

13 Alumni Artists



Middlebury College Museum of Art



Fig. 2. Peter Krashes. *Physical Therapy No. 2*, 1998. Oil on linen, 63 × 44 inches. Photo: courtesy of the artist

history of portraiture of one's lover, and understands that until recently this implied a man painting a woman's face or body: as if sexual difference were assured and not itself staged, constructed, somehow always in drag.

Steve Miller, finally, creates the bionic mother, viewing his mother through digital and electronic speech. Her boundaries are not fixed, and the phenomenology of the maternal henceforth exceeds its traditional surface or imaginary limits by having passed through so many X-rays, mammograms, sonograms, electron microscopy. The machine has intervened to prop up the maternal body and even to shoot through her accessories, as in the X-rayed *My Mother's Purse* (fig. 3). Oedipal

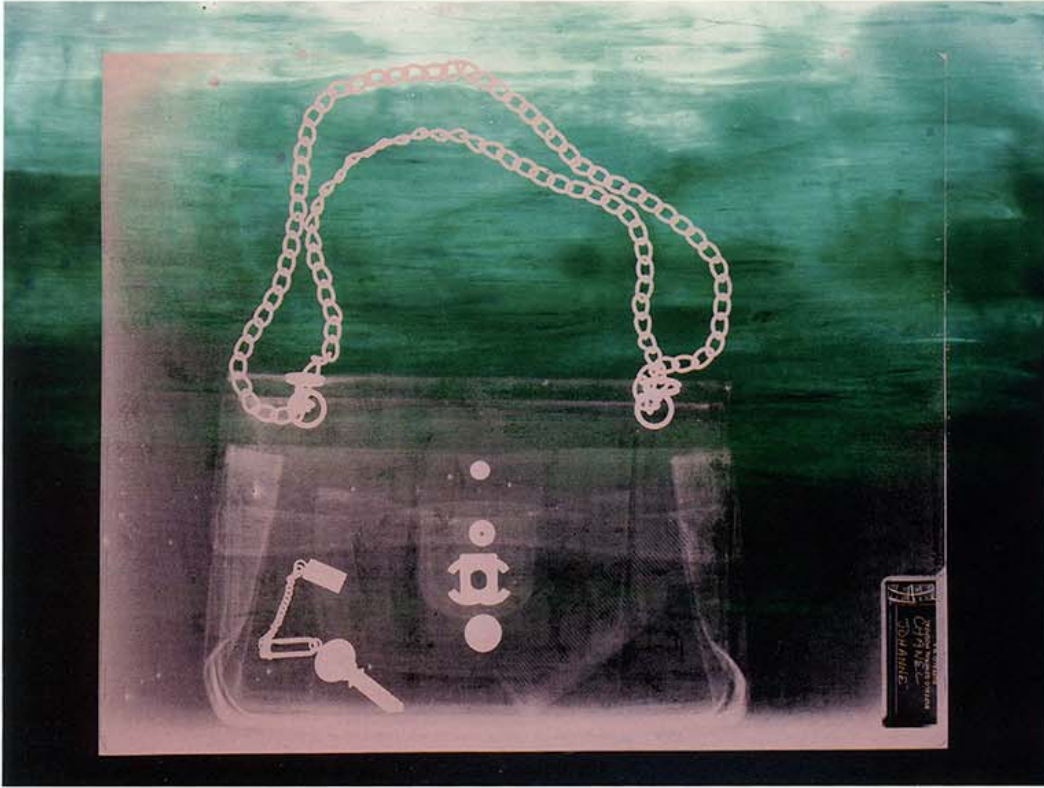


Fig. 3. Steve Miller. *My Mother's Purse*, Chanel, 1997. Silkscreen and enamel on canvas, 35½ × 46½ inches. Photo: courtesy of the artist

desire has been recircuited to penetrate her purse, rendering her belongings phantomlike and bare. Mother is exposed by equipment linked to surveillance and medicine. As with other objects that come under Miller's scrutiny, she has been probed and analyzed, sectioned and scanned, measured and standardized by the pressures of the technological grid. There is nothing merely "natural" about one's rapport to mother. As his body of work ceaselessly reminds us, *mater* is related to the materiality of the work, evoking its untouched matrix. Even the feminized violin case (*Self-Portrait Vanitas #96*) has been subjected to the dissecting intrusions of technology.

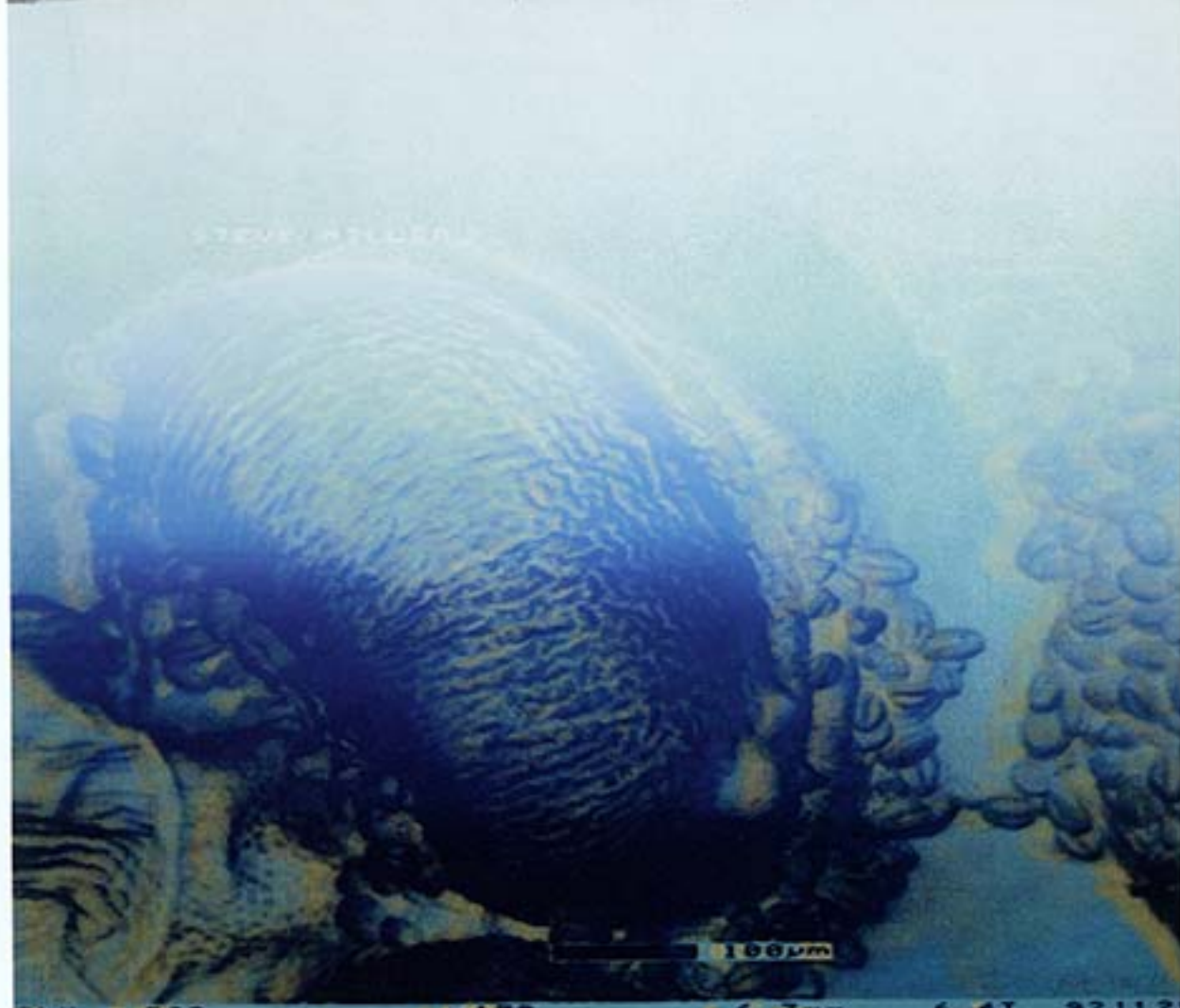
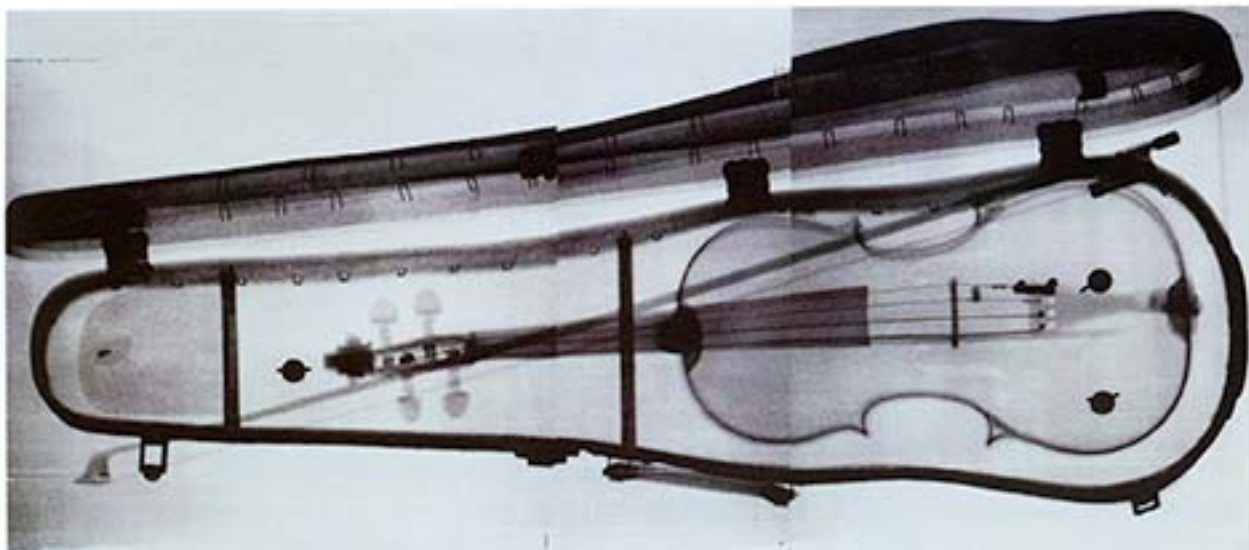
The medicalized gaze disrupts traditional and modernist figurations of the body, submitting human interiority to the calculative traversals associated with technology. It is not as though one could turn away from technology at will or zone its incursions to a circumscribed space, a comfortably sealed Elsewhere. Technology invades, supports, reveals the body, offering uncanny close-ups of the maternal, the

Steve Miller

Miller's *vanitas* self-portraits take their name from seventeenth-century paintings that represent the ephemeral nature of human existence. Through such symbols as a skull, an hourglass, wilting flowers, soap bubbles, musical instruments, or a candle burning low, the painter alludes to the transience of earthly pleasure and the brevity of our lives. While obviously indebted to this iconographic tradition, Miller has updated the imagery. Using the tools of contemporary technology to render body fluids – the element most characteristic of and essential to human life – his *vanitas* portraits include vaporous clouds of blood corpuscles (his own) and billowing swirls of pollen spores. X-rayed images of flowers and violins allude to his art historical sources. Miller has re-imaged the macrocosm by substituting au-

thentic documentation of his own personal microcosm. The numeric notation suspended in the ether of these composite images alludes to the precise frame of the film and the time of day, to a millisecond, on which it was exposed, further heightening our sense of the speed at which time moves on. Miller's enthusiastic exploitation of digital technology and the paraphernalia of the medical laboratory is countered by a healthy skepticism that the notion of progress is relative, value-laden, and perhaps like ourselves, dated.

Steve Miller. *Self-Portrait Vanitas #96*, 1999.
Enamel, silk screen, paper, 50 × 38 inches.
Photo: courtesy of the artist



0kV ESD x130 6.7mm 6.4T 92112