

DAVID B SMITH
GALLERY

Liz Miller
Recalcitrant Mimesis
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David B. Smith Gallery
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Exhibition Essay by Leanne Haase Goebel

The artist Polly Apfelbaum describes her colorful room-sized installations as “Fallen Paintings.” Made from colorful fabrics, her works often spread out like a painting that has slipped to the floor. It’s an appropriate description.

Liz Miller might then want to describe her works as “Draped Paintings.” Instead, she uses the affectionate term “Wonky Origami.” It’s also been described as kirigami — think paper snowflakes — and Rorschach blot tests writ large. Colorful industrial felt is slung, dangled and suspended to create shapes and forms that interact and react with the walls and the space.

At first glance, one would not connect Liz Miller to Clyfford Still. So it’s not surprising that Miller admits to being slightly perplexed when first presented with the idea of creating a site-specific installation for David B. Smith Gallery inspired by the art of Clyfford Still. Appropriating another artist’s forms, colors and compositional devices can lead to art that’s uninspiring. Miller wondered how she could stay true to her own interests, which are more gothic and baroque. For the past year, she has created room-sized installations, hand cut from industrial felt, based on the shapes and forms of weapons. Focusing on the jagged, gestural marks of Abstract Expressionist painter Still seems counter to her more hard-edged work. But her fear of creating something “cheesy” was unfounded, and the inspiration of appropriating Still’s forms provided a creative jolt for the Minnesota-based artist.

Miller’s process is complex. It begins with understanding the dimensions of a space. The artist then gathers imagery. She arrives at what she calls a form that other forms can pivot around. A form that can be manipulated in interesting ways using Photoshop and a computer. With Clyfford Still, she looked at as many paintings as she could in person, though there are not many in Minnesota. In fact, 94 percent of Still’s oeuvre is in the collection of the Clyfford Still Museum in Denver. Miller began trying to research the artist’s life and ended up finding very little, so she instead focused mostly on the visuals she could access online and in books.

“Subconsciously, I think, I was looking at Still’s work and would erase things. I ended up finding in his work forms that resonated with other forms I’ve been working with,” Miller said. “I wanted this installation to have a special connection to Clyfford Still, but I also wanted it to be something I could connect with.”

Once Miller has identified the shapes and forms, she projects them onto tagboard and cuts out a stencil. The artist then uses that stencil to hand cut shapes with an electric scissors from industrial felt that are then draped, hung and attached to walls using fishing line, plastic chain and fasteners to create dimensionality.

“Mimicking a Still gesture is an effort in futility,” Miller wrote on her blog, “especially when that gesture is to be translated as a hard-edged stencil.” She said his brushwork translated awkwardly because the edges were so irregular and had a very painterly quality to them. However, through a process of identifying and isolating marks and gestures from a variety of works, she believes she was able to freeze Still’s organic, expressive marks.

After she cuts the shapes, Miller will mock up an installation in her basement studio, but doesn’t diagram in advance, choosing instead to find that perfect balance between organization and improvisation. She utilizes play and sometimes drawing to create relationships between forms that resonate to her. She is looking for something that has two opposing readings: something beautiful, but also threatening. She will photograph her studio process and use the images as reference when installing a work in response to, and in reaction with, the space in which it is located.

Her work explores the duality between synthetic and organic, at once rigid and hard-edged, but also draped and flowing. Like Jessica Stockholder, Miller creates works that blur the distinction between painting, sculpture and environment. Stockholder established her reputation by mixing everyday consumer and household objects with high art traditions. Miller is not consciously broaching the territory of the art versus craft divide, but it is present nevertheless.

“I’ve always been attracted to materials that can somehow cloud our view. Materials that can transcend and go beyond their origins.”

The industrial felt she uses is tough, but also tactilely soft. “It’s ominous, but soft,” she said. A quality she also found in Clyfford Still’s work. “One thing that really stood out as interesting and exciting was how severe and sinister-looking some of the shapes were in his painting.”

The violence and menacing shapes in Clyfford Still’s paintings are something the artist himself acknowledged in letters and correspondence. He even told Henry Hopkins, director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, that the paintings had the power to kill. They were like weapons to Still, so it is not surprising that Miller found weapons in the shapes and forms she created from Still’s work. Initially, she may have been recalcitrant about appropriating Clyfford Still, but in the end, she found a kindred expression of violence and weaponry shared across time.