

Mindy Yan Miller

seeing and not seeing [and other recent works]

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Andrew Forster

Seeing and Not Seeing Nature: Recent Hide-works by Mindy Yan Miller

seeing and not seeing is a group of artworks engaged with the idea of nature in an era of intense environmental co-fragility within the endgame of colonial culture. That is to say: these works are about the basic crisis-questions of America.

Mindy Yan Miller's installations, sculpture and performative pieces investigate labour, identity, loss, and commodification through a source-practice involving meaning-laden materials combined with actions of repetition and pattern making. She has worked with used clothing, melted fabric, human hair, Coke cans and, for the work in this exhibition, cowhides. The work in this exhibition is part of a new body of work involving hides as primary material. For *seeing and not seeing*, industrially produced cowhides are the basis for Yan Miller's working processes involving cutting, shaving, perforating and other pattern-making interventions in artworks which are displayed both frontally (as hanging wall-works) and horizontally (as table-works).

Seeing and not seeing is an encounter both with nature and with the human manipulation of nature (that one could call world-design, or designed world) in the form of the food industry, of which they are a by-product. There is nothing more evocative of a 'nature' for humans than the animals with whom we share space or environment, which exist at our scale, and whose style of movement is biologically and neurologically so close to our own. Animal skins are a flattened form, derived from, or expressing, the full living form. They are shapes which are as primal a part of human image-making as we can imagine – outline drawings from the prehistoric survival-hunt as proto-art or proto-ritual practice. These very contemporary manifestations of material meaning are an engagement with the idea of nature in an era of intense environmental co-fragility within the endgame of colonial culture. That is to say, they are about the basic crisis-questions of America.

These two lines of thought (nature and the collapse of America) might seem grandiose conjectures about work whose making seems to be quite simple. On the level of informational 'content' these works seem silent or deliberately empty (maybe one could forget it all and dwell quite happily in their beauty). The artist would probably refuse a conventional idea of content defined as a bunch of informational language or expressed feelings to be taken out of the container of the artwork, as if to satisfy tick-boxes in a grant application. That is an idea of meaning as 'content' that infects us from the information and entertainment industries – our finger-swiping access to the world of consumable outcomes. If we have in Yan Miller's work something of a parable about the food industry (which is the origin of these transformed skins) we begin by recognizing that



Mindy Yan Miller. *seeing and not seeing* (2019-20) - installation, Estevan Art Gallery and Museum, + detail (photo: Gabriela Garcia-Luna, courtesy of the artist)

the communication syntax (the meaning-delivery) of the information, entertainment, *and* food industries must all be very similar. They exist in semantic co-dependence. Perhaps, in our day to day, so do we.

To use gestures of making as a way to unfurl other ways of meaning, to speak of what cannot yet have language, or has been forgotten, or is a counterfactual possibility, is something that compels me about some art practices. I describe this, intentionally naively, as clairvoyant practice. Some art practices are clairvoyant in that they make apparent how changes in social meaning takes place.¹ The physical gestures of a practice are a loosening of the thread of accepted meaning to allow other possibilities to be seen. Yan Miller's work in this exhibition does exactly that for me. We are getting (a little) outside of language, or jostling language to accommodate something unknown into its syntax. We begin with a particular material (these hides) which themselves physically carry the load of human intervention, violence, and manipulation (from the farm, to the packing plant, to the tannery). This artist adds a few simple physical gestures, even rhythmic gestures (I see this making as a form of song), which can hardly outweigh what has already occurred, but which turn our thoughts from passing over what is given in this material to a deeper meditation on it. I will sketch-out a bit these two possible directions of meditation – nature and America – before coming back to how they are going on for me in *seeing and not seeing*.

Nature: A Question. Re-defining or re-finding the natural involves re-understanding the place of nature in relation to the designed world. If clairvoyant practices of art could have a practical vocation in relation to present-day crisis – literally, that they could be of service – it may be in understanding the conventional sense in which we use the idea of nature to connote a surround to our designed world. This world is a temporally, spatially, and materially specific place of our own making. What is the *form and function* of nature in this world, to borrow architecture's disquieting design analytic? How does nature crop up in the designed world? Art historian David Summers suggests that real space must always be considered as a plural – 'real spaces'. There is no singular 'real space' but there are many 'real spaces' drawn up by and around artifacts in their different formats. The space of a culture is the space which its 'made-things,' its artefacts, allow or afford. Bruno Latour (in *The Politics of Nature*, 2004) insists that the same is true of nature. We must only speak of *natures* in the plural, in the same way we speak of a plurality of cultures. Summers' and Latour's demands are related. Nature is not a world unifying singularity, not at all a model of the 'natural' juxtaposed to the 'artificial' (a binary invented by artificial intelligence visionary Herbert Simon) or a human 'world' juxtaposed to a natural 'surround' in the manner of content and container that technocratic and some environmental thinking seems to prefer – a binary we might mistakenly try to reconcile through a truce with ecology.

French philosopher Bernard Stiegler, who died during this Covid year, suggested our thing-world of "organized inorganic matter," fundamentally determines how we experience time and space. Is this time and space *our* nature among a plurality of possible natures? A place among possible places? Stiegler suggests that our ongoing organization of matter, our technicity, is both remedy and poison with which we must constantly reckon. Focusing practices of art on the grain of this designed world can be a making apparent of the nature of our nature. Some clairvoyant practices make what disappears appear, as a service to our knowledge of thing-world and nature. In a recent book, Montreal philosopher David Morris elaborates an approach to nature as working "to suspend our urge to directly describe nature, *as reflecting ideas we bring to the table*, and instead lets us be oriented by nature as challenging our conceptual and descriptive proclivities. Nature thus clues us in to critiques of our idea of Nature" (D. Morris, *Developmental Ontology*, 2018, my italics).

Radically simple practices of art like Yan Miller's work in this exhibition incorporate this same 'orientation by nature.' Describing their simplicity may require complex language but the gestures that are involved are everyday gestures tuned to putting stress on the syntax of the everyday. They 'sort out' the everyday. They

1. This idea of the clairvoyance of some art practice as a unique nexus of "doings and sayings" is borrowed from practice theorist Theodore Schatzki.

are clairvoyant practices as art practices that seek to make the ways of ordering of the designed world more apparent. This conjecture suggests an affinity on my part to this figuring out of *how* nature crops-up, both as a rich philosophical line of enquiry and in its everyday importance for deepening an understanding of how political, financial, cultural, and knowledge institutions all represent nature in explicit relation and service to themselves. Morris' 'orientation by nature' points to a more complex call to nature where, beyond the screen of our habits, we attempt to sense what there is that gives rise to such human and other natures.

America the Beautiful Crisis-Question. This all hints that the meaning of things, especially humanly organized things, is also the source of meaning in the artworks in this exhibition as an engagement with the idea of nature and its corresponding realm of organization, our culture. In an era of intense environmental co-fragility and within the endgame of colonial culture we find ourselves in crisis. We may fear that the fraying of climate stability and the unravelling of the world-dominant cultural invention that is 'America' has put us in an un-survivable situation. One definition of crisis is that it is a precipitous moment where we cannot see the form of things beyond. We cannot see the future. As I threw out in the second paragraph, the crisis of weather and the crisis of systemic violence as colonialism are the fundamental crisis-questions of America. Maybe we should just name this crisis-complex 'America.' Maybe artworks and other yet un-invented practices can help us navigate the membrane between this all-too-known and the unknown, as a form of coping. These cowhides are a physical manifestation of this surface – the smooth skin we draw over nature through our technical and social processes to make our world. This artist's engagement with these skin surfaces is an attempt to understand and articulate the resonances which run through them rather than to read the formed/informed surface as it is given to us – to sense and to sort what is *seen* from what is *not seen*.

America is also the name for the European conquest of these continents. The conquest and its consequences were, and are, generated here. It's an American thing, not a 'from elsewhere.' It is the substance and syntax of this place (and it comes with some great tunes and some great inventions and some great technology that we all embed our identity in). It is a layering resonating with violence, the violence of the theft of land, the violence of slavery, the violence of military dominion, the violence of capitalism and the free market, the violence of industrial agriculture and resource extraction. To scratch the surface is to uncover the violence between the layers of high comfort. In the preface to Andrés Ajens' *Poetry After the Invention of América*, Montreal poet Erin Moure (with Forrest Gander)² notes Ajens' assertion that "our representational systems have often become machines for exterminations" and that a poem in *América* is "an instability that might be likened to finding the faces of others in your mirror, faces you touch when you touch, and see yourself touching, your own face." Poetry in Adjens' *América* is an instability, an impossibility, in the frame of the institution of literature that is the "West of Conquest." Again, isn't this far too much to ask of these modest art works, these hides? Yes... And no, not at all.

These hides are the skin of nature. At the prehistoric rock art site in the Côa Valley, Portugal and many other places, outline drawings of animals are incised into the rock. Conjectures abound as to what these drawings meant to the humans who made them. The simplest might be that they are a record of, or a rehearsal for, an animal encounter. A real-live encounter or an encounter of the imagination – or the connection or bridge of imagining between the two. So the labour of Yan Miller's patterning of these animal hides is a connection to animal being, to the conception of nature as a first-thing. ***These hides are the skin of America.*** An abiding myth of America (obviously untrue, if one even has to state it) is that the wild bison of the prairie gave way to cattle and crops as the first step in the industrialization of food in North America. This is also the first step towards consumer culture (towards the *Amazon*, if a corporation could ever be more aptly named!). The one-on-one violence of the hunt gives way to the mass violence of the abattoir and the industries of meat and leather. It is no accident that one pop-culture cipher of individual freedom in America is the smooth black

2. Preface by Erin Moure and Forrest Gander for the English edition of Andrés Ajens' *Poetry After the Invention of América* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2011)

leather jacket. It is also no accident that a pop-culture cipher of hippydom and the appropriation of the indigenous is the softer, more 'natural,' leather fringe jacket. The labour of patterning and incising in these art works touches this undertow of violence while caressing the reassuring beauty of its surfaces. Neither is truer than the other – violence coinhabits with beauty. We should not be afraid.

From the advent of television, we have been watching animal shows. They were invented in the era when America controlled the world, and we still watch them in the era when 'nature itself' seems to be at risk as a result. We consume the animals and at the same time we are fascinated by their lively movement and behaviour, so identifiable with our own, similar to, but different from our neurological ordering. This seems deeply normal. But it is also a witnessing of something radically in crisis, perhaps explicitly hidden by our primal connection to living bodies in movement. Last year, the meat packing plants of North America were themselves an apex point of cases in the Covid pandemic. In those factories migrant contract workers, refugees and recent immigrants were at the front line of feeding us, we who can de-connect from the process. Perhaps, if not modern-day slavery, this is evidence of the perennial shunting-off of the visceral and flagrant cost of comfortable living. Is ALL THIS too much to ask the works in this exhibition to respond to? Again, the answer is yes, of course. I'm so sorry. But these works of *seeing and not seeing* are a special sorting out of the everyday – what is *seen* and *not seen*. These skins are an inseparable surface between (or is it 'of?') nature and culture – a membrane that the attentive and laborious gestures of Yan Miller's artistic process of re-patterning seek to bring into the visible. They are a coping with the state of things and rehearsal-gestures for repatterning that state.

(Andrew Forster, curator)

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