

## *Intuitive Geometry and the Elegance of Ordered Pattern in the Work of Brad Miller*

*Submitted by Jo Lauria, April 1, 2011*

The always unpredictable and often fascinating nature of the evolution of organic structures and the natural rhythms of growth have been the center of Bradley Miller's thinking and art making for more than thirty years. In this extensive survey, the Los Angeles-based artist reveals a profound curiosity about the physical world and an enduring passion for the complexity of nature's rational order. Included in this exhibition are 25 wood panel "burn" drawings, 19 ceramic platters and bowls, and 4 ceramic wall sculptures, most completed in 2010 and 2011. These recent works evidence Miller's unique investigations of this unexpected realm for expression-- archetypal patterns operative in the Universe.

Considered collectively, Miller's work focuses on the geometries underlying the physical world and how those geometric patterns define growth and expansion. Comprised of primary patterns based on the shapes of ovals, spirals, zygotes and concentric circles, the patterning in Miller's pieces is determined either according to "close packing systems" or "dendritic systems." The forms embellishing the ceramic platters and bowls are examples of the system of "close packing": the carved ovals are arranged in the most economical way to fill the space, creating a design that replicates patterns of organic and inorganic growth structures as found in seeds, atoms, and bubbles. The basic concept of dendritic, or branching systems, extends to both the physical systems of branching as articulated in the human body (i.e., the circulatory system or the branching pathways of the brain through which synapses travel), and the virtual systems as realized in the Internet, a system encompassing seemingly limitless digital branching connections.

The patterns rendered in the "burn drawings" and the exuberant forms of the ceramic wall sculptures are the result of Miller applying the dendritic principle of branching to different types of materials and processes: burn markings on wood and clay-shaping. In many of the wood panels, the branching system follows the symmetry of a binary pattern, branching in polar directions from a central axis. In the wall sculptures, the branches grow outward from a center core or nexus, extending in multiple directions formed from each new juncture. In sum, these works are based on modularity, repetition, symmetry, and seriality. These characteristics are also the guideposts of minimal art, but in the hands of this artist they take a different turn: Miller employs modularity, seriality, repetition and the deliberate presence of the hand as a springboard to create works that are viscerally commanding, palpably tactile, and channeled by intuitive order, rather than intellectual or rational order.

Delving even more deeply into the conceptual, Miller perceives the evolution of his career as a studio artist as following a branching system writ large. As the artist sees it, he has tracked on

his ideas quickly, drawing from the same source material. As if looking at a navigational chart, Miller imagines a dendritic system overlaid on his career. What he sees are passageways forking to diverse roads of explorations, leading him to engage with visual vocabularies ranging from geometric to biomorphic and abstract.

For Miller, the act of “making” empowers him to understand universal structural systems. Process is integral to the meaning of his work; it provides a visual and tactile experience and is in keeping with his own embrace of the handmade and the imperfect. The artist believes it would be too complex to draw these archetypal patterns or fully fabricate them in a representational way. Further, Miller views every drawing and each ceramic sculpture as a leap of faith: when he begins he doesn’t know where the piece will end. For Miller, there is no end-game in sight as he doesn’t nail down his artistic vocabulary—he leaves it open ended—so the viewer can travel the pathway of discovery with him.

In the burn drawings, Miller reworks the panel surfaces repeatedly by sanding them down. He then adds more pigment and more patterns, and may decide to sand again, removing more from the surface. The process is additive and reductive—adding and subtracting color and pattern almost ad infinitum. Miller feels the piece generally gets better with repeated reworking, but admits that at times it is difficult to know when a piece is truly completed. When the artist is questioned on the subject of “completeness,” he likes to reply with a quip from the legendary Peter Voukos, who responded to this question, “A piece is finished when someone takes it out of the studio.”

Miller’s interest in realizing organic forms in a tactile material led him to clay. Particularly in the wall pieces, one can see the artist has grafted his own aesthetic language onto this natural material, creating sculptural objects with stunning formal beauty. In each work, the module is a given, as modularity is fundamental to how structures are formed everywhere, on every scale: in the realms of the organic, galactic and nuclear.

To create a wall sculpture, Miller begins with a small modular form modeled in an elegant biomorphic shape. He then sands the clay to create a pristine surface that invites the subtle gesture: the volumetric structures of the modules are amplified by their overall “whiteness” and their smooth, rounded curves make them animate. They seem to dance and undulate when light passes over them. Miller multiplies and connects these modular forms, orchestrating a fluid synthesis, until they extend further into the arena of abstraction. The sculptural space claimed by the modular pieces anchored to the wall engenders the gap for the intellect and the sensory to mingle. Ultimately, their distinctive visual language has the power to alter a viewer’s perception of nature.

To comprehend the wood panel drawings requires a bit of mental dexterity. One can perceive these “burn drawings” on plywood as the nexus between painting and sculpture. Miller’s foray into the world of the two-dimensional began when he was building his ceramic studio in Venice and didn’t have a space to work with clay. He crossed over into the realm of “flat art” when he began drawing on paper, and then quickly leaped to the next phase of burning the paper. This process soon led to burning marks on the birch plywood. The artist inscribes these surfaces with the non-referential imagery of geometric shapes interrupted by burn marks. The burn marks are randomly placed along the geometric lines, and more marks are torched outside and inside the lines, until the geometric pattern is intervened, confounded, and obscured.

For the concentric circle pieces, Miller begins with a compass and pencil and draws a symmetrical series of circles. (The artist accomplishes this with the same compass set he has had since sixth grade). For the spiral images, he finds the middle of the panel and draws a vertical line. He then finds two points on either side of the vertical line to begin the spirals. Ultimately, the lines of the spirals intersect at the bottom of the panel, forming a heart shape, as seen in Turbinated (2010) and Rotators (2004). It is not coincidental that each of these titles refers to a wind turbine or vortex, as spirals imply movement, energy, and the cycling of life and time: Miller is keenly alert to the symbolic references associated with the spiral pattern.

In some panels the artist starts with an ordered pattern of burning, and in others his approach to mark-making is much more random and frenetic. The more burn marks Miller applies, the more chaotic the pattern becomes and the bi-symmetry of the design almost disappears. Varying the density and placement of the burn marks and juxtaposing structured pattern with randomness highlights the dichotomy between order and imperfection. To wit, the artist avers: "My intention is to permeate my work with these timeless and familiar symbols as they dance between order and chaos."

Like every potter worth his salt, Miller has chosen to celebrate the vessel, the most primal of his works included in this exhibition. On pondering this archetypal form—which Miller has done in abundance (nineteen vessels selected for this survey)—he has opted to emphasize its less obvious characteristics. Rather than spotlighting its metaphorical associations with the body, or its inviting containment of meaning, Miller has chosen instead to exploit the vessel’s structural form, its uninterrupted surface, for carrying ordered pattern: the platters and bowls offer a continuous surface, from interior to exterior, for carving patterns of close packing forms. Miller has purposely crafted the shape of the platters and bowls to be as minimal as possible, throwing their sculptural quality into high relief. The artist shapes the smaller forms on the potter’s wheel, and the larger ones he makes by forming clay slabs over drape molds. This allows Miller to sculpt the perimeter of the platters and bowls into the basic shape that mirrors the outer section of a sphere. In fact, there are several levels of “reflection” occurring in these

pieces simultaneously: the spherical shape of the vessels is repeated in the sphere-shaped carving patterns on the contiguous surface; and the “hallow” outline surrounding the hemispherical carved shapes and the glassiness of the glazed surface reflects light back to the viewer. (Miller achieves this reflective quality through multiple glaze firings and progressive sanding of the surface with diamond pads).

However, the artist—always in pursuit of the branching pathway—veers toward complication and subverts the reflective properties of these vessels by juxtaposing their “lightness” with their weight. Miller has rejected the time-honored pottery tradition of producing vessels that are thin-rimmed, delicate, and transparent. Instead, the artist has intentionally made the platters and bowls thick and heavy. In this way, he imbues them with the heft and sculptural weight of vessels that could be carved from stone. This is informed by his background in sculpture: Miller’s objective is to equate the vessel’s visual weight to its physical weight, thereby making it appear solid, immovable, and permanent. For yet another acute turn in a different direction, Miller perforates several of his platters and bowls, limiting their purpose. Through this act of piercing, the artist strips away the “bowl-ness” of the forms, negates the concept of containment, and challenges the viewer to consider aesthetics versus utility. It should be obvious, at this point, why Miller has favored including platters and bowls in the exhibition: he has discovered that the vessel is capable of carrying an entire Universe of ideas.

Miller sums up his creative motivations by quoting Buckminster Fuller: "It is one of our most exciting discoveries that local discovery leads to a complex of further discoveries." In other words, Miller’s inspiration to continue creating art is based on Fuller’s insight that discoveries are dendritic in nature and always lead to an ever growing expansion of knowledge. Like a tree whose roots and branches grow outward over time, this survey illuminates a slice of time in the development of Brad Miller’s work.

**Jo Lauria** is an independent art curator and writer based in L.A.