

September 23, 1999

## STEVE MILLER

### Seeing Through His Subjects

BY CARISSA KATZ

**T**he artist's blood cells contaminated with pollen, then exposed to the powerful lens of an electron microscope. Magnetic resonance imaging slices of his psychiatrist's brain. An M.R.I. of his mother's spinal column and hip joint. A collector's chromosomes. An X-ray of his mother's shoes, her purse, her suitcase. The mammogram of a friend.

The building blocks of Steve Miller's portraits are both coldly clinical and strangely intimate.

By exposing his subjects to M.R.I.s, X-ray machines, and CAT scans, drawing their blood for genetic testing and examination under an electron microscope, he reveals an inner world that is more about biology than it is about psychology.

#### Guests Sign In

"Everybody has to do something," the artist said over lunch at his Sagaponack studio, a slightly mischievous look in his eyes. Then he brought out a large, leather-bound book, many of its pages silk-screened with portions of the images that appear in his larger works.

"D.N.A. Studio Tour," it said on the spine. Eventually each page will include a bit of hair, fingernail clippings, perhaps a dab of blood taken from the people who visit his studio.

"What's it going to be?" he asked. With a small pair of scissors, he snipped a curling lock of hair from a visitor's head and taped it into the book.

#### Half Tones, Whale Bones

Mr. Miller's studio, a converted potato barn by the railroad tracks, once belonged to the artist Frank Stella. After renting the space for six years, he bought it from Mr. Stella in 1986 and, two years later, began living there.

The place is comfortably rough

around the edges. The signs of its former life as a working barn are still evident. Two wooden sailboards, a clue to another of the artist's passions, hang on the wall above a guest bed in the living area.

Large silk screens are stacked against one wall beneath a hand-painted color chart. Boxed paintings

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*A wedding portrait of two patrons includes images of his hips over ultrasound images of her ovaries and uterus.*

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and prints lean against another and in the center of the room a table is piled haphazardly with big half-tone negatives used to create the silk screen images. A few whale vertebrae lie on the floor at the other end of the table. Prints and paintings from several recent X-ray series are hung around the main room.

#### Today's Language

Among them are several pieces shown this summer in the window of Southampton's Saks Fifth Avenue, as part of the store's Project Art program. Each includes the objects a "fashionable" woman might surround herself with, exposed to X-rays, then recast in brilliant colors on canvas and paper.

Mr. Miller thinks of the Sagaponack studio as his "production facility," while his New York studio is for "research and development." In New York he has access to the high-tech services, like radiology, electron microscopy, and IRIS printing, that his artwork relies on.

When Mr. Miller began using computers in his work in the early 1980s, he was among the first wave of artists to embrace digital and computer-

altered imagery.

"Art has always reflected the language of its culture," he said. "Our culture today is digital and electronic."

#### Big Year For Dreams

Mr. Miller has a Web site, [www.stevemiller.com](http://www.stevemiller.com), through which cyber visitors can take a virtual tour of his Sagaponack studio and look at his artwork.

He's also working on another Web site based on an interactive CD-ROM he's developing with the artist Colin Goldberg. Called "dreaming brain," it will accompany a traveling exhibit of art about dreams that coincides with the 100th anniversary of the publication of Freud's "The Interpretation of Dreams."

"Dreams 1900-2000: Science, Art, and the Unconscious Mind" will open at the Equitable Gallery in New York in November.

#### Interactive Creation

"Dreaming brain" is a series of interactive quick-time virtual reality movies that allows the viewer to "construct your own exquisite corpse."

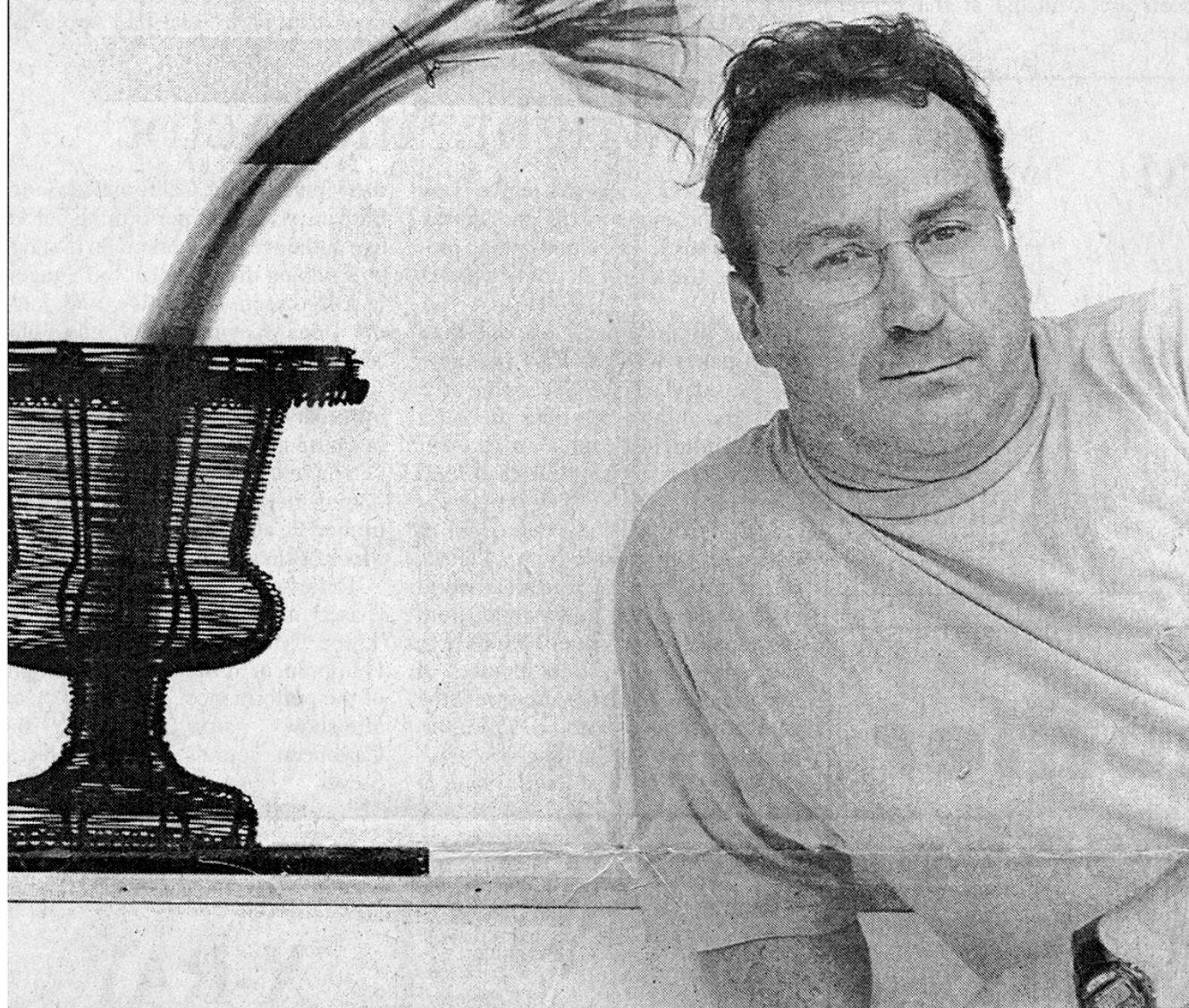
The dream begins in a universe containing seven planets which represent birth, childhood, art, nature, the appetites, vanity, and death. Most of the images were shot on the South Fork with a digital camera.

At each museum the dream exhibit travels to, there will be a flat-screen monitor and a shelf with a mouse on it, so people can "create their own dreams" after looking at artwork about dreams. The CD-ROM will be sold in a limited edition and a low-band version of the piece will be on the Internet at [www.dreaming-brain.com](http://www.dreaming-brain.com).

After several months working strictly in the digital media, Mr.

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STEVE MILLER







STEVE MILLER'S "Self Portrait Vanitas" includes silk-screened images of pollen spores in the artist's blood and an X-ray of his psychiatrist's oboe.

## Miller

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Miller is anxious to finish the project and spend the winter painting in Sagaponack. As savvy as he is about new technology, he still likes to blend his computer-generated product with silk screens and painting.

The artist grew up in Buffalo. After graduating Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude with highest honors in art from Middlebury College in Vermont, he spent two years at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown on a Hans Hofmann fellowship.

In 1975, he moved to New York City. A sculptor in college, he became an assistant to the sculptor Mark di Suvero when he first arrived, and before long started to paint.

### New Take On Painting

"At first I was making Abstract Expressionist paintings, like the whole world was," he recalled, "but I got kind of disenfranchised and started making movies after that." He did a movie about steam and another about water, showing his work on the independent film circuit. He also found jobs on commercial films.

Film, however, "wasn't immediate enough" for him. He missed pencil and paper, missed having a more active role in producing an image, and turned back to painting, searching for a new approach.

"There was this idea that the artist was the shaman, that he could reveal all these truths," he reflected. "I was looking for a piece of paint that I wasn't responsible for."

### Whose Image?

Mr. Miller started to use Rorschach tests in his artwork and was delighted with the results. He found the amorphous blots relieved him of the responsibility of content and the responsibility for the paint.

"Being responsible meant that then I was the voice of authority," he said, and he didn't want to be cast in that role. "With the Rorschach tests, everybody projected into them. I loved the idea of your experience, the experience of the viewer, being more important than my authorship."

He put the Rorschach blots on a computer, digitized and polarized them, and then silk-screened them onto canvas. "It was a total cop-out,"

he said with a smile, but the whole point, he added, was that "your experience has more validity than mine, at least collectively."

### Eye On Pathology

The beauty of the Rorschach test is that it forces the audience to look at its own psychological health. "If you're using it in forensic psychology," he said, "if, instead of a dancing bear or a butterfly, you see Hiroshima or bloody fetuses on the pavement, then it's going to work against you."

"It projects back on you so, it really looks at the psychological health of the culture."

That series sparked his interest in pathology and in the tests used to find diseases in the body, rather than the mind. "I started to think of culture as something that might be sick, and to look for metaphors for that."

### Inner Portraits

He used images of medical pathology, drawn mainly from textbooks, at first — a damaged heart, AIDS viruses, and cells. Seen up close or through the medical imaging systems, "they were just as mysterious [as the Rorschach tests] in that they were just as abstract."

And then, he began to use the tools of medical testing to make his own images for portraits. "It was a new way to take on an historically dead genre. . . to reinvent a genre that was marginalized by photography," he said.

In traditional Renaissance portraiture, the eyes were the windows into the soul, but with the new imaging tools, which had changed the entire concept of what a human being is, "we really have windows into the interior of the body," Mr. Miller commented.

### See-Through Subjects

With the help of a network of good contacts in the right places, he got access now and then to X-ray and sonogram machines, M.R.I.s, CAT scans, and electron microscopes.

A doctor in Paris "whose trip it was to connect artists with technology" helped him out at one point. His psy-

chiatrist, Dr. William Frosch, introduced him to a radiologist in New York. A friend from high school back in Buffalo had become a doctor and had his own M.R.I. machine.

His portraits literally saw through his subjects, getting inside of them in a way that traditional portraiture never had. A wedding portrait of two patrons, Jacques and Veronique Mauguin, includes images of his hips over ultrasound images of her ovaries and uterus.

### Chromosomes On Canvas

Mr. Miller convinced the French writer and art critic Pierre Restany to have his skull and hands X-rayed for another portrait, and placed images of his psychiatrist's M.R.I. brain slices over Rorschach tests for another.

Isabel Goldsmith, a collector who bought one of his pieces, asked him to do her portrait. The artist had her blood drawn, then asked someone to sneak it into a genetic lab. At the lab the nuclei were put into a bean culture, where they went through mitosis. The chromosomes were then photographed under an electron microscope at various stages of division.

The artist reworked these images on his computer, made a silk screen of them, and eventually did a chromosome portrait of Ms. Goldsmith.

"I'm pretty sure it's the first genetic portrait," he said, looking at a painting from that series on his living room wall.

### Fashion Accessories

In 1995, invited to be in an exhibit in Paris about the designer Roger Vivier, Mr. Miller looked into his mother's closet and discovered she owned a collection of Vivier shoes. He put the shoes on an X-ray machine and created a silk screen of that image, producing the first of many X-ray paintings of his mother's possessions.

He did an X-ray of her Chanel purse, keys and a comb visible within it, another of her Vuitton suitcase half unzipped with roses inside.

The brightly colored images are sleek and graphically clean, almost

commercial in their simplicity and attention-grabbing color. But, as with anything Mr. Miller does, there is another idea at work.

### Egyptian Tombs

"Fashion is the surface of culture and the surface of culture is what gets referenced in the media," he said, "but there's something beyond the surface. . . Maybe contemporary culture is about looking through things."

The shoe pictures led to a series of still lifes that turned the X-ray specs on the objects that his subjects surrounded themselves with.

"It was the Egyptian tomb idea," he explained. He moved from simple still lifes to variations on the baroque vanitas paintings. These showed wilting flowers, skulls, hourglasses, burning candles, and other objects that spoke of the fleeting nature of human existence and the nearness of death.

### Objects That Speak

"Vanitas were about wealth and power, but the Catholic church turned them into a morality play. . . Basically the vanitas said, you'd better be good because Santa Claus is coming to town."

In his digital 20th to 21st-century vanitas portraits, Mr. Miller reworked the baroque themes using a vocabulary of digital and virtual imagery: his blood, DNA, blood vessels, X-rays of musical instruments, hourglasses, flowers, and candles. The blood vessels often look like gathering storm clouds in the vanitas pieces.

His choice of media makes his work very expensive to produce, but in recent years he's begun to work with Kodak, which gives him digital X-rays and forensic work, and General Electric, which gives him CAT scans and M.R.I.s.

"Basically, I trade art for access."

Although he acknowledges that conceptualism is one of the biggest issues in 20th-century art, Mr. Miller is reluctant to accept the label of conceptual artist. Still, he believes that "if you can keep the work alive after you've left the object, you're certainly helping things along."