

Tracy Miller's Raging Alcholates

Finally, when he had sufficiently savoured this spectacle, he frantically scattered exotic perfumes around him, emptied his vaporizers, quickened all his concentrated essences and gave free rein to all his balms, with the result that the suffocating room was suddenly filled with an insanely sublimated vegetation, emitting powerful exhalations, impregnating an artificial breeze with raging alcholates—an unnatural yet charming vegetation, paradoxically uniting tropical spices such as the pungent odours of Chinese sandalwood and Jamaican heiosmia with French scents such as jasmine, hawthorn, and vervain; defying climate and season to put forth trees of different smells and flowers of the most divergent colours and fragrances; creating out of the union or collision of all these tones one common perfume, unnamed, unexpected, unusual, in which there appeared, like a persistent refrain, the decorative phrase he had started with, the smell of the great meadow and the swaying lilacs and linden-trees.

—J.K. Huysmans, *À Rebours*

There is a word, rarely used today it seems, that I think has everything to do with the odiferous pandemonium initiated by the most (in)famous nineteenth-century Decadent, J.K. Huysman: *Rank*. My Midwestern family used it liberally—and loudly—for a time, particularly when something intense (usually a smell) crossed one of our paths unexpectedly. Yet, etymologically, it's a farther reaching and certainly more ambivalent concept, with definitions that range from the luxuriantly or exuberantly fertile to the offensively gross, rancid, or corrupt. Indeed, the word seems to succinctly embody superabundance at both ends of the spectrum, and was tellingly picked up during the nineteen-twenties as a slang verb meaning “to reveal another's guilt” or “to harass and abuse.” Huysmans, whose own complicated modern pleasure simply couldn't exist without the revelation of guilt's accompaniment, would certainly have appreciated the flagrant two-headed flowering of such a seemingly banal four-letter word.

There is, of course, another, now much better known, definition for *rank* (i.e.: to order), one with connotations of hierarchy, position, and standing. It is as though the older, immoderate, inherently unquantifiable notion of the word yielded to those anxieties undoubtedly aroused by its exorbitance—giving way to those comfort-bearing, if arbitrary, rules by which we sort, number, and privilege those things and people around us. Of course, Huysmans would have had no use for this second definition of *rank*—his “analysis of the sensual and cerebral pleasures of refined and neurotic creatures” modeled itself on the unruly kaleidoscope, not the differentiating microscope. As cited in the passage from *À Rebours* I've begun with here, Huysmans' pleasures were born “out of union *or* collision,” though it's often deliciously hard to distinguish which is which or if, in fact, there need be distinction between the two at all.

Rank. The word is summoned in all its glory in the face of *Shrimp Shapes* (2002), a large, pigment-gorged painting by Tracy Miller that emits a vibrating cacophony of heady color and fantasmatic aroma. In contrast to much of her earlier work, the palette is garish, festive, chock full of bubble-gum pink and tangy yellow. The brush-stroke is giddy but certain—Miller is not afraid to make a mark, to let paint both represent *and* just be. Indeed, Twombly-like twirls and drips take on a new kind of substance here, and, while Miller is ostensibly offering us a still-life, she simultaneously fashions a gravid abstraction, where recognizable objects double as dumb forms, flat and impenetrable. Four loose quadrants house a chaotic array of foods and flowers, at once delectable and disgusting in their piled abundance. It's impossible to gain perspective; there's no ground, no vanishing line of perspective, but instead a kind of perpetual tilting, as though the contents of a loaded picnic table were slowly sliding towards you.

Shrimp Shapes features two shiny apple-red lobsters, cartoonish pink tulips, a six-pack of Budweiser, an enormous Pabst can, a corn cob, a pineapple, assorted bunches of globes which might be grapes, a festive shrimp cocktail with lemon slice, and any number of bold fields of color accommodating layered shapes that resemble flower buds or petite-fours but could just be paint. In the very center of the composition, a delicate black doily holds two fleshy shrimp, which look for all the world like huddled twin fetuses set amidst a raging hubbub.

With such collisions and unions, Tracy Miller emerges as a kind of Huysmanian painter of contemporary life. She makes paintings that flirt with conventions of landscape, still-life, abstraction, and representation, but refuse the autonomy of any one of them—sampling at will and combining with unexpected alchemical results. She fills the canvas much in the way Huysman fills a room: with paradoxically united elements, raging alcholates that threaten to overwhelm, to subsume, to tip into the noxious, and which offer sensations more extreme than any that come to us purely by way of nature. There is a frantic, concentrated pleasure here, one that hints at the neurotic monstrousness produced by so many consumable goods. Yet the poker-faced humor of Miller's works, packed as they are with fish and donuts and hotdogs and bananas and pie (so many potential allusions to ever-more guilty pleasures), render the works complicated and ambivalent—at once clamorous and mute. What you make of a gargantuan cherry seated alongside a pair of stuffed trout [in *Pie Hole* (2002)], the artist seems to say, is entirely up to you.

If Miller's works are rank by nature—performing with clumsy ebullience so many elegant, exquisite extremes—they (in Huysmanian tradition) have little use for or tolerance of dull strategies intended to sort out ascending values. Indeed, because her canvases defy ordering principles nearly altogether (there is rarely heed paid to scale, rationale, or even orthodox color), they operate almost like exquisite lists that carry on with no real beginning or end, spreading and sprawling without a hint of decorum. Roland Barthes' lists (especially his famous *J'aime, je n'aime pas*, in which we learn that the author likes, among other things: salad, cinnamon, cheese, pimento, marzipan, the smell of new-cut hay, roses, peonies, lavender, champagne, loosely held political convictions, pears, white peaches, cherries, Pollock, and Médoc wine; and that he dislikes, among other things: white Pomeranians, women in slacks, geraniums, strawberries, Miró, children's choruses, fidelity, and Vivaldi) also work this way, as cornucopias of personal and cultural *stuff*, shored up in its nakedness, at once embarrassing and exquisite.

Miller's willingness, or perhaps will, to produce paintings that are ecstatically awkward and whose subject matter is, after all, food, should, I think, be seen as carrying a good dose of wry feminist tongue-in-cheek. But hers is no commentary on women's role in the kitchen, or on over- or under-eating; nor is it any simple allegory of gender. Rather, there is simply sexuality everywhere and nowhere, permeating the field of her paintings with punctuations that are, themselves, visual puns: thick sausages, Twin Donuts, ripe melons. While playing on our omnipresent urge to project sex onto everything in the world, Miller reveals, however, just how corporeal and sensual the world already is. A fluffy chocolate cake or shiny caramel flan are defiantly seductive—both as representation and as painted mark—because they appeal to senses that exceed (and disrupt) any artificial notion of the strictly sexual.

I like to think of Miller's oeuvre as a recipe of its own: a dollop of Cady Noland (she, too, opted for the King of Beers) and a pinch of Audrey Flack (check out her juicy peaches and strawberry tarts), a heaping cup of Cézanne, a spoonful of Florine Stettheimer (there has to be a *fête* if we're to have all this food), and a barely-discernable hint of Paul McCarthy (what would a party be without dogs and burgers?) Uniting and/or colliding the pungent and the titillating, the intuitive and the coded, Tracy Miller's rank brew of raging alcholates is, however, very much her own.

—Johanna Burton, December 2003