Book Review: Surfing the Cosmos by Steve Miller

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Surfing the Cosmos © Steve Miller.

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Surfing the Cosmos is a collection of Steve Miller's latest photographs built upon his enduring interdisciplinary interest in physics and aesthetics. From the abstract traces left by electrons, to the tangible, concrete wires that serve as the conveyor of electricity; from the organized antenna attached to the particle accelerator at CERN – the European Organization for Nuclear Research, to the entangled power grids that have become part of the urban landscape, Steve Miller has created a photographic dictionary centered on the theme of energy. The intention of the multidisciplinary photographic project is two-fold: to use photography to visualize physics, and to rethink physics as an aesthetic choice.

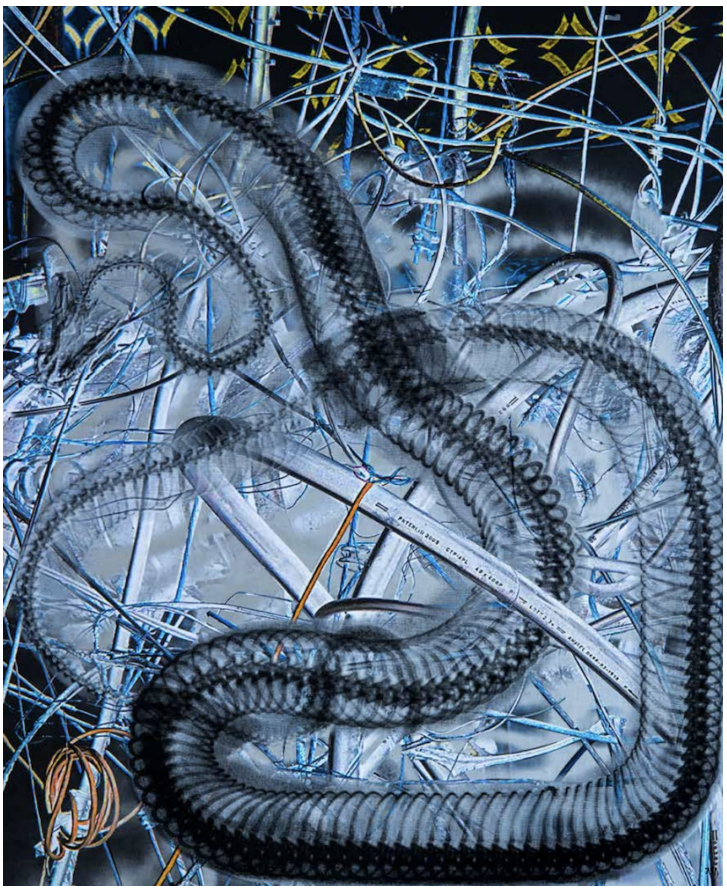


The opening chapter of Surfing the Cosmos was taken in Rocinha, the largest favela in Brazil, where swarms of intertwined electrical grids have scratched the sky. In Miller's lens, power grids imitate the wild lines in fauvist paintings, merciless, savage, tearing the background into pitiful patches. These photos channel our attention to the mundane objects that can easily pass unnoticed, and however unnoticeable, we are reminded that the landscape composed of grids has already become a hyper-structure of our ground, of our sky, of our habitat, and of a modern life.



After the visually striking overture, Miller's lens travels to CERN, the research organization near Geneva, the home to the world's largest, highest-energy LHC (Large Hadron Collider). Invited by the Theory Group at CERN, Miller was able to observe the scientific discussion and document the experiment in forms of photography and paintings. The ended result is a series of photograph-based paintings that overlay the different forms of expression for fundamental physics.

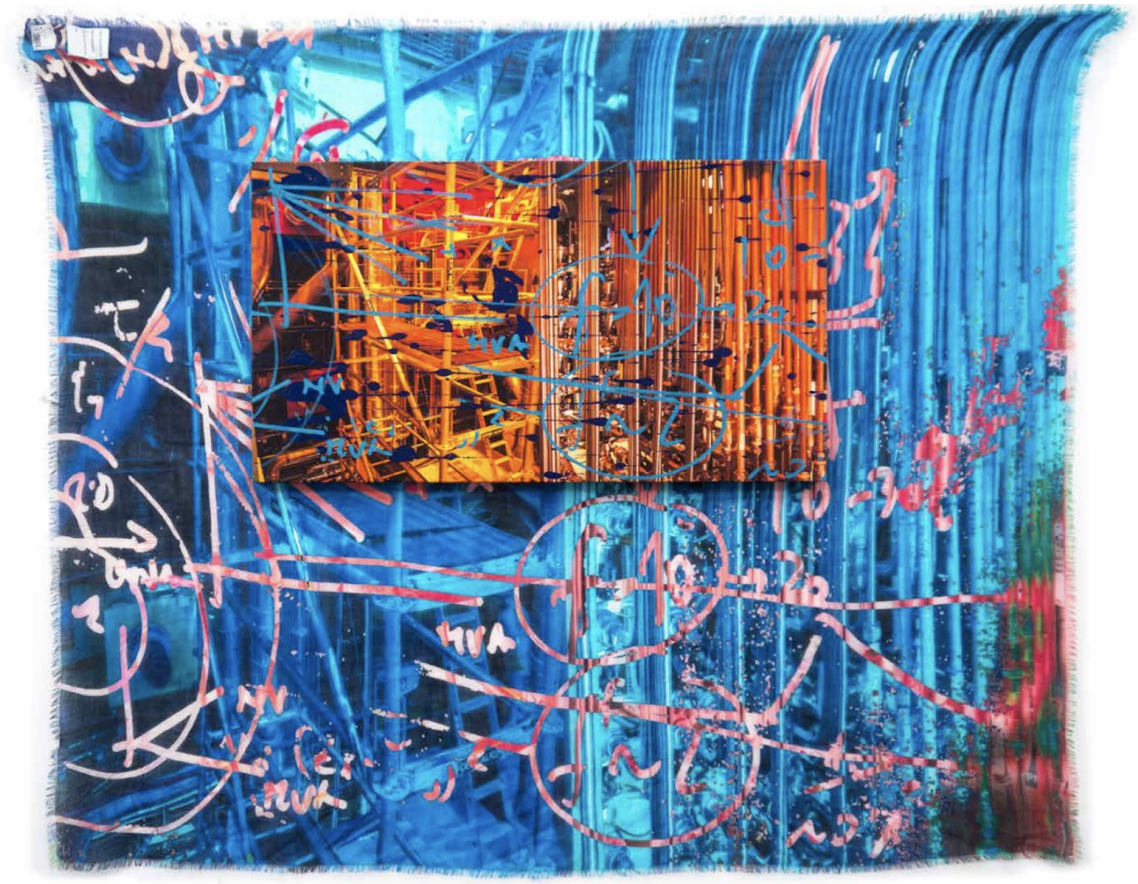
At CERN, Miller's vision is fascinated by the beautiful equations left on the whiteboard which bear a structural perfection that infinitely approaches symmetry. Another of Miller's favorite objects to observe is the gigantic instrument: the eight-story-tall atlas detector and a tremendous maze of computer banks. Miller's images have captured how the mechanical constructions have intimidatingly and meticulously extend on each direction, and this has given an endless visual depth to the photographs that resemble the imagination of a higher-dimensional space.



The research focus at CERN is to explore the composition and structure of basic particles, and for this reason, the key intellectual field remains at the invisible micro level. Luckily, what Miller captures in his photographs can be viewed as a macro resonance that brings the depth, the complexity of a microstructure to visibility. The macro construction of detector and computer maze is not only the experimental foundation for exploring particle's microstructure; they are, more excitingly, an apt metaphor, a prophecy of what we are about to discover. In this sense, Miller's art has predicted what physics has aspired but failed to do. That is to unfold the microstructure at the macro level, to give physics a visibility which allows for the entrance of aesthetic intuition.



“Scientists sometimes use aesthetics in defense of a theory”, physicist Arthur I. Miller thus stated in the introduction he writes for the book, illuminating the historical bond between physics and aesthetics. For years, Steve Miller has been dedicated to bond and working on science-based art. Surfing the Cosmos is his so far the most powerful visualization of the statement “science at its highest level may be indistinguishable to art”.



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