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## Enduring: The Paintings of Katie Miller



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Katie Miller was born in New Hampshire, USA in 1984, and grew up in Boca Raton, Florida and Sacramento, California. She decided to become an artist and taught herself to draw as a small child. Miller earned her BFA Magna Cum Laude in painting with a minor in art history from Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland USA in 2007. In the summer of 2006, she studied in Umbria, Italy, at the International School of Drawing, Painting, and Sculpture. Miller earned her MFA in 2011 from Hoffberger School of Painting, Maryland Institute College of Art.

Miller is a winner of the Wynn Newhouse Award and an individual artist grant from the State of Maryland. Miller's works are represented in The Rubell Family Collection, Miami; 21C Museum, Louisville; and many other private collections. She has been represented by CONNERSMITH in Washington, DC since 2010. She lives in Baltimore County, Maryland and works full-time as an artist.

Her current exhibition, 'Enduring,' is on view at CONNERSMITH Gallery in Washington, DC through May 31, 2013. Chen Si, a graduating MICA senior, conducted this interview

after working with Miller as a studio assistant.



Interview:

**Chen Si: What do you think of contemporary art?**

Katie Miller: Honestly, a lot of my very favorite artists have been dead for centuries, but what I look for in contemporary art is work that that appeals to me intellectually, emotionally, and visually. I like work that has a strong conceptual basis and communicates on multiple levels, while still being wonderful to look at. One artist whose work does this really successfully is sculptor Patricia Piccinini. I tend to be drawn to work that deals with the humans in some way and is influenced by art history and/or contemporary issues. Other artists I like are photographers Gregory Crewdson and Rineke Dijkstra, and painters Gottfried Helnwein, Jenny Saville, and Vincent Desiderio.

## CS: What was the most important thing that you learned at MICA?

KM: There are two. The first thing is that it while it is great to experiment and take feedback into consideration, it's also important to trust your instincts. I've always had an inclination to paint very "tight" and obsess over details. That's the way I drew as a kid. As an undergraduate at MICA, I was told by teachers, over and over again, to "loosen up," "be more painterly," and "use bigger brushes." I grew to internalize the idea that this style of painting was somehow better, and I tried to fight my detailed tendencies.

In my senior year I worked with Phyllis Plattner for my thesis, and she encouraged me to paint the way I really wanted to. Since then, my work has gotten more and more detailed, and I love it! The way I paint is really fun for me, the technique suits my themes and subject matter, and they play off of and inform one another. My gallery tells me that the way I paint details, particularly skin, is what sets my work apart from other people's. It was good for me to experiment with different painting styles in undergrad, and in fact I'd encourage all students to experiment widely! But I wish that I hadn't gotten the message that one kind of painting is wrong, and another kind is right. I eventually learned to trust my own instincts.

The other thing I learned in grad school, and that is that no matter what the show is, whenever you have a chance to exhibit your work, you should put all your effort into exhibiting your very best work, because you don't know who will see it. Never think, "Oh, it's just this little student show. It doesn't matter." It very well could matter a lot.



My first year at Hoffberger we were a few weeks away from the first-year show which is up at the same time as the MFA thesis shows. First-year MFAs typically put in one work. It's not a high profile show – the graduating MFAs are the stars. But I had an idea for a painting, and I wanted to start and finish it for the first-year show. It was a big 4 x 6 foot full-size portrait, which I hadn't done before, and I only had 6 weeks. I painted 12-15 hours a day, usually 7 days a week, even when I was sick, and I skipped out on crits and the NYC trip. Some of my classmates said, "why are you working so hard on this? It's just the first-year show. No one looks at it. Everyone else is just putting up whatever they already have in their studio." But I wanted THAT painting in the show, so I did it.

And that's how I was discovered by CONNERSMITH Gallery. Leigh and Jamie go to look at the MFA shows to scout for their yearly Academy group show of graduating area art

students, and they saw my painting, *Girl on Blue*, in the first year show, loved it, emailed me, and set up a studio visit. They invited me to show it and several other pieces in Academy 2010, all four of which sold before the show opened. *Girl on Blue* sold to a prominent private collection, which was an enormous honor for an unheard-of artist still in grad school. So what I learned is that hard work is worth it, and can pay off. You should always do your best and show your best work.



**CS: Why did you choose MICA as your BFA and MFA?**

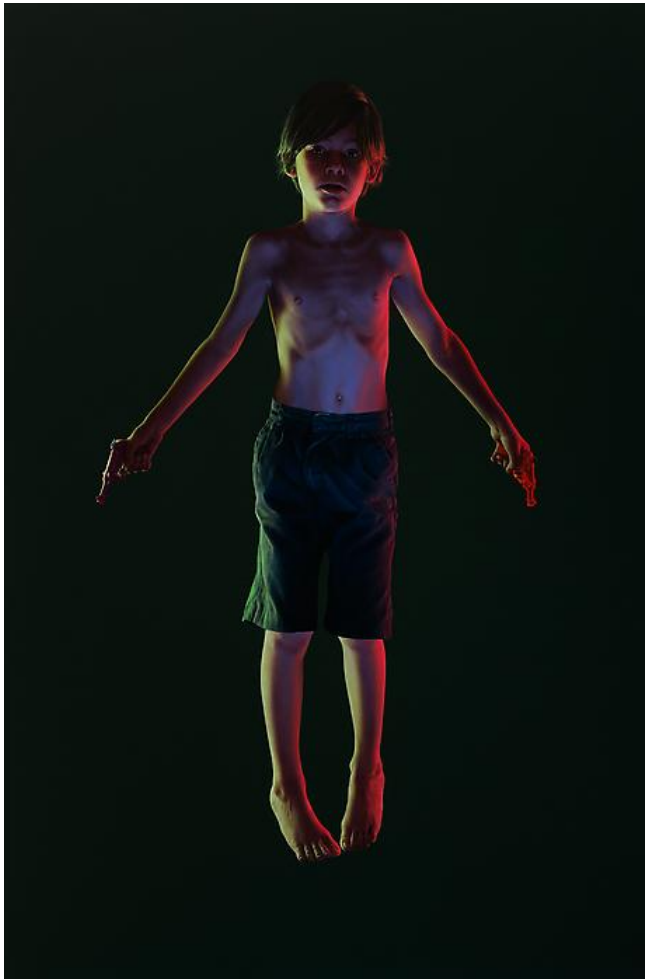
KM: I lived in California with my family in high school and as soon as I learned there were colleges just for art, that's where I wanted to go! I knew I wanted to be an artist from the time I was 5 or 6, and by high school I just wanted to do it full-time and was annoyed that I had to do other high school things, too. I visited the San Francisco Art Institute and loved the art school atmosphere. At first I thought I wanted to go there, but at the time they didn't have dorms or meals and I wasn't ready to be that independent yet!

I also looked at a bunch of universities and liberal arts colleges, but in general I wasn't impressed with the art being produced. So I started looking at art schools in other places. I think the MICA literature piqued my interest because it had dorms and

food and really good art in the catalog. When I visited, I loved the atmosphere. I liked the campus. The people were warm and inviting and both students and faculty were eager to talk to me and tell me they loved it here. And best of all, the work up in the galleries was by freshmen and it was better than the senior work at ALL the other schools I saw! I knew MICA was my place.

For my MFA, I was originally not going to look at MICA because I was told that it wasn't good to go to the same place twice. Phyllis Plattner, my senior thesis teacher, recommended that I take a look at The Hoffberger School of Painting, so I did. I liked the large private studios, and I found out that the director at the time was Timothy App, who I had worked with as an undergrad and liked. It was nice to already be familiar with the city and the campus, so I could just concentrate on my work. I also liked that Hoffberger was a small program at the time, about 14 people, all painters, but with a lot of diversity in the work being made. There was a sense of community

because even though we all had private studios, they were situated around a communal living/working space. You got to know everyone. I liked that.



**CS: And how did you take the next step after graduating from MICA?**

KM: Connersmith (then Conner Contemporary Art) put me in their Academy show in 2010 and then represented me. They gave me my first solo show a few months after I graduated, in September 2011. Then there were two art fairs, Pulse Miami and Volta Basel in Switzerland, along with the (e)merge fair they helped found in Washington DC. Then I spent the last two years working towards my solo show, Enduring, which is up this month until May 31.

**CS: What do you think is the important aspect to being an artist?**

KM: Well, I know that every artist is different, and works differently. Some artists can and do make successful work by just showing up

to the studio once in a while and puttering around, but I think that's likely the minority. I think for most artists, the value of hard work and putting in a lot of hours is one of the most important things. I know it is for me. My paintings take a LOT of work hours. I have to treat painting like a regular job and show up for work every day – only I don't get a salary, a retirement plan, or health insurance. Often it's a seven-day a week job.

In the past year, I took maybe two days off each month, if that, and I usually work more than eight hours a day. So that's hard. But if I didn't work that hard, I wouldn't be where I am now. I'm also starting to figure out how to optimize my time, by delegating tasks that don't absolutely need to be done by me, to other people. I started an internship program this year and host one or two MICA students per semester, once a week in my studio. They learn my painting techniques, and other tasks that go into creation, and help me create my work. It's worked out really well and I look forward to having more in the future.



The other important thing isn't something that the artist can control, but I think it's really hard to be successful without it. And that's the support of your family. I wouldn't be where I was now without the support of my family. It would be impossible. Again, some artists can make it without that support, but it is a lot harder to do it alone. I can't even explain all the ways my family has helped me and continues to do so, but I'm very grateful.

**CS: What is your day-to-day life like now?**

KM: Right now, I'm taking things easy because my show is up and I have no immediate deadlines on the horizon! I worked super hard for two years on this show, so I'm enjoying a bit of freedom and gaining my energy back. I'm slowly re-organizing and cleaning my studio and my office to make

them more efficient, learning how to use some new equipment, and best of all, quitting when I feel tired and doing what I want! I can see friends again! And read books and watch TV and go places and it's amazing! Very soon, though, I'm going to be back to work at making some new compositions in Photoshop, doing photo shoots with new models, and making more paintings from them.

My next solo show will be in another two years, and I want to get a head start. When I am in the beginning stages of working towards a deadline, I work 40-50 hours a week, still maintain a life, and tell myself it's a reasonable pace and that I'll be able to keep it till the end. Then about halfway through I realize that's not possible, freak out, and start working like mad until the deadline. Overall, I'd say an average day would be working about ten hours, and an average week would be working six days.



Some days I'm painting all day, some I'm doing a photo shoot or preparing for one, some days I'm working with images in Photoshop, some I'm doing prep work like gessoing or tracing. Then there is also photographing the finished work, which I do myself, and updating my website. Occasionally I'll have a workday dedicated to sitting around and thinking up ideas or trying to translate them into words, but those are rare. The vast majority of time is spent actually painting.