



Robert B. Miller
Leaving Home: An Homage

*A New Narrative in Faces:
Portland's Ethnic Minority Artists and Activists*

January 20 to March 13, 2011

Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery
of Contemporary Art
Lewis & Clark College
Portland, Oregon



Leaving Home: An Homage
2008
Chromira print
24 x 30 inches

“In my work, I have attempted to find the resonance at the mysterious place where the inner and outer realms come together. This place where resonance is created has been called mystical in religious and theological terminology, and it has been called mythopoetic in literary and mythological studies. Whatever it is called, photography that produces this resonance transports me to a realm that lies beyond the intellect, the abstract, and the analytical.”

Robert Miller

Robert Miller is a senior lecturer in art and program head of photography in the Department of Art at Lewis & Clark College, where he has taught for more than 27 years. Miller started the photography program at the College in 1984. He holds a B.F.A. from the University of Oregon and an M.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His website is www.rbmiller-photography.com.





A Portrait of Ethelyn DeMonnin

In August 2008, Robert Miller's mother-in-law, Ethelyn DeMonnin, left her home in the Irvington neighborhood of Portland for the last time. The decision to remove her from the house where she had spent most of her adulthood was heart-wrenching, but her grown children, like so many baby boomers with aging parents, believed that placing their mother into a care facility was the only option.

How does an artist chronicle the transitions of a human life? For Miller, a lifelong photographer, the project *Leaving Home: An Homage* started with a kernel of objective curiosity. As his wife, Joyce DeMonnin, and her siblings went about the sad and arduous tasks of clearing out Ethelyn's house and preparing it to be put up for sale, Miller asked permission to document the house as Ethelyn had left it.

Naturally, as Miller went through the house—now devoid of human presence, but hardly empty—he discovered the flotsam and jetsam of a life lived. The 20 photographs that comprise the series document a middle-class home as if someone had left it for just a moment—to run an errand, perhaps. A pair of scissors is left out on the coffee table, as if someone were clipping coupons; there are clothes in the closets, knickknacks on shelves, and jars of canned fruit in the pantry. Although there are no human subjects in the traditional sense in Miller's series, *Leaving Home: An Homage* is very much a composite portrait of this document's actual subject, Ethelyn DeMonnin.

Miller is well known in the Portland arts community for his ongoing series of portraits of Pacific Northwest artists. These, and his series of portraits

of Portland activists, also on view in the Hoffman Gallery in this exhibition, would be classified as traditional portraiture. The photographs in *Leaving Home*, however, are anything but traditional portraits. The Italian Futurist painter and sculptor Umberto Boccioni, remarked that “a portrait, to be a work of art, neither must nor may resemble the sitter...one must paint its atmosphere.” With Miller's lens trained on Ethelyn's home, “atmosphere” is virtually all he gives the viewer.

Each photograph in *Leaving Home* is a vignette of sorts. Some record actual rooms; among these, the living room is represented, with its ordinary navy-blue couch and chair, and a glass-topped coffee table collaged with family snapshots. (The photos-within-photos introduce a thematic *mise en abyme* in Miller's series, and the viewer comes to understand Ethelyn as the most familiar of idolaters: her home is a shrine to her family.) A spare bedroom takes on the role of domestic catch-all, with an electric organ, more family photographs, dolls, and tchotchkes—as well as a left-behind walker and folded-up wheelchair leaning against one wall. In this room another iconic portrait presides from a corner, gazing down at the clutter: a paint-by-number *Pinkie* (from Thomas Lawrence's 1794 original). In another photograph, one sees a china cabinet filled to overflowing with dolls and trinkets; nearby there are photographs of grandchildren and the family dog, a replica of the *Venus de Milo*, and a contemporary *memento mori*—a vanity table.

In other photographs, Miller focuses on objects as still life. In one, a cache of costume jewelry is scattered across the surface of a marquetry tabletop; gold chains and locket intermingle with colorful beads and, incongruously, a pink plastic clothes hanger. Atop the tumble is a vintage

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photograph of Ethelyn and her husband, Charles, in a tarnished and rusted frame. A view into a closet is a glimpse into an earlier era, where the dignified khakis of a child's Boy Scout uniform are hung on ordinary hangers, one of them made more elegant because someone crocheted a chenille covering for it. In yet another photograph—the only one in which the viewer can actually perceive Ethelyn's visage—a framed wedding portrait is prominent, as is an unframed snapshot of a group of children; these are given equal importance along with a ceramic figurine and a glass-domed clock. It is keenly affecting to realize how much Ethelyn valued photographs of her past, now iconography in her son-in-law's artwork.

Are these “portraits” poignant and more than a little sentimental? One would have to concede that they are, but how could the removal of an elderly woman from her home be anything but stirring? As Mary Pipher, an expert on elder care, has pointed out, the greatest shame borne by today's elders is not being self-sufficient. August 2008 marked the moment when Ethelyn had to surrender that freedom.

Miller's photographs are paired with narratives written by his wife and Ethelyn's daughter, Joyce DeMonnin. This textual content further chronicles the life of Miller's subject by recounting family stories and evoking the place and time in which Ethelyn DeMonnin thrived. Together, the photographs and words pay tribute to an ordinary, but very rich, life.

Linda Tesner

Director

Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art
Lewis & Clark College



Dining Room With Bed

After Dad died, shadows enveloped the big formal dining room that once had been home to craft projects and family banquets. Meals were taken in the nook off the kitchen, or as with so many other families these days, in front of the TV.

But after Mom had a stroke and a fall, her bedroom was moved downstairs into the dining room. Tucked around her were photos of relatives from the 1800s. How she treasured the images of these early Oregon settlers.

“Write these names down, Joycie,” she had asked me, an impatient teenager, many years earlier. “Someday this will be important to you, and you have such good handwriting!” I wrote the relatives' names on the back of the old photos or in the antique photo album, which I still have. I see the careful cursive identifying Samantha, Uncle Dave Turner, the Birdsell, and others. Looking at that practiced penmanship takes me back to that summer. And I'm grateful Mom took the time to share the names of family who came to Oregon following the Civil War.

I wonder if those faces comforted her, and if she wondered if someday a grandchild of hers would say, “Write this name down. E-t-h-e-l-y-n. Some day it will be important to you.”

Joyce DeMonnin

A New Narrative in Faces: *Portland's Ethnic Minority Artist and Activists*

Current commentary on American urban culture often includes a critique about our “underrepresented” populations. Sometimes we call them “the underserved,” other times they’re “the underprivileged”—but every single time, a lot of tongue-clucking’s involved.

This exhibit, indeed these 11 subjects of Robert B. Miller’s photographic study, suggests that now may be a good time to get unstuck from these tired characterizations of Oregon’s ethnic minorities. The language is loaded. The story is mainstream-centric. And while it may have been true a chapter of Oregon history ago, a closer examination of Bong Kilong Ung’s muscular jaw lines, a quieter look at Doña Marta Guembes’ laughter lines sprinting away from her chocolate eyes should be evidence enough for us to reconsider our obsolete narrative. To re-map us moving on.

Of course to our families’ sorrow, American institutions are awfully racialized. But if everybody’s sister, Jo Ann Bowman, is one face of African America’s tireless heavy lifters, then Central African elder uncle Jimmy Dogo’s face is the other—the faces of unabashed immigrant optimism.

If painter/labor activist Jeri Sundvall-Williams persists despite centuries of shameless ethnocide, if poet/community organizer Baher Butti has survived the sudden disintegration of Iraqi society, then Portland can make room for what makes these artists and activists so resilient and so civil. And so kind.

A bigger urban narrative is now necessary: one blending our several energetic ethnic streams with our rich mainstream. Our decreasingly patient neighborhood of nations,

an increasingly interdependent world, needs America to get this right.

These times require resuming our democratic ideals. This place, our extraordinary confluence of grand matriarchs Columbia and Willamette, is poised for activists like those featured in Robert B. Miller’s work to lead a new narrative.

And leading well—as anyone can read in each community-builder’s dreamy gaze—necessitates a mélange of mechanical dexterity and mystical pause. At the exhausted end of another workweek, Oregon’s ethnic communities expect capable leaders to own a repertoire of words and pigments, of composition and motion, that regular folk simply do not. Leaders must be fixers of a thousand daily maladies, *and* dreamers of all we can be. Activitists and artists.

Terima kasih (I offer our love, in gratitude) to Professor Miller, for the new narrative these faces represent. *Insh’allaah*.

Ronault (Polo) LS Catalani

Ronault (Polo) Latang Savang Catalani is a weekly columnist for *The Asian Reporter*, author of the book *Counter Culture: Immigrant Stories from Portland Café Counters*, and co-founder of the monthly Colored Pencils Art Collective art and culture night. He is also a community lawyer and the coordinator for City Hall’s Office of Human Relations New Portlander Programs.



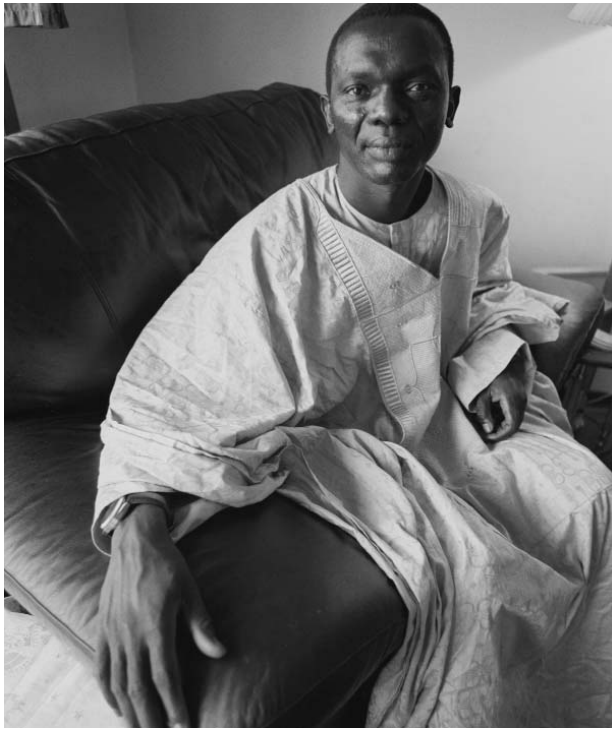
Kilong Ung
2009
Toned gelatin silver print
20 x 16 inches



Marta Guembes
2009
Toned gelatin silver print
20 x 16 inches



Jeri Sundvall-Williams (detail)
2009
Toned gelatin silver print
16 x 20 inches



Djimet Dogo
2010
Toned gelatin silver print
20 x 16 inches

Works in the Exhibition

All works are courtesy of the artist.

A New Narrative in Faces: Portland's Ethnic Minority Artists and Activists

Each artist is represented by a chromogenic print and a toned gelatin silver print.

Twenty-two portraits of eleven subjects, each 16 x 20 inches. Narrative biographies were written for each portrait by one of the following writers: Linda Goertz, Melissa Reeser, or Noel Tendrick.

Alberto Moreno
2010

Djimet Dogo
2010

Dr. Baher Butti
2010

Lynne Clendenin
2010

Prajwal Ratna Vajracharya
2010

Amalia Alarcon de Morris
2009

Jeri Sundvall-Williams
2009

Jo Ann Bowman
2009

Kilong Ung
2009

Marta Guembes
2009

Ronault Catalani
2009

Leaving Home: An Homage

2008

Chromira prints

Series of 20 photographs, each 24 x 30 inches

On the Cover:

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