

Judy Millar

The Future and the Past Perfect

2 March – 19 May 2019

Exhibition texts

The exhibition *The Future and the Past Perfect* offers insight into Judy Millar's oeuvre over the past 40 years. Born in Auckland in 1957, today she is considered New Zealand's most important contemporary painter, and her fascinating work is among the central contributions to current painting.

Her paintings are created in a process of subtraction. The canvases lying on the floor take on gestural traces of painting by removing the applied paint using rolls of fabric and squeegees. The transparent gestural movements depict the artist's body and are the central pictorial element of Judy Millar's art. In a way, her work represents the reversal of traditional painting, similar to the negative of a reversal film.

The result is abstract pictorial spaces of great dynamism and expressive gesture. The traces are abstract, but in their fragmented form they can easily be read figuratively, opening up a rich field of association. Some structures might recall ragged strands of velvet, microscopic images of tissue, late Renaissance prints with countless fine details, as well as surreal gardens or vegetative jungles. The way in which this energetic painting expands across the pictorial spaces she creates is one of the artist's central themes.

Room 1

The first room features recent works by Judy Millar. Created in 2017 and 2018, these paintings include numerous splintering and fraying traces of movement in empty colored pictorial spaces. They are very large-scale works that the artist developed in recent years, and they all have a very dynamic and expressive quality that draws the viewer directly into the picture. The three-dimensionality of a torn-open tangle of paint is strongly emphasized. Like a cyclonic vortex, it seems to float in a virtual space created with blue and red spray paint. On the other hand, what we see is simply paint that traces a temporal process and is nothing but a trace of color that brings the subject of time and the physical act of painting into the picture. Each work has its own dynamic, such as the spiraling shapes of the smallest, greenish-blue picture on the windowed wall, the thick bodies of paint in the painting *Promised* (2018), which also appears in the poster and as a three-part flag outside, and the explosive dissolution of a tangle in the painting on the front main wall.

Room 2

This series of controlled graphic works that were created in the early 1980s after Judy Millar graduated from the art academy in Auckland is surprising. The process of subtraction appears early in these polished diagrammatic grid structures. The works on paper were made using masking and adhesive tape cut with a sharp Japanese knife. The removed tape leaves torn-off spots on the paper and anticipates the painting that later developed in the gesture of taking away. The small inaccuracies in taping and cutting add their own dynamic to the picture, which breathes and always remains in motion.

Room 3

A large “conventional” painting with fine, overlapping traces of color dominates the third room. The bright colors and the traces of the painting process can be seen in parallel in the picture, so that the process and the pictorial effect are linked. A work of this size, spread out on the floor, can only be created by physically entering the picture. The physical presence of the artist is inscribed in the painting with direct smears, just as fingerprints and gestures at an arm’s length define the basic structure of the painting. The layering of colors is refined, since glazes, such as the light blue traces in the right part of the picture, do not lie above the gestural structure but below it. Only in the layering does an atmospheric pictorial space open in which one can immerse oneself endlessly and in which even the artist loses herself at moments. Of course, the extreme landscape format is immediately reminiscent of the Cinemascope format in film for infinite landscapes. The opposite portrait shows a dense color field with color accents, which at times lie above the gestural painting, and at others below it, and thus create a dense color space. The rough natural landscape on the coast north of Auckland, where Judy Millar lives and works part of the year in a remote nature reserve, has surely influenced the formats and atmospheric dynamic of her painting.

Room 4 (Skylight Hall)

The six large-scale paintings with irregular outlines are painted with acrylic on plastic tarps, and in their sketch-like form they refer to works that Judy Millar created in 2009 for the exhibition *Giraffe-Bottle-Gun* in the late-Baroque church of Santa Maddalena in Venice. The contours of the paintings are reminiscent of the three things mentioned in the title, which also shows Judy Millar’s sense of humor. Her art is always close to the viewer, whom she transports into unseen worlds while ironically referencing everyday life and its visual language. For the presentation on the occasion of the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009, Judy Millar printed her own pictures greatly enlarged on tarps and exhibited them as “shaped canvases” in the church. The artist is interested in large-scale paintings, especially the technical possibilities of reproduction in the contemporary advertising industry: she takes the measure of these powerful images from everyday life.

For the exhibition in St. Gallen, Judy Millar returned to these subjects as sketch-like memories. She is particularly interested in the process that takes place when revisiting her own compositions, and in transforming them through another technique, such as the shift to screen printing and another form of painting.

Room 5

This room focuses on variations of the color red, which are mainly evident in the flat paintings from 2002. The paint is removed from the canvas in large meandering loops and shows the dynamic of the process in all its fine details. Depending on the structure and the colored underpainting in acrylic, the pictures can be completely flat and thus concentrate entirely on the process of painting, or they can begin to create three-dimensional pictorial spaces through overlapping elements.

Room 6

Color, format, ground, and technique engage in a complex interaction in this room. What at first glance appear to be black-and-white landscape paintings actually have an underpainting in acrylic and natural zinc dioxide, which has a skin-like effect and thus lends the pictures an anthropological reading. Bursting heads and warped skulls are briefly visible in an exploding and condensing of shapes before becoming lost in abstraction. The allusions to archetypal images emerge schematically, only to disappear and leave the viewer disquieted. The large canvas in gold has a detailed layer of shimmering pigment that changes depending on the perspective. An expressive, abstract motif is superimposed on it, which originated as a small painting by Judy Millar, but here is executed in a black scaled version as a flat screen print. Thus, the painting is almost hermetically closed toward the front and pressed into a barely penetrable flatness. The two paintings *Ferryman* and *Split Ferryman* in the upper foyer focus on the uncanny nature of the picture in the same large format. *Ferryman* in a seductively shimmering violet refers to the mythical ferryman Charon, who transports souls across the river Styx in the underworld of Greek antiquity.

Judy Millar asks fundamental questions in her work. Her oeuvre is one of the most fascinating contributions to contemporary painting and is linked to the positions of Günther Förg, Katharina Grosse, David Reed, and Steven Parrino, whose works have been shown in previous solo exhibitions at the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen.

Galerie Mark Müller in Zurich has been showing Judy Millar's work regularly in solo and group exhibitions since 2004, offering a continuous look at the development of her oeuvre. We received our first painting by Judy Millar in 2008 for the collection of the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen. In 2011 and 2017, further acquisitions followed. We showed these paintings in various combinations in exhibitions of works from the collection. Thus, there has been a continuous engagement with the artist's work—a "trademark" of the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, which offers the public a coherent engagement with pioneering artists.

At the latest with her spectacular installation *Giraffe-Bottle-Gun* at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009, it became clear that Judy Millar is not only New Zealand's most important painter, but also represents an important voice internationally. Her large-scale, expressive paintings leave the protective space of the museum and take the measure of everyday urban settings with the expansive possibilities of painting, which can realize a different autonomous presence than video or photography, for example. Her gestural abstraction takes place with great energy, which makes visible in each moment the temporal aspect of the gesture in its direct vitality.

Due to the geographic distance, many of Judy Millar's works—especially those from the 1980s—have never been shown in Europe. Generous support for this exhibition project from Creative New

Zealand/Toi Aotearoa has allowed the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen to present a wide-ranging survey exhibition on Judy Millar for the first time in Europe. After years of intense development of her art in New Zealand, and partly in Berlin, it is the perfect time to combine these two branches of her outstanding oeuvre and offer an overview. Judy Millar's art, along with the cultural heritage of her homeland, fits into contemporary global art in a very specific way. New Zealand's generally distanced perspective on avant-garde movements of the Western world is part of this.

In an interview with Justin Parton in the book *You, You, Me, Me* in 2010, Judy Millar said:

"Most spiritual paths are about seeing through the table and chair. I don't want to see through those objects, but I want to be able to hold something else at the same time that I acknowledge the chair's presence. . . . There's a point in the studio where I feel I have disappeared. Where a part of me shuts up for a while. . . . I do experience a sensation of stepping away, a feeling of detachment. Another feeling I have is of time becomes space all of a sudden. You're moving and doing, but clock time drops away. It's difficult to give these things words, but that's it crudely. I think these are the moments where you're able to still dualism and move into a place of total presence."