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A Visit to a Historic Maine Resort Town to See Miller and Walker Exhibitions

Sue Miller, *Spar V*, 2007–21. Acrylic, wood, fabric, canvas. (Photo courtesy of John Colan)

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The Ogunquit Museum of American Art salutes artists who depict the sea as a place of myth, memory, and mystery.

"Intense" is the best word describing *Sue Miller: Personal Voyage* and *John Walker: From Low Tide to High Tide*, two exhibitions at the Ogunquit Museum of American Art in this seaside town in southern Maine close to the New Hampshire border. I'm embarrassed to admit I'd never been to the museum, doubly embarrassed since it's a museum of American art and I'm an American art scholar. When we go to Mount Desert Island, which we do every summer, we're on a mission to get there, and when we leave, it's a haul to get home. I'll add that Ogunquit is a summer-resort town with terrible traffic.

View from the interior of the museum. (Photo courtesy of the Ogunquit Museum of American Art)

Miller and Walker are exceptional artists, so, in a profile in perseverance, I got there last week. The treat's worth the trouble. The museum's very pretty, in a low-slung 1950s Modernist building set in a lovely sculpture garden, directly on the ocean, and blessedly far from the madding crowd. The Miller and Walker shows, both nautical in theme, deliver a sea that's not a pretty view but, rather, a messy, tough, and uncertain thing.

Miller's is the exhibition I most wanted to see. She's among a cadre of stellar women artists who go from strength to strength, honing a singular, spirited vision, never famous but having a cult following. Emily Eveleth,

Elizabeth Enders, Keltie Ferris, Angela Lorenz, whom I've profiled, Lois Dodd, the late Jackie Saccoccio, and Lorraine Shemesh are among them, all first-rate. Miller was discovered by Allan Stone, whose biography I'm writing.

Personal Voyage is about the sea but also about the act of painting and the tension between abstraction and representation or, more correctly, about what's evocative, even mysterious, and what's visually resolved. They're mostly small paintings, some collages, done in the last few years, though a couple were from the '80s. Miller also returns to pictures, not to belabor them but to tweak, or to re-enchant here and there. Experience does that.

When I write "intense," I mean *Spar V*, from 2007, tweaked last year. It's 11 by 14 inches of wild and wooly drama. It's painted with thick acrylic allied with strips of wood for the masts and pieces of fabric. There's a chromatic riot, too, happening in the sky. The painting's not just moody. It's a mood unto itself.

Sue Miller, *Rider II*, 1983–88. Acrylic, wood, canvas. (Photo courtesy of John Colan)

Rider II, from the mid 1980s, anchors the exhibition, since it's the biggest thing in the show. It's a boat, we don't know what it's doing, and it might as well be a ghost, or a whale, docked and safe or adrift and abandoned. The water's black, and the sky's a tonal, creamy mix of color. The boat's on a subtle diagonal, giving it animation. The planks glow. Every passage beseeched me to look, absorb, think, look some more, and question.

Miller is 83. She's been painting for a long time, coming to seascapes from her young years in the New York suburbs when she learned to love sailing. She was more a dabbling rather than career artist, raising three sons and making the jump after they were launched. I wasn't surprised to read in curator Katherine French's essay that Miller loves to sail but also studies Greek mythology.

Odysseus was already on my mind since I admired the French wallpaper at the museum of Andrew Jackson's home, the Hermitage, depicting the life of Odysseus's son, Telemachus. Odysseus is the model for a thousand sea wanderers. Trying to return home after the Trojan War, Odysseus lands his boat on an island where the nymph Calypso lives. He stays with Calypso for years, and they're not doing a Homeric study group. An empty boat can mean its owner has found something better to do.

Like every good artist, Miller looks at artists from the past, in her case Albert Pinkham Ryder, whose retrospective at the New Bedford Whaling Museum I reviewed last year, and Turner. Ryder painted *The Flying Dutchman*, the classic ghost-ship story. Miller, I learn, loves Coleridge and read "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" to her boys when they were young. That mix of tense, cryptic calm, outright danger, the supernatural, and the macabre beats *Horton Hears a Who*.

Left: Sue Miller, *In the Intervening Years*, 2009–12. Acrylic on paper.
Right: Sue Miller, *In a Way*, 2011–12. Acrylic on paper. (Photos courtesy of John Colan)

Miller painted a group of small works in the late Aughts about grief. *Depths I* and *Depths II* show shadowy figures somewhere but not here and now. She's not religious but believes that energy inherent in human life doesn't evaporate after death. Death converts it into something. *In the Intervening Years* and *In a Way*, both around 8 by 8 inches, imagine how that energy looks. Under thick, layered acrylic are old letters, in this case letters from a loved one who died. Sometimes Miller paints over old nautical maps.

What to make of this? Words — and voices — from the past don't disappear. Memory gives them a second life. We can respond, or tease meaning, as much as we want, but the other side's elusive, and it's already gotten the last word. Miller paints most of these words over, so the bits we can read are now ambiguous. And nautical maps? Obscured, they don't help.

Sue Miller, *Lacuna*, 2014–20. Acrylic, wood, fabric, linen. (Photo courtesy of John Colan)

Lacuna, painted in the late Aughts, is made from acrylic, wood, and fabric. This and other paintings are dense and layered. Her paint's viscous. Her handling isn't gestural or fast. Her layering is deliberate but made to look like layers accrued over time. All of this layering antiquated a picture. I think of old Roman or Greek cities, or of Jerusalem, with layer upon layer of history beneath what we see today. *Lacuna* is one of the most abstract things in the show, but it's still representational. The picture starts with a sail, a square sail of Viking ships.

Sometimes Miller starts her paintings with a grid, or a geometric shape. She then obscures it. The grid is an essential tool for much Modernist painting, but worship it too much and the artist rejects nature, the grid's antithesis. Miller's art is never easy and always deep. She was an art-school teacher for years. Like every good teacher — and artist — she leaves lots to be deciphered on our own.

Left: John Walker, *Seal Point Series #V VIII*, 2007. Oil on bingo card. 7 1/4 x 5 1/2 inches.
Right: John Walker, *Seal Point Series #091*, 2005. Oil on bingo card. 7 1/4 x 5 1/2 inches. (© John Walker, courtesy of the Alexandre Gallery, New York, N.Y.)

Walker's 83, too, born in Britain, but he has lived, taught, and painted here since the '60s. He's been in Maine for years, in tiny South Bristol, a narrow, vertical piece of land that seems to dangle over the ocean, its contours irregular and with countless inlets. *From Low Tide to High Tide* is about Walker's Maine, and it's a Maine that most visitors never see. It's about his home for the last 20 years but also his childhood home in the U.K.

Walker paints seascapes, but he prefers to paint during low tide. High tide's glorious and when the sea seems full, all-powerful, and complete. Low tide reveals. It reveals a living world of critters and crawlers and new shapes in the mud crafted by the sea as it recedes. Predator seagulls swoop. There's yucky seaweed. The scene, hardly scenic, smells, too. It's a raw smell, pungent and sickly sweet. All of this isn't conventionally beautiful but, for Walker, it's a painter's joy. Most of the pictures in the show are low-tide, mud scenes.

Miller fits in the American seascape tradition. The giants in that world are the early ship painters such as Thomas Chambers but, closer to our time, Ryder and Winslow Homer. Walker's foundations are Constable and Turner. Both were gestural painters, sometimes wildly so. Like Constable's cloud studies, Walker does close-ups of eddies where mud and sea gunk and crabs mix and move.

In Miller's world, time slows. In Walker's it accelerates. Time for both isn't clock time, a modern device to regulate, but nature's time.

Many of the works in the show are what's called bingo-card pictures. Walker started doing them about 15 years ago. They're heavily impastoed paint on old bingo cards. In some of the *Seal Point Series*, from 2006 and 2007, the numbers, grid, and decorative border are barely visible but definitely there. More than Miller's old nautical maps and letters, the bingo graphics provide structure. They're 7.5 by 5.5 inches but seem monumental.

Walker joins Picasso and many other painters in calling oil paint "colored mud," so from low-tide mud, Walker makes art using viscous paint. His bingo-card pictures are also tributes to his father, who fought in the British army in the First World War. He was there, on the battlefield and in the trenches, during the Battle of the Somme. Walker believes that his father returned a deeply damaged man, not so badly damaged that he couldn't raise a family but strange and insular. "Bingo" is what some say when someone else has gotten something right.

As a game, though, it's about randomness. Much as nothing is clear in the mud, in bingo we can't predict anything. What happens is governed by the luck of the draw.

Left: John Walker, *Untitled*, 2007. Oil on canvas. (Photo courtesy of Doug and Betsy Anderson)
Right: John Walker, *Sea Cake II*, 2004. (Photo courtesy of the Ogunquit Museum of American Art)
(Courtesy Ogunquit Museum of American Art)

Untitled, from 2007, and *Sea Cake II*, from 2004, are big paintings. *Sea Cake II* is 86 by 68 inches. As paintings go, they're Wagnerian. Walker's handling of paint is that dramatic.

Both exhibitions look good. French is experienced, having been director of the Danforth Museum, a small American gallery with an art school in Framingham outside Boston. The Ogunquit Museum has a new curator, too. The arrangement in both is nice.

Both have clear, succinct introductory wall panels and not much other curatorial verbiage. This is good. I see too many exhibitions where preachy, narcissistic curators hijack the art on behalf of their dumb causes. For the Miller and Walker shows, though, French's catalogue essays are so good that I would have used artist statements, not with every object but with groupings here and there. Both artists are articulate, and French's essays are as incisive and comfortable as the best extended interviews.

Without reading the book on Walker, for instance, I wouldn't have known about tidal mud's links to the mud in the trenches. Without the essay on Miller, I wouldn't know the lush anecdote about Coleridge. One of the chapters in my dissertation was about Coleridge. He needs to get more ink.

There's a lot on view, too, in the museum, which could be a bad thing. I would have ditched the Jim Morin exhibition. He's the editorial cartoonist for the *Miami Herald*. I love editorial cartoons, once much-dreaded or hungrily awaited, depending on whom the reader hoped to see skewered. Morin is a landscape and seascape painter, too.

He says his cartoon and painting styles are intertwined, but we don't see or learn how. One problem here is his show is too small, as are the Walker and Miller shows. Losing one would have allowed the other two space for more art and further development of intellectual themes.

Marsden Hartley, *Lobster Pots and Buoy*, 1936. (Museum purchase, 1958)

The Ogunquit museum springs from the town's history as an art colony for seascape painters starting in the late 1900s and continuing into the '20s. There's a big gallery on the art colony and also on the museum's early collecting. The place embraced seascapes but also American Modernism. There are great things by Marsden Hartley and John Marin, both Maine-based, but also Mark Tobey.

For Saturday, I'll write about Bernard Langlais (1921–1977), a Maine original whose house, studio, and crazy outdoor sculpture park in Cushing, Maine, near Rockland and Wyeth country, are essentials in understanding Maine art. There's no one like him.