

If there's actual "beauty" in Miller's paintings, it emerges slantwise, cradling a studied awkwardness of composition in refulgent color.



Nick Miller  
*Baby Blue*, 2020–21, oil on linen, 127 x 107 cm

Courtesy: the artist and Art Space Gallery, London

## Lynne Tillman

Beauty isn't important, but everybody talks about it. It is important but not in the way everybody talks about it. Beauty can't be defined, so it can't be talked about, since no one knows what they are saying or what they mean when they use the word "beauty." It cannot be defined, because it is not stable, it changes over time. People make subjective judgments, which also change over time. People change over time and with the times. In one time, something was considered beautiful. In another time, it is not.

Beauty has no standards. Gold was once a standard. Beautiful to some and not to others. An uneven hem, an uneven face, beautiful, and

there are many reasons, the face of the globe isn't symmetrical, for one.

People want different things, and to the great majority, need comes way before desire.

Beauty as an idea and an image is unimportant to a starving person. Food is beautiful then, eating and being fed. Some wealthy people starve themselves to look beautiful, and eating is anathema to them.

Beauty lives in a context, it is easily unbalanced. A beautiful car next to a desperate human being is ugly. Beauty cannot stand up to inequity, it always fails.

*LYNNE TILLMAN is a novelist, short story writer and cultural critic.*

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## Martin Herbert

Nick Miller's work is a Taoist-inclined twist on the memento mori tradition, often involving painting things recently deceased but not yet decaying. Arrangements of cut flowers halfway to drooping, men at the end of their lives, the occasional interloper like a beached baby shark. If there's actual "beauty" in his paintings, it emerges slantwise, cradling a studied awkwardness of composition in refulgent color (beauty needs imperfection, the beauty mark, to humanize it); a simultaneous relationship to and awkward distance from traditional still-life painting; and, primarily, the bodily conveyance that what's beautiful here has at least one foot out the door. You can get beauty-adjacent qualities like prettiness without foreboding. But beauty, it seems, needs to hurt a bit; is always saying, "Sorry I can't stay."

All of which you know if you've spent any time tending a garden, deadheading roses before petals scatter: a perennial rhythm of goodbyes consoled by the promise of next year's spring. If civilization itself winks out, though, that consolation weirds, insisting we get used to the idea (as in the beautiful-

to-me, time-lapse imagery of nature reclaiming our post-human planet in Alan Weisman's 2007 book *The World Without Us*) of an unpredictable resurgence that we ourselves will never apprehend. What we have, meanwhile, is the pricking beauty of, in gallerists' parlance, "a last chance to see," in the way so many terminally ill people report an experience of re-enchantment, reality belatedly aglow. In the face of these conditions, art's historical determination to insist on material permanence in relation to the ostensibly beautiful – Dutch flower painting, say – isn't necessarily a good fit for a potential extinction moment. Other art models, either emergent or recently established for a seemingly unvoiced, ulterior reason, seemingly align better with transience: digital generative practice and (particularly undocumented) performance might constitute both unlikely bedfellows and apt groundings for incoming artistic beauty, predicated as they are on things you can't keep, on rehearsing relinquishment. But even if not, there may nevertheless be enough beauty, if terrible beauty, to go around.

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