

*Figureheads & Widows:
Commentary on the
sensibility within
John Millei's recent work*



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Two seemingly incongruent bodies of work, constructed simultaneously over a period of several years.

A cumbersome rocking boat, tilted, askew, no tangible mizzen, bulwarks or figurehead – the symbolic lady of the boat – can be deciphered. The surface values shimmer and produce a glaring effect, which are both pleasurable in their ability to absorb and to repel a stare.

A single ship, or schooner, isolated in a large aquatic environment divided in half between ocean and sky is the basic formula for constructing a maritime painting.

A portrait of a woman seated in a chair is the quintessential figurative composition for painting.

Both subjects depict objects in space.

What make up the forms in these paintings are the riggings – the ropes, lanyards, and turnbuckles, which are entwined and messy. These aspects of the ship are all business. They drive the massive form through the elements. In close-up they are lines and negative space against the sky. Getting a ship of this type ocean ready takes considerable planning. The *maritime* paintings in exhibition are not singular, but multiple, suggesting that the fleet is about ready to depart on a voyage for months, if not years. As we know,



ships do not sail themselves. Young men man the riggings, and they usually have beloved dear ones ashore. The woman sitting in the chair is pensively waiting. She is the archetypal figurehead staring frontal. Her many moods are transparent and absent. She waits, as we pace the floorboards in front of her, periodically checking her *Submariner* in anticipation of news. Though the figure is painted flatly, the chair tilts forward, pouring her into our laps.

In older New England, there is a special architectural consideration given to this moment of introspection, and perhaps solace. The widow's walk is a railed platform built on the rooftop of a building providing an unimpeded view of the sea. The scale is unimportant, but its service -- a balustrade gallery providing access -- is a crucial component in covering the psychological distance and anticipation between the woman and the earlier sighting of the horizon.

There are physically so many paintings involved in this operation, but in reality there are really only two -- a close-up of the fleet and a picture of a woman in a chair. Sometimes you need a diversity of opinion to substantiate the singularity of an idea. The easy meta-reading would be to confuse abundance or productivity with a prolific sizing up of a single subject. But, as with most nautical fleets there is power in numbers, which is intended to send the inhabitants running in all directions. I would merely suggest upon first sight of the fleet that your first reaction should be to "stay your ground."

The woman in the chair paintings are all about meaning. They are trapped in the ebb and flow of deciphering what is absolutely obvious as image. But, what stands out when traversing the paintings is how the painterly decisions are made to manifest a resolute closure. Knowing what something is, is very different from painting it.

End.





In conversation with John Millei, January 2010, following his exhibition at ACE Gallery Los Angeles/Beverly Hills, December 2009.

Images of art work courtesy of the artist.

Photographs on page 1 of widow walk and figureheads were gathered from the internet.

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