



D.F. Miller

January 23 - March 8, 2000

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

## What Are You Looking At?



Vectorgraph Components

*See him initiate the sacred process! The making of meatloaf is serious business, and so it is with art. Though the man has made it hundreds of times, he still consults the text with patient reverence and ritual. It is ironic that he is so adept in the, uh, kitchen. The collection of cells and cigarettes currently known as "D.F. Miller" is uncomfortable in his meat uniform, and has been for some time. As an art student in the '70s, he was rendered suddenly bald and egg-like one morning in the shower. Hair fell from his head in small shaking fistfuls, and his mournful ululations could be heard for miles. Certain experts have proposed that this radical denudation was due to acute existential stress. Others take a more positive stance and conclude that the event was a subtle performance piece by some underlying Miller. This theory holds some merit and conveniently explains current male pattern baldness afflicting the man as a long-term attempt to return to the ur-zygotian world he alludes to so often in his art — a timeless void where he can relax and perform his enigmatic maths in peace.*

It is a Friday night in late October, and I am frustrated with this man. This "D.F. Miller." I sit now on my front porch, completely discombobulated, having just left him at Washington Park. The sun has receded, and the sky is a brilliant tangerine. Waves of amber light lap at my porch, and I should be completely relaxed. I should be dredging great shrimps in spicy sauce at one of Kansas City's informal bistros, yet I am drawing his face in my sketchbook instead, and crossing out his eyes with little red Xs. Perhaps I should be grateful for the attention he has granted me. Time and again, his art has delivered me to the most unlikely and enchanting places ... but this time the man has gone too far.

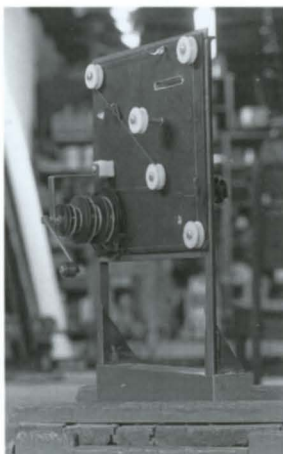


Threading Vectorgraph

*Look at him chop the onions, but mind yourself! Be careful. He has a knife, and does not play well with others. He never has. As a child, D.F. Miller was forced to communicate meaning in art classes through the use of referential marks and color systems. Brown house. Green tree. This did not sit well with him, and his resentment shows to this day. What you experience in his work is as much about math as it is about poetry. When asked as a child, as the tiniest of millers, what two plus two was, he ciphered away for five minutes before responding "roughly four." When the bemused teacher went to look at his calculations, she found on his desk an invoice for twelve dollars, which she felt compelled to pay.*

It is a Friday night in late October, and I should be sweating and laughing by now somewhere. But I am not. He has called for me, this Miller, and I have no choice but to heed that call. The circumstances are irrelevant. On this planet, in this lifetime, one waits for him. To call, to come, whatever. It does not matter. The man traverses Kansas City like a private detective, hot on the trail of foible and folly. To and fro he journeys, making deals and pocketing small sums of money. Plotting his art. Storing nuts for use at a later date. Sometimes it will occur to him that your services are required, and then you too will get a call, as I did, a couple of hours ago. He wanted me to meet him at Washington Park for a little chat. So I dutifully went and waited for my friend.

Tensioning Device



*Check out the confidence with which he combines unlikely ingredients. Good meatloaf and modern art are alike in so many ways. Both typically involve ketchup, eggs, and some sort of numbering system. D.F. Miller makes great meatloaf, and great art. He is a magician of meat, and a poet of numbers. Like all of us, he understands numbers on an intellectual level, but he stands alone in his heartbreaking attachment to them on an emotional one. The oneiric precision that pervades his work can be traced, at least partially, back to his days as a carnival barker in Indiana. It was here that he tinkered with colorful machines that sucked quarters from our willing pockets in exchange for improbable promises. It was here that he learned that numbers, like time, are a form of blank fiction, ripe for inclusion in the nonfiction of our lives. Imaginary numbers like money and minutes. He barked word seeds into the fertile air and harvested our souls and quarters. He spoke at length of the existence of prizes. Prizes! What prizes? This stuffed bear? That, uh, Kleenex? It did not matter. The potential of **winning anything** was easily worth a dollar, a piece of green paper. A small sum indeed for a chance at the prize! How many pieces of green paper will it take to win the nice Kleenex? Roughly four, he calculated. He still calculates.*

In the park, I sat at a picnic table and waited for him. As always, I noticed many squirrels bandying about, collecting what ... nuts? I didn't see any damn nuts. Precious Friday afternoon minutes slaked through me into the soft ground. I whistled nervously and noticed some things. I noticed that squirrels are basically rats with tails. Tree rats, I thought. Squirrels is tree rats, I said aloud, like a crazy person, there in the park as I waited for "D," and whistled nervously.

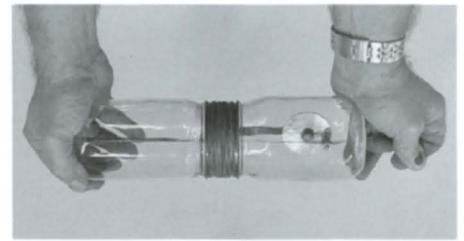
*Watch him mix the meat. Note that he is not laughing. He has the hands of a magician; hands accustomed in equal measures to subtle transformation and violent action. He tells me often that the world is filled with funny things, but there is nothing funny about meatloaf. I believe him. He also tells me, in the most unlikely of places, that time is a fiction, that nonfiction is fiction, and I believe him about that, too. That all of it is unlikely and that all of it is funny. Did he really work as a carnival barker? Did he really teach priests in Japan how to build American-style houses? Did these things really happen? Well, sure they did. And even if they didn't, what the hell. They did.*

In the distance beyond the airy diesel zizzing of rush-hour busses, a car alarm sounded, and I sensed a rift in the time-space continuum. The squirrels lazed about on their backs like house cats, and I sensed he was close. Sure enough, the constituent cells that comprise the physical Miller materialized. The mouth part began to move, and I nodded emphatically at the wordlike sounds that flew out. It became apparent that he wanted me to write the catalogue essay for his upcoming show. I was flattered and honored and told him I would surely think about it. I rose to leave, to proceed with my Friday, but my legs would not move. I realized I had no choice in the matter of his "proposal." I agreed to his request by scratching my name on a tattered parchment he produced from his shiny cargo shorts. It smelled of burnt feathers. Then the parchment was gone and I was confused and the suddenly immense man was within an inch of my face. Of course, he told me, or at least the constituent cells that approximated him genetically implied to me, that he would not provide me with the luxury of an actual description of the work he would be showing. Hee hee. He would not burden me with this tiresome information. His eyes slowly spiraled as he told me this ... And my bones! They rattled like so many empties in the metal bottom of the thing.

*Notice the care he takes in forming the platonic loaf! I assure you he has been equally careful in measuring the ingredients, and will be even more so in setting the oven temperature and timer. Details matter to Miller. When he has time, this Miller is my mentor on matters of matter. He straps me into his red truck and drives me around, pointing out places with potential, places with the absolute best whatever it is. Beer wine chicken donuts. He has a big checkbook, this Miller, a golf-tournament-size checkbook that smells of soap. In it are registered mysterious entries and sums. Together we drift across the city and trade the big checks for provisions and prizes. Will I get back to work? All in time. And all is fine. He tells me this and I nod, but I know there is something the matter with this man Miller and his time. Time is no matter for this Miller.*

Although it is his art that intoxicates me, I am equally fascinated with the man. Often I have noticed, as I observe him in public, that his mouth moves and nothing comes out at all. Yet still the people nod their heads. They give him small sums of money. The man is a walking conundrum, and I am drawn to him like a moth to the moon. At Washington Park, he hovered inches above the grass, and words came out of his mouth at me. As I left him, nodding glumly, wet boots slogging along in the grass, I could hear him chopping at the air with his small hard hands. When I turned back, the man was gone and the sky was what ... orange? And where the man had been, there was a rich smell there and many cigarette butts from many off-brand cigarettes. And the tree rats! They were gone too.

*See him shudder with anticipation as he gazes upon the fragrant approximation. Like good art, meatloaf is not meatloaf until the buzzer buzzes and Miller says it's meatloaf. Until that time, the sweating lump in the oven is just a meaningless conversation between ingredients. In his kitchen, as in his studio, my head swims with meaningful analogy. Like eggs, like chickens, there are many millers that comprise the physical meat-Miller. I have detected perhaps a dozen over the years — enough for four large omelettes. These millers sit on small stools and beat their conundrums. D.F. Miller is an incorporation of these smaller millers, a confederacy of these independent miller states. They agree on one thing. They each share*



*Catastrophe Machine (After Zeeman)*



*Viewing Cloud Chamber*

*Condensers in Storage*



**an intense desire not to communicate with you**. This, and less, is written in their constitution, a document they scribble on from time to time. This document excites the Physical Miller tremendously, and engenders in him **an intense desire to communicate with you**. To communicate this ancient, uh, noncommunication that is so important to, uh, all the uh ...

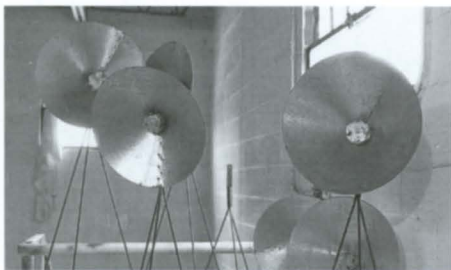
Little millers.



Inspecting Rotary Sphere Mold

What are you looking at? You hear the ticking and feel the heat and smell the meat and still you believe he does not want to share with you? To communicate with you? Frothing could be lather from the truce. Colorless green ideas sleep furiously in D.F. Miller's work, waiting for our buzzers to buzz. We are no match for him in ideospace. In the time it takes us to think one thought, he has already thought, what? Yes. Four thoughts. Roughly four. Of these four, he spends three immediately, in his conversation and his art. The other he greedily stores in a sort of mental mutual fund that he dips into from time to time. This fund is formidable and has performed at an exceptional level for the twenty years he has maintained his studio. He wants to talk to you about all this, but he doesn't really want to talk to you. About all this. Not about all these. Uh, meaty matters.

Now it is cold out and I am cold, and it is dark out, and now I sit on my porch. There are stars up there, and there are sirens in the air, and the smell of smoke and soap lingers, and this infection he has granted me tonight, this headache, will not go away, and I am out of time, I think. Can I serve him as I promised? I do not think I can. Did I already mention the bit about the shower? I have no idea. I am cold and my head hurts, and it is clear to me now. I cannot summarize the immensity of his weird power in a few hundred words. At best I could attempt, and I would fail, to build a word frame for the expansive poetry of his message. With all the usual blather and blah blah blah. The physical Miller might even appreciate the effort. But his art wouldn't give two jots for the paper fence I would create. I don't have the words for the art of D.F. Miller. I don't even have all the letters.

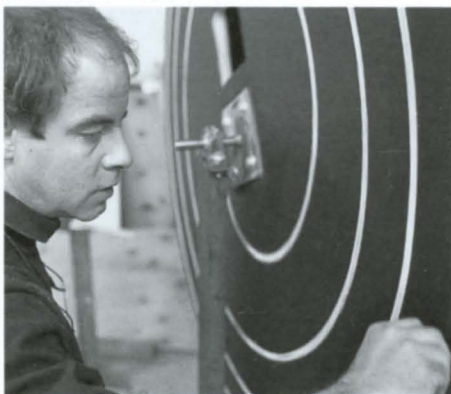


Iso Suite

Ab. So it is done. So it is so. What can one say about such a thing? I will not write about his show. I cannot write about his show. On the porch, warm beneath a green Aer Lingus blanket swiped decades before, I come to this conclusion. I close my eyes and listen to the sirens and smell the smoke, and a sweet empathy swells in my heart. I consider the non-Miller things. Out there. I think of oranges and trains and gas station coffee. In my mind, from my porch, I stand and distribute handful upon handful of nuts to the hungry squirrels like some forest pope. My eyes are closed, my head no longer hurts, and he has passed from my thoughts. These millers. This Miller. My mind is clear and the space up there is bigger than the sky.

So, what are you looking at?

Drawing on Large Cylinder



Now, of course, as if on cue, he flaps on over and perches on my shoulder. He is a colorful bird, this Miller, and that's not lipstick on his beak. Fresh from the, uh, oven, he whispers in my ear, and now I sense his work, there in the future where you lurk, and I am giddy with the thought of it. Something uncanny has been recorded, I'm sure of it, there where you are. Here today. Some measured imbalance that makes fat Santa cry and the slumping elves pine for the days of handwritten lists and painted wood toys. Something is moving. Something has been stacked and stored. Something is moving and making a sound, and your eyes are perhaps a bit out of focus, like mine now, and it all seems kind of funny in a way, and you are no longer thinking about your new shoes or how road salt is eating away at your car and you should have sprung for the undercoating. Something is moving, or about to move. Tonight you just might have lusty sex or at least laugh at dinner, or at least run a red light and not get hit. And not get caught. And you can jolly well thank D.F. Miller for that thick rich slice of life.

Dan Maginn, architect  
el dorado inc., Kansas City, Mo.

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