

Brenda Miller: At Second Sight

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Brenda Miller arrived at her ways and means of making art some fifty years ago. Her consistently impressive work has aged well because its sensuous affect was never corralled by minimalist generalizations. Unlike the rejective canon “what you see is what you get,” Miller’s work offers more than what you get at first sight. The viewer may sense underlying suggestions of feminist content and imagery or simply enjoy its visual power. Offbeat minimalism—or what I called in a 1966 exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction*—could extend from Eva Hesse’s sculptural and material innovations as far as Robert Ryman, whose painted variations on white seemed endless and painterly rather than “reductive.” I dislike the terms “post-minimalist” (tethered as it is to a predominantly male style effectively meandered by Miller and other feminist artists), and of course post-feminist (premature until and if we reach post-patriarchy).

Miller earned her BFA at the University of New Mexico, where, in comparison to New York City, the “incredible natural light made an enormous impression on me. It made me feel a bit unhinged at first.”¹ She was also struck by “those beautiful intricate Navajo sand paintings that could be made, then removed and reconstituted. Images were used like a written language.”²

¹ Personal communication, June 2023.

² Personal communication, June 2023.

After two years in New Orleans, where she received an MFA from Tulane, she returned to New York and began to synthesize all these ideas and experiences in her work.

Whereas many of Miller’s contemporaries focused on nothing beyond the obdurate object itself, her string installations, like Sol LeWitt’s wall drawings, are architecturally site-specific, scale determined by the space—sometimes calmly, sometimes disruptively, such as installing in a stairwell.³ Also like the wall drawings, her works are both permanent and impermanent, flexible when reinstalled in new spaces. She makes diagrams for each piece that allow others to follow the instructions and install it. She is currently working on a new iteration that would allow the work to be collected and stored rather than re-created each time, an economic decision demanding an esthetic solution.

Much as I admire Miller’s art, I will always think of her first as an activist friend and ally. With Poppy Johnson and Faith Ringgold, then me, too, she cofounded Ad Hoc Women Artists to protest the Whitney Annual’s pathetic showings of women’s art in 1970. (We knew each other

³ Stairwell pieces turned out to be problematic, first at 112 Greene Street in 1970 and especially in my *Twenty Six Contemporary Women Artists* show at the Aldrich Museum in 1971, when she installed *Homage to Constance Marie Charpentier* on a staircase. Aldrich returned from a ski trip on crutches and removed the lower part without informing her; when she arrived at the opening, she removed the rest of the piece. When the show was resurrected and expanded in 2022 as *52 Artists*, she was asked to make the same piece, different stairwell, and her proposal was rejected by the fire department because it was flammable—unlike all the other works in the show made of equally flammable materials. Miller was justifiably enraged by this and their response to replacements; she refuses to even look at the catalogue. (Regrettably, I was never informed about all this and never saw the exhibition myself.)

through the Art Workers’ Coalition, but our group was independent, heir to WAR—Women Artists in Revolution.) Miller, like many women artists, has been restless under that category, for fear of being forever ghettoized, but there was never a question of her feminism. In the early 1970s she was open, if not convinced, about the possibility of a female sensibility in art. Some of us identified this as central imagery, others as exaggerated repetition, evoking women’s traditional work in new ways. Miller parallels the performative and time-consuming repetition also found in the art of Michelle Stuart, rubbing soil into paper; Howardena Pindell, punching thousands of holes; or Jackie Winsor’s wrapping techniques.

Fiber, of course, has long been firmly associated with weaving and women’s work, though in some indigenous cultures, it is men’s work. When starting out as an artist, Miller moved from painting to fiber “rugs” (a.k.a. “floor pieces,” like Carl Andre’s brick rectangles or Harmony Hammond’s braided/painted fiber pieces). She went on to the use of string in her mature work, bringing a sensuous, organic (almost nest-like) texture to the underlying grid. The linguistic relationship of text to textiles (a staple of Cecilia Vicuña’s quipu poems and installations) is made tangible in Miller’s rubber-stamped and typewritten “prints.” Seduced by the alphabet, she has in turn made it seductive. In the mid-1980s, she returned briefly to the horizontal, creating a couple of subtle outdoor works of mulch and grass—“materials that would return to nature and not become pollutants,” in which “the landscape itself constituted the art”⁴ (with a little help from the grid): *Nantucket Landscape* (1984) and *Strata* (1986) at Snug Harbor on Staten Island.

⁴ Personal communication, June 2023.

Like so many of the New York feminist cohort, Miller refused to abandon abstraction for overt commentary, choosing instead to challenge or subvert aspects like the rigid grid, the aloof object, and the rejection of content. In the “printed” wall pieces she prefers a more precarious diamond shape over stolid minimalist squares and cubes. Her massive 1980 *Collapsed Grid* can be seen as a comment on the deflation of minimalism in the 1980s. *Separate but Equal* (1981) is a rare use of taut rather than relaxed string, evoking a cage or prison cell, intended as a comment on the idiocy of the so-called solution to pervasive racism.

For Miller the grid is not a final effect, but a tool serving to anchor the thousands of pieces of string generated by a mathematical code. Her choice of mediums—cheap sisal twine, rubber stamps, typewritten pages—adds a populist touch originally dictated by economics. She has even washed and recycled the string when a piece was deinstalled; *Aleph*, a book piece, incorporated paper she made from discarded sisal, a strategy more reinventive or regenerative than deconstructive. In fact, the very word “generative” can be attached to the clichés and the triumphs of women’s lives and arts.

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