 1986, I came up with a set of rules that I applied to all the paintings. These were, the same 30" square size, a consistent diameter for both the outer and inner circles, and that there were always six black circles on a white ground. But the idea was, and you have to remember I made them in the mid 80's, the idea was that I wanted to make a painting where you could not make an objective argument for one painting being any better than another.

JM: Right.

MS: Or worse than another. Which is to say that to argue for one painting over another is subjective, regardless of whether the painting is good or bad. This work came out of a time when everything I was seeing was based in expressionism. There were artists who, on some level, were doing the same thing, not really the same thing, but there was "new geometric" painting and artists like Sherrie Levine who was addressing appropriation. And so, that's sort of the thinking that these paintings came from. And then for the later work, this idea of a systematic approach towards painting became even more up front, in particular with the "distance paintings". Same thing with most of the paintings prior to 1994.

JM: Yes. But in the earlier ones you reduced the subjective component to a cybernetic quality.

MS: You have to help me on that word, cybernetic.

JM: Cybernetics is a system that's self-governing through feedback; as such, it

produces a kind of equilibrium.

MS: That's right, because as you make something, the response that it generates determines the next output. Is that it?

JM: Right, right. Since "Schema" was governed by the size of the page, so there's a reciprocity between that and what you see. In your kilometer and quarter-mile paintings, you adjust the increments and the intervals until you reach the desired length within a canvas of pre-determined size.

MS: Yes, but one difference between the kilometer and quarter mile paintings and what you're talking about with Dan Graham's work is that, on a certain level, the paintings I make address, at least initially, aesthetics. Even though I start each painting with a set of known parameters, I still, in the end, want to have a visually impactful work. And from what you describe about the "Schema" piece, I think Dan Graham was probably less interested in what the work ends up looking like than I am.

JM: At that stage, Dan Graham's work was more hermetic. No doubt it just baffled people who came across it in magazines. Your mode of address as a painter holds a certain advantage in that if people feel that if they can identify a work as a painting, they already understand it.

MS: That's right, because there's a context and a history that they bring to it. And with my work there is a direct reference to Op Art as well.

JM: In particular it references the pop element of Op Art. Viewers respond to an optical pattern and periodize it in terms of product design without necessarily knowing who Bridget Riley is, for example. So this means you engage a vernacular plus painting history. Moreover, the opticality of your paintings takes a little bit longer to kick in. If someone were to look at your show very quickly, they could just say, "Oh, black stripes," and move on without seeing the colored afterimages that aren't literally there in the composition.

MS: I guess my 1980s paintings come closest to the Bridget Riley's. But with her work there is the curve which is sort of a "sexy" aspect to painting.

JM: With Bridget Riley, you identify the curve and say, "That's where the opticality is happening." You work with unyielding straight lines – or circles, as the case may be. In any event, the viewer can't point to a certain flourish or gesture.

MS: Yes, and when I made them, I made them with the intent that they would be very optical. That extreme visual state was always a motivating factor behind the work. I would say that I wanted to make something so optical that in theory it would be impossible to look at, which I always thought was the opposite of how a painting traditionally functions. And yet, of course, their opticality is based on how close you stand to them. They gray out the further you walk away. So in reality, nothing is

impossible to look at. But I think what motivates the work, the theory behind it, whether it is achieved or not, is very important to the understanding of the work. And you have to remember that I don't even see that optical aspect until they're finished. Because there is nothing optical about them until the very last moment of their making.

JM: When you peel the tape off.

MS: Yes. And just so you know, that whole thing about the color afterimage that you and other people have mentioned to me is not an aspect of the work that I've seen, because I'm colorblind. So I don't see any of that - I only know about it from what people have told me.

JM: Oh really? Because another correlation I was going to make would Tony Conrad's flicker films. He produced these just using clear and black film spliced together at certain intervals.

MS: Did they go from black to white to white to black?

JM: Yes, but the timing varied. He came up with formulas for the sequencing. This produced colorful afterimages but, like your painting with no actual color. It was just either clear leader or black. This reductively mirrored how film works through the persistence of vision, but it also was a psychedelic experience.

MS: I like that aspect of the psychedelia. That's what I was trying to do when I stopped making the line paintings in 1994 and jumped into the more illustrational figurative work. I made that change because I had been working out of a systematic approach to painting since 1986. As a matter of fact, when I was doing the circle paintings, I set up a methodology of working that I did not forecast an end to. But there comes a point when you realize this is not the only thing I want to say. For me that came about two-and-a-half years after I started making them. And one thing about having work based on a methodology like the circle paintings is that once you stop making them, you can't go back to recreate them. Their whole point is that there is a continuum and once that continuum is broken, it's broken for good.

JM: So at the outset were you thinking of repetitive activity like On Kawara's?

MS: Yes, because in the mid 1980's I had seen two date paintings at MoMA by him. And when I saw these paintings, without knowing anything about him, I knew that the paintings were painted on that date. That they were not illustrating that date but representing it or marking it. I was really interested in that the subject that On Kawara chose to paint was determined for him – in his case that was the calendar.

And when I started the circle paintings, I did not set off with having them all look identical. In fact I made two with dots in their center. And as I started to make these circle paintings, I first tried to make them as different as possible within the framework that I had set up. But after about twelve, I started to think to myself "Why am I trying to

make them so different when I've set up this structure to begin with? Why am I trying to play up the differences when I've created these very restrictive set of rules? Why not, instead, play down the differences as much as possible?" Which is what I ended up doing.

The line paintings were even more methodical than the circle paintings because when I did the circle paintings, the decision as to the band widths was subjective. But when I set up the line paintings, I came up with the idea that I would pick one line width as a starting point and from there I just had to look to see what the line width of the previous painting was to determine the next one I would make – which would be 1% thicker in width. But as with the circle paintings, I eventually came to a point where, well, I wanted to do something else. And from 1990 through 1993 I did create different systems of working, which resulted in the pattern paintings and then the distance paintings. But then again, I felt like I'd reached an endpoint because I was just coming up with different systems and applying them to my painting methodology.

JM: But something was operative in those paintings that entailed a certain social reductivism. On one hand, cybernetic or quasi-cybernetic aspects come into play too, but you link this to a fundamental condition of perception that, significantly, is involuntary. While On Kawara's work isn't about perception per se, it does point to a fundamental aspect of existence, namely biopower: "I got up." If not, you'd have to be sick...

MS: ...or dead...

JM: ...or asleep. So it's a building block of existence. In comparison, the neo-expressionist paintings of the day were allegorical. Think of Schnabel's broken plate paintings: an allegory of Kristallnacht. Your works sidestep all this. The perception of them exists only in the here and now - but it's a paradoxical literalism because viewers see things that aren't actually there. You could also equate these to certain minimalist forms of music like Glenn Branca or Rhys Chatham or Sonic Youth. Their music concerned concrete sound in a particular space and the overtones that performing it generated: notes not actually played by the musicians.

MS: I see what you're talking about, particularly in terms of the concrete.

JM: The conventional, liberal esthetic model is that the artist makes a proposition and the viewer is free to interpret it. But your paintings set up something different: an involuntary perceptual relationship. That's what links it to certain strains of conceptualism and minimalism.

MS: Yes, I'm definitely tied to those two practices and less tied - I mean, people may disagree, but I say less tied to Op Art because I think these paintings operate very differently than the way Op paintings from the 60's function. If you look at Larry Poons' and Bridget Rileys' work, I don't think my painting functions in the same way theirs do.

JM: Exactly. I was very young back then, but I remember how Op Art was dismissed as a novelty. No one had seen things like that, so they were excited. But then they felt it was a trick and dismissed it. This is also why designers embraced it. Now, bleeding over into design would be thought of as a good thing, but back then people considered it selling out.

MS: But apart from the Bridget Riley black and white works, I don't think most Op paintings are in fact that optical. When I approached my work, I never thought about the Op Art movement. Of course I was aware of it, but sometimes you touch on other artist's work without focusing on it. For me, I did not see it as influencing me, it was really something I was just aware of. Because ultimately you want to do something that's different from what others have done. So even if you touch on other artist's work you want to take it to a different place than they did. And that's not saying anything against where they went. It's just focusing more on what I was interested in at the time.

But the Op Art aspect of the work is really tied to the pre-1994 work. I took breaks from that type of painting and re-examined it again in 2002 and 2003. These later paintings relate to the earlier work but they approach it from a different direction. For example, I don't consider them to be based in concrete thought at all. Also, unlike the early work which tried to eliminate the hand of the artist, these start to embrace it or at least allow for it.

JM: I'm curious why you stopped making the circle paintings after going to Nepal.

MS: Well, I did not stop making those works because of that trip. It had to do with taking a break from New York and deciding when I came back that I could either continue on with the circle paintings or do something else. And I decided to do something else.

We have been talking a lot about opticality, but the circle paintings were not about optics at all, but were instead about a concrete approach to making a painting that questioned the idea of "originality". It was only when I exhibited fourteen of them together that I recognized this other aspect to them. Seeing them all lined up like that is when I started thinking about making a new body of work that tried to take optics to an extreme level.

JM: So after you went through a kind of reductive, literal stage, but it was completely antithetical to Greenbergian reductivism. Then you followed this with the "candyland" paintings?

MS: Yes, after I had finished the distance paintings, I felt I had reached an end game with that type of reductivist work and I didn't want to come up with a new system for approaching making a painting. And at that time I had also become interested in the psychedelic aspects that are implied by the optics in the line paintings. So I became interested in playing up an aspect of the psychedelia, and on one level trying to illustrate it. Also, with the line paintings I was trying to drain the work of content by coming up with a set of rules for making a painting. So I thought that with these new "candyland"

paintings, that if I made them so over-the-top in content, that the content would become meaningless and render them somewhat content-less. And at the time I was making them, the art world was focusing on politically motivated work. So in one regard, they also came as a response to the politically charged work of the time.

JM: It seemed you were dealing with a sense of degradation, in part by alluding to the unruliness of experience that was behind the rigorous lines of the prior work. The "candyland" imagery is ostensibly wholesome, but ultimately perverse.

MS: I didn't try to subvert this imagery with sexual overtones or anything like that. It's very wholesome and it's very up front about it – and it doesn't apologize for it either. The work is not ironic.

You know, I feel that I have come out of a post-modernist way of thinking about art which I see as not having to create a single platform that you stand on that you can't later subvert. I didn't want to be an artist that kept investigating painting in the same manner with slight variations over time. I wanted to explore different ways of investigating different ideas. And as you know, artists contradict themselves all the time. And I think that is a good thing. Being an artist is not always following a linear path.

I have made other works besides the "candyland" paintings that may seem to subvert the line paintings, but then again, their opticality somewhat subverts the concreteness of those works as well.

JM: What about your more recent paintings?

MS: After 2003 I did not make any line paintings until 2009, and the black and white ones I only started in 2011. That's a six year break. So when I returned to making these line paintings, I took a very different approach, though the results, at first glance, are similar.

The later works let you see the process. On one level I saw them as a "Zen like" meditative practice or performance that had a very optical end result. The performance is that to create them I drag a ruler across the painting and cut it and then repeat that process, in some cases, some 1,800 times. The paintings from 2002 and 2003 took a very long time to make – maybe four to six weeks. Whereas the earlier ones took like a day or two. And with the process of dragging the ruler and having the lines be so thin that I could not regulate them, I set up a situation where I knew imperfections would occur, as they become inherent in their making.

JM: What's funny, the imperfections don't look like they were made by hand as you would expect. They look more like printing errors or silkscreen errors. Like something wasn't inked properly or the registration is wrong.

MS: Well, even with these you can see what happens is that the paint pools, so it leaks. In general I am not really interested in how things are made, but these newer paintings,

starting with the color works in 2009, came out of the fact that the materials I had been using had changed and the tape no longer kept the paint from seeping under. So I decided to embrace those mistakes. I embraced what before I would have viewed as an error.

JM: So do you think of that in terms of Pollock at all?

MS: I didn't actually, until you just mentioned it, but I can see that connection. But in his case he's putting the paint down as he's doing it. So he's actually responding to what he does aesthetically. Whereas these paintings don't - which more relates to the Dan Graham "Schema" discussion you brought up at the beginning.

JM: What do you think of Wade Guyton's work, do you relate to that at all? You might check out how he uses large-format inkjet printers to produce black monochromes and exploits defects in the printing process.

MS: When these are made, the accidents that occur, well, they're not actually accidents. They're just results of their making. They're not intended - they're not predetermined or manipulated.

JM: Could you talk about their performative aspect a little bit more specifically?

MS: Well, the performance is almost like a meditative aspect of repeating the process of cutting the tape over and over again. They are all made the same way. They've always been made the same way. But the performative aspect of the work is the movement of me from one side of the painting to the other. That can be somewhat meditative on my part, which I alluded to before. But I never thought of the earlier work as the result of a meditative act. I saw those works as starting with an idea and me just visualizing that idea. So, for example, with the earlier work I had the idea and I knew what I wanted it to look like and I executed that idea. And these later works, they're more about starting off with a premise and allowing things to happen along the way. So in the end you are left with what you are left with.

JM: Now that I think about it, your tape technique is akin to silk screening or etching because, you apply the paint in one coat and the tapes acts like a screen. So there is a close proximity to printmaking. That the process can become meditative implies some kind of connection between subjectivity and a quasi-mechanical process.

MS: That is true of the paintings, as well as the photographs I have made over the years. It is the same principle in both, masking light or paint; which is about creating a negative that when painted, results in a positive. The more recent work plays into this more because the tape is removed while the paint is still wet, which adds an element of chance – an element that was never a part of the earlier paintings. By chance I mean that the paint seeps through areas where it has pooled or leaves marks as it is peeled off. But it nevertheless remains within the parameters of their making. In a sense they may relate more to Dan Graham's "Schema" piece which had the variable of the page

size. It's funny that I could see these more recent works tie more closely to his piece than the earlier ones.