

## ART

### Lowell Miller's double life

by TAD WISE on Jun 6, 2014 • 6:30 am



As a local I was long ago acquainted with a) struggling artists, b) cottage industry artists, c) weekend artists, and d) “the ruination of Woodstock” as represented by families attached to businessmen working at Rotron, IBM and eventually imported from New York City.

Recently home for a few days, I hear about a new model of artist in the person of one Lowell Miller, a highly successful investment manager whose company, Miller/Howard, employs almost 50 Hudson Valley residents. While Lowell has lived in town for many years, he’s only recently gone public with what’s been a lifelong pursuit, with fairly instant local attention. We schedule a studio visit by phone, agreeing to meet two hours before the new WAAM exhibition opening for which three of his works were selected by Ian Barry, a guest curator and Director of the Tang Museum at Skidmore College.

Walking through the first room of a large studio, I’m reminded that I’m not a student of modern sculpture — I’m really here out of sheer curiosity. When I inquire, Lowell informs me he didn’t go to art school (though he’s had much feedback from his friend Wade Saunders, a sculptor and sculpture critic for Art in America). And while he’s “absorbed a lot of art” he hasn’t consciously tried to emulate anyone, nor does he consider himself part of any movement or style. “I’m just trying to realize myself,” he says, half way into our hour and a half talk.

“I’ve never encountered a successful businessman who is also a serious artist...” I say by way of a mission statement. Without hesitation Miller counters, “Why favor left brain over right brain? What’s wrong with having both? Some people might have both.”

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I blink, conceding the point, and upon hearing that this man is an almost 40-year student of Aikido I am not surprised. The tour continues.

Though cost of materials is clearly not an issue here, Miller's sculptures are — for the most part — modestly sized and executed in bronze, ceramic, or modest mixed media. A craft-like quality abounds, not in the least self-aggrandizing; the work isn't cool, slick or academic. These are the creations of someone, who, finding they have something to say, has developed skills sufficient to such expression. In a sense, Lowell Miller seems a three dimensional cartoonist. The work exudes a playfulness, often hinging on a visual pun involving title, but the whimsy isn't childish, it's raw, edgy — occasionally, urgently sexual.

"I thought Big Business was prudish," I posit. "How is it your work is frank if not downright obscene?"

"It's been a problem, in my mind, at least, but self-censorship is the worst kind of repression..." Miller suggests.

Miller now lets down his guard, telling me a little more about his life than most people would understand and which I am not comfortable in fully revealing. For a man who competes for a living and by way of sport such transparency places a journalist in a curious position. To be specific, while seeking to "dig and reveal," I am soon provided such an embarrassment of riches that while the writer in me is highly pleased, I also become aware of an instinct to protect my interviewee from his own candor. While in the back of my mind I keep wondering why Miller is giving me far more than I can imagine extracting from him through hard labor.

After studying philosophy and literature at Sarah Lawrence College (in the first graduating class to include males) Miller knew only what he didn't want to do. Never planning to practice, he bought some time studying law. "I simply wanted the degree and merely passing didn't require much work. A first love had just ended wretchedly, I was suffering from a highly painful 'male plumbing' condition. Physically, psychically, I was in agony — which, we know — is a highly motivational state. I started doing exercises detailed in a book by Wilhelm Reich's protege, Alexander Lowen, who'd eventually create the field of Bio-energetics. I had a lot of time on my hands so I did a lot of the exercises. And I did them often. For hours and hours. The result being..."

"You stripped yourself of your armoring."

Now it was Miller's turn to blink. "Exactly. It was like a dam broke. And I went through the demolition process rather quickly. For a few months I sobbed uncontrollably, for another few I yawned, almost constantly. I was living in a cheap place off Great Jones St. (in New York) with a bathtub in the

kitchen. Everytime I soaked in the tub a short text popped into my head, and I'd jump out, dripping, to write it down. I sent Rolling Stone magazine a bunch of my texts and they started printing them at \$30 a pop. Then Jann Wenner's austerity regime reduced my fee to \$25 which didn't help my finances any. I thought I should find a way to make a living. But I was busy with all the body changes induce by the armor breakthroughs. Most times when I wasn't experiencing strange sensations, like a warm ring around my chest glowing and glowing, I found odd postures and contortions to stretch every muscle and joint, stretching out a new container for a new energy.

"Soon I was experiencing full-on 'streaming' [a pleasurable tingling sensation Reich claimed accompanies revelation of an unobstructed life force he named 'Orgone Energy'], a feeling of warm liquid traveling through my body, lighting up my senses. And then one day I began to crave the taste of clay..."

"My grandmother had been an Abstract Expressionist. Together on rainy days we fashioned sculptor's clay into balls and snakes and ears — the three basic shapes — one, elongated and probing, the other flat and accepting, the last one squashed. Now all these years later, I developed a hankering for clay. I tried some, and liked it, though I didn't become an addict or anything. But that box was hanging around, calling my name. So? Though I was never that guy who loved to draw, and didn't draw well at all, I soon found I could almost perfectly model nearly any object I chose, and bring life to it, and it gave me pleasure.

"The city was too much for my newly heightened sensitivities — all sounds and sights and smells were magnified almost beyond tolerance. So I moved, first to Rhinebeck in 1974; the sculpting of early pieces continued in a barn studio..."

"Like that one?" I said, pointing to the simplest, smallest, most symmetrical work in the room.

"Yeah, that's my first piece in bronze, originally done directly in solid wax," he acknowledged, with a sideways glance.

"What I needed was a day-job," he continued. "I knew people were afraid of electricity, so becoming an electrician could work. Earlier I'd had some success with more serious freelance writing, but I also had developed over college summers a skill in what some have called equestrian handicapping — that is, developing betting systems at the track." Lowell began to study Aikido with Lou Kleinsmith, the legendary Aikido and T'ai Chi master who taught locally in the 70's and early 80's. My guess is Miller aimed at honing an "unobstructed nature" earlier described. I should have corroborated this presumption but it seemed self-explanatory at the time.

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Miller now realized the stock market was a lot like a horse race, where correct pattern recognition invariably led to the doorways of success, “but since people talk and horses don’t,” he could predict the outcome of the stock market better than the Belmont. Utilizing an outsider’s objectivity to bi-pass the insider’s preconditioned responses, Miller invested with increasing success and he organized his conclusions in a book. When the Stocktrader’s Almanac named it “Stock Market Book of The Year,” Lowell was dumbfounded. He was not yet 30. If his rudimentary effort was perceived as sage wisdom, he reasoned, the gatekeepers of finance must not know very much. An investment newsletter created income stream and reputation, providing time and tools for further study, including a “deep dive” into nearly all the existing academic finance literature on equity investing. Along the way Lowell met computer scientist, Mike Howard, at the dojo — they partnered up, proceeded by instinct, imitated others’ successes, intuited their own...and grew.

Simultaneous to outward success Miller’s interior sculptural expression evolved steadily if quietly. After a particularly satisfying work was completed he’d wake up in the morning and realize, like an arborist observing the age of a tree — “I’ve added a new ring!”

Lowell says he had no hunger for recognition, but his accumulated work was taking up a considerable amount of physical and psychic space. A few years ago he attended a talk by a local artist (whose name he does not recall) who spoke of “public sharing of private experience.” The statement resonated and Miller decided he’d been too secretive. Miller reacted by hiring an assistant and his output increased accordingly. He resolved to get the old work out into the world and make room for the new.

David Ross, formerly Director of the Whitney Museum and San Francisco MOMA, selected a piece in 2012 for the WAAM’s annual juried regional Far and Wide show — it was basically Lowell’s first submission in over 25 years. This year juror Ian Barry has selected more pieces from Lowell Miller than any other local artist. “The moment you leave,” he tells me, “I’ll iron a shirt and attend the WAAM reception.” I really should have tagged along; I’d have done this article a service by briefly picking Barry’s brain. Instead I ask: “Have you considered, Lowell, that such a kudo could have something to do with your financial clout? That a guest curator might be attempting to lever our gem of a museum an inch closer to Manhattan, where art more nakedly represents money, and power bows to power?”

“I don’t think so,” Lowell responds, “Ian Barry doesn’t know me, and the submissions in this case had no biographies attached. In fact, it’s more the other way ‘round. My own success in business is seen more as a negative. Curators, collectors, the general public are, I think, more drawn to the artist who is a little crazy, has some child-like dysfunction, ‘can’t help’ their obsession to create. The fact that I have a double life that includes art-making and have the luxury of that choice doesn’t make me or it more attractive. Everyone loves a painter who cuts off his ear, if he’s any good at painting. But no one loves a guy calculating the odds of making money, not in art or anywhere else. If anything it works against me. People like to keep their pigeonholes simple and clean.”

“So Lowell — aside the kick and purge of creation — what does your art, or for that matter anybody’s art, really contribute to a world in deep, deep trouble?” I should have said, “Tell that to Jeff Koons,” but I wasn’t fast enough and I’d already stayed an hour longer than I said I would. Instead, I engage this ambidexterous-brained individual on the subjects I know least about: his business in the town of Woodstock and how the two get along. At long last Miller displays some caution in finding his words. While as a businessman and an artist Lowell does not engage in philanthropy-speak, he now expresses major concern over our flagging local economy, the exodus of Woodstock’s Best and Brightest, and what he deems a reflexive restraining order on the growth of clean businesses like Miller/Howard, which already supplies much needed income to the town, and seeks to bring more. If the young people don’t stay, it becomes like one of those empty farm towns in Iowa, where they’ve all gone to the city. But this is a place that’s supposed to be thriving, throbbing, creative, exuding light. Knowing nothing, I now respond with nothing. But in the elegiac-bordering-upon-nihilistic mood which overwhelms me while walking around all that’s left of Woodstock, my last question becomes — I admit — a bit of downer.

After the briefest of pauses Lowell answers, “Art transmits information that people have forgotten or never knew.”

Of course, it’s a pretty good answer, but I must have provided a less than convinced look since a minute later he dropped back down to earth.

“Basically, art is useless,” Lowell Miller admits, “but can you imagine a world without it?” ++

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*Lowell Miller’s sculpture is on view in the show Far and Wide, which is currently running, until June 9, at the Woodstock Artists Association and Museum, 28 Tinker Street, Woodstock. For more information, call 679-2940 or see [woodstockart.org](http://woodstockart.org).*