

Shelley Miller: *The Rise and Fall*

"Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible."¹

-J. Baudrillard

One could easily fill this space with a discussion of the various juxtapositions at work within Shelley Miller's installation *The Rise and Fall*, however, for the purpose of this short essay, I wish to focus on but one: the real vs. simulacrum. As proposed by Jean Baudrillard, the real has long been subsumed by simulacra and simulation – it has in fact become the *hyperreal*, something other than the real, but no less *true*. In this case, the simulations are immortal, in that they survive the actuality. This is where Miller's work brings us: into the space of the hyperreal where simulacrum no longer stands in for the real, but becomes the real.

"Once there lived in the Ardennes an old cook, to whom the molding of buildings out of cakes and the science of plastic patisserie had given the ambition to take up the creation of the world where God had left it..."²



As with Baudrillard's fastidious character who begins with creating buildings out of cake and ends with creating a world out of concrete, so too does Miller wish to create a separate world, one using the tools of a baker to render an alternate reality, a simulation of grandiose architectural design that is as much about process and production as it is about decoration and ornament. The colourful ornamental icing of earlier works, such as *Pipe Dreams*, has been replaced by the no less ornate appearance

of hammered aluminium, which in this case creates the appearance of a vaulted ceiling. This elusive structure brings several images to mind: first and foremost it recalls the high vaulted ceilings of a cathedral, one that is more Rococo than medieval in design. This illusion is achieved along the tradition of *trompe l'oeil* painting, which in itself is a simulacrum; however, not one that abolishes dissimilitude, but acknowledges it. Dating back to the Roman period, there has been a sense of pleasure found in "deception art", a delight felt in tricking and deceiving the eye. This enjoyment is at the heart of Miller's project.



Leaving the realm of the sacred, the work also evokes something of the profane. Tin ceilings have long-since been used for restorative and decorative purposes in many domestic interiors: *jaux* ceilings were often used to cover cracked plaster while at the same time lending a false elegance to an otherwise mundane space. Likewise, Miller's choice of material also works within this juxtaposition of high vs. low, of real vs. simulacra. The cake tins used to create the ceiling are made of aluminium, tin's cheaper and more contemporary substitute. Readily available at your local dollar store, these pans, when treated with such attention, give the appearance of polished silver.

The reflective surface created by the pans only heightens the impression and gives the illusion of space, providing Miller's ceiling with height and depth, while at the same time creating a (self)referential environment. The reflective surface mirrors the

starkness of the rest of the gallery space – empty, save for the ceiling piece.

Whether it evokes thoughts running to the sacred or the profane, one accompanying consideration is that of process and production. If the labour is real, if the production is real, is it a simulacrum? As to the process, the work was first constructed digitally: a grid was drawn up to fit the dimensions of the room. The work then became site-specific: the dimensions of the space dictated the level of illusion. The planning and creation of the grid took months to achieve. Once the grid was produced, Miller then hand-embossed the individual pans; this process took several months. Even the installation of the work became part of the process.

Leaving the realm of production for a moment, the title of the installation, *The Rise and Fall*, also provides us with indications as to the nature of the work. While alluding at once to the process of baking, it also evokes the rise and fall of ancient civilisations. This is also evidenced in the various architectural elements that make up the design: they recall civilisations past and present. The title also lends the piece an organic quality which exists in opposition to the austere, removed and cold surface of the work. This organic quality is also achieved with the choice of materials: the baking materials immediately conjure up thoughts of birthday cakes and sweets.



Furthering the idea of hyperreality, Miller's forthcoming project also deals with production and consumption. Creating cakes that simulate everyday objects, i.e. a pair of running shoes, these "sweets" are then photographed. Rather than the object itself, it is the photograph that becomes the object of display. With photography, the level of simulation reaches new heights; you can perfect an image until it is no longer the thing in itself, rather it becomes something hyperreal, hyper-perfect.³ When discussing these new projects, Miller makes reference to the tradition of Dutch still-life painting, a precursor to the photograph, which could be said to have been created in the space of the hyperreal.

Simulation (or simulacrum) is not false, nor are Miller's creations false: they are merely an alternative. The illusions work together to create an evocation of the sublime, a postmodern pastiche of high/low, sacred/profane and real/simulacra. With *The Rise and Fall* Miller has created an alternate reality, a piece of counter-architecture that finds its truth in the materials of the kitchen.

Mikaela Bobiy

¹ Jean Baudrillard. *Simulations*. Trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton & Philip Beitchman (N.Y., N.Y.: Semiotext(e), 1983) 38.

² *Ibid.*, 90.

³ This is what Jean Baudrillard refers to as the stereophonic effect in his text *The Illusion of the End* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994) 5.

Biographies:

Mikaela Bobiy is currently completing her PhD in Art History at Concordia University, Montreal. She has written texts for several Montreal artists and divides her time between undergraduate teaching and working for the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Shelley Miller graduated in 2001 from Concordia University with an MFA in Open Media; and in 1997 with a Diploma of Fine Arts from the Alberta College of Art and Design. She has exhibited her work in galleries both nationally and internationally including Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax, NS; Optica Gallery, Montreal, PQ; and Sanskriti Kendra Exhibition Space, New Delhi, India.

Front cover:
The Rise and Fall, 2002 (detail)
hand carved aluminum pans

Inside, left to right:
Pipe Dreams, 2001 (detail)

Pipe Dreams, 2001,
cake icing on wall, 26 x 18 feet

The Rise and Fall, 2002
hand carved aluminum pans

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This is a Stride Gallery brochure written by Mikaela Bobiy who has been chosen by the artist because of her particular interest in the project. These publications provide regular opportunities for diverse writers to publish work that furthers critical discourse about contemporary art.
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