

DORA ATWATER MILLIKIN: GEOMETRY OF PLACE

Newport Art Museum
76 Bellevue Avenue
Newport, Rhode Island

Through August 10



Aptly titled, Rhode Island painter Dora Atwater Millikin's "Geometry of Place" is now on view at the historic campus of the Newport Art Museum. While the manicured surroundings echo a sentimentality of time and place ubiquitous to this oasis of beachside mansions, Millikin's unconventional landscape oil paintings provide a neutral view, absent of the clichés you might expect to encounter there.

Scattered between the coastal cities of New Bedford and Newport, the artist notes objectively of her subject matter: "It's southern New England; it's my world. I've lived by this stuff all of my life."

At first glance, the forms seem familiar enough: fishing trawlers, tugboats, sleepy seashore side-roads, sometimes punctuated by the bulk of a rusty truck or camping trailer. Look deeper, and Millikin's unusual compositions will anchor you, allowing her more formal concerns to emerge as attachments to narrative dissolve.

"It is, first, a composition – a snapshot of everyday life," Millikin states. "Subject matter is not the most important thing to me; it's not meant to be spectacular, or fancy. I'm trying to create an abstraction, and I do this also through [the placement of] lights and darks."

As infants, the delineation between light and dark is the first visual impulse we perceive. It's this primal impression that these paintings draw upon, with varying levels of application and intensity. Certain elements enjoy a preferred role in these varied snapshots - namely: asphalt, telephone poles and rigging. Where these are used to define the picture plane, the intention of the artist truly shines through.

"There is so much rhythm and balance, I get so much out of it," Millikin mused, when asked about her compositional attraction to these elements. "It's meant to read like a song."

In "Morning on Main," a line of utility poles recedes off-frame, while anonymous bungalows cluster behind as a silent anchor. The sky is rendered in a series of buttercream sections, pinned like quilt squares between a network of intersecting telephone lines. The artist confides that in relation to the source location, the lines are heading straight into the sea.



LEFT: *Morning On Main*
RIGHT: *The Hyatt*

"But hopefully you would never know," she laughed.

Working instinctually from her source sketches and photographs, if you were to take any one of the finished paintings to the original location, you would probably scratch your head and wonder, "What was she thinking?"

"Most of the actual painting is done in the studio, from no resource; no photograph... nothing. It is painted for the sake of the painting itself. I never work from someone else's source," she emphasized.

Unlike the conventional method of painting, in which a background is applied and the forms then laid on top, Millikin first draws the subject, or positive image, and then defines it with the negative image in thick strokes of oil paint. "For the sake of the composition I'm always adding or subtracting," she explained.

A graduate of the Old Lyme Academy of Painting in Connecticut, Millikin's rigorous, traditional training included a strong emphasis on life painting and the human form; which, interestingly, appears infrequently or largely simplified in her work. Only one painting, titled simply "Early Morning," depicts a human figure in full frontal view, approaching almost through the large-scale picture plane.

It is important to note also that Millikin works from a primary palette, which consists strictly of red, yellow, blue and titanium white. All subsequent colors are mixed from this pure set, resulting in a harmony of color balance within her paintings. These subtleties of technique effectively imbue the work with a richness and accessibility altogether separate from the subject matter.

| Meredith Cutler