

THERE WILL BE COLOUR JUDY MILLAR

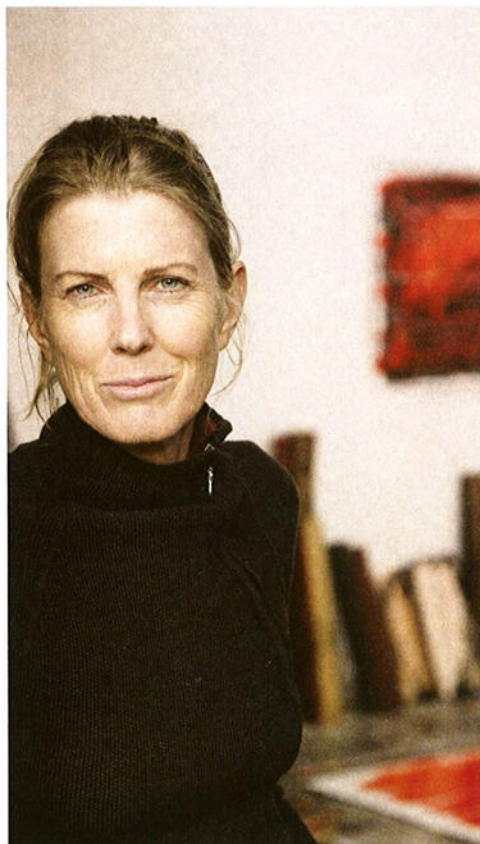
Despite being selected to represent New Zealand at this year's Venice Biennale, Judy Millar's international profile is arguably far more prominent than her reputation at home. Although her work possesses a distinct European-ness -- both in its abstract, gestural qualities and its complex intellectual underpinning (ranging from Bertolt Brecht to quantum physics) -- it is nevertheless deeply connected to New Zealand, including the late works of Colin McCahon. Art World spoke to Millar -- and photographed her in her stunning Auckland studio -- in the lead-up to this month's Venice Biennale at which she will transform a church interior with a massive three-dimensional painting

WORDS: Anthony Byrt PHOTOGRAPHS: Stephen Oxenbury

Paintings at various stages of completion cover the floor of Judy Millar's Berlin studio. Millar arrives there after an early flight from Venice; straight away she grabs a hammer, puts some tacks between her lips, bangs a few of the paintings up on the wall and picks up where we left off when we last met: "I've been searching for this idea of a kind of thing-ness in the work for such a long time," she says. "These ones have an iconic quality. They've become... thingy." Before I can press her on what exactly she means by "thingy", she points to an area of scraped black paint: "What I love is this weird thing that happens here, which is completely indeterminate. Is this before this, or back from that, and is that in front or behind? It throws you into such an ambiguous space."

This is a typical conversation with Millar. She speaks gently and casually, she's generous with ideas, and she's extremely funny. But like her paintings, she can leave you dangling in an ambiguous space: often, her answers are so simple that it's difficult to know what to do with them; other times, she'll say something so complex that you just hope you've grasped enough of it to prevent the interview from screeching to a halt. In both cases, it's usually a couple of days later that the real meaning of what she's said sinks in.

Along with Francis Upritchard, Millar will represent New Zealand at this year's Venice



Above and opposite: Millar at work in her Auckland studio

Biennale. Her success over the past few years should, in theory, justify her selection: she's had shows throughout New Zealand, Europe and the US; she's won awards in New Zealand and been shortlisted for a major German painting prize; she's taught at leading art schools around the world; and she's had several residencies. But that success has been hard-won and, despite it, there are still a lot of people in New Zealand unimpressed that she's been picked for Venice.

Millar's work first became controversial back in the early 2000s. Up until then, she'd been making minimal, perfectly acceptable paintings. Then, all of a sudden, she put her canvases on the floor, knelt beside them, took her strongly corrective glasses off, and started to push paint around. The resulting works were sticky testimonials to the act of their making, their relentlessly colourful surfaces woven together by her fingers or by rags. They were suspended somewhere between hardcore gesturalism and extremely pretty abstraction, and they split the New Zealand art world in two. While some critics and curators defended her as one of the country's most important artists, just as many saw her as an archconservative who made things that were a weird throwback to a time when painting mattered more than it does today. And while people at home argued about its merits, overseas dealers and curators started to notice her work. So she became New Zealand art's elephant in the room -- someone with an international reputation that didn't necessarily match up with local sentiment.





Above: Judy Millar's Auckland home and studio

Millar shrugs this off: "I'm in the curious position that no one really gets what I'm doing," she says, "and they never did." This lack of understanding is largely because her work is so difficult to place. Detractors often suggest that she is too derivative of Abstract Expressionism or contemporary European abstraction. But her supporters often rely on similar comparisons, to Jackson Pollock for example, or to her European counterparts like Bernard Frize and Katharina Grosse. When I suggest that these comparisons are a way for her fans to justify why they like her paintings, she laughs: "They give the work a substance, and some kind of importance by association, and I guess they help people deal with it. But maybe my work has nothing to do with any of those things anymore. Working both here in Germany and in New Zealand, the position I've been forced to take up is one that is completely independent."

Six months earlier, Millar and I met to discuss her exhibition at Galerie Mark Müller in Zurich, Matte Black. The paintings she exhibited there were a massive change of direction. The bright colours, dynamic strokes and explosive starbursts of her earlier works were all gone. In their place were black marks that had been run through with a squeegee, dragged

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across a glowing white ground. Every painting felt like an odd, paralysed moment in which she'd maimed a very pretty child and left a monster in its place. Even the title was brutal. "I was just becoming more and more suspicious of all those devices," Millar explained when we met at the gallery. "I could see that that's where people were stopping, and they were never meant to stop there. It was also becoming possible for me to do too many delightful things, and that was pretty hard to get out of. It was the flourish that I wanted to kill."

This aggression wasn't about getting something off her chest: "I was becoming interested in the way that the more violently I worked the paintings, the more printed and photographic they appeared," she said. "And this is heightened by the use of black. The whole thing becomes immediately illustrative." While it was true that forms were hinted at – cliff-faces, ribbons of fabric, graffiti, bones – none

completely revealed themselves. But when I suggested that they were happy accidents of her process, she pulled me up short. "No, no. I'm drawing. And that's the difference. I've succumbed to drawing; I've taken up the graphic." This was a surprise. Millar is often portrayed as an artist for whom process takes precedence over image. But here she was making clear that rather than being expressionistic, her paintings were illusionistic; they referred to recognisable things out in the world, beyond painterly abstraction. In fact, Millar strongly denied that they were abstract at all.

Under her new, tough regime, even the residual traces of her swirling marks took on a graphic quality. As a result, they didn't quite seem like the real thing, almost as though they were referring to her language of mark making rather than actually being genuine "Judy Millar" marks. Millar agreed: "I've become very interested in Bertolt Brecht," she explained. "He believed that actors always had to show that they were acting. So the performance and the being are separate, but at the same time never separate. There's something of that that I want to show as well. The mark has to be totally believable, but it also has to be obvious that it's acted." Millar also used this performance to act out her status as an artist stuck between European and New Zealand art. Matte Black drew



1 *Untitled (2007)*, oil on canvas, 142 x 99cm 2 *Untitled (2007)*, oil on canvas, 146 x 98cm

on both traditions without ever fitting into one or the other. This made it difficult for everybody to cope with: gallery staff admitted that visitors were intrigued by the paintings but didn't know what to do with them; and when I asked Millar if she'd thought about showing them in New Zealand, she just laughed: "I think they would have offended everybody."

They were, however, more indebted to New Zealand than was immediately obvious. For example, it was no coincidence that they were made after a residency in Colin McCahon's former house. Millar acknowledged the impact McCahon's late black-and-white paintings had on her, those archetypal works that took him from being just another regional Cubist to a completely independent artist, an outsider. She also admitted to another, less likely New Zealand source: in some of the paintings, graffiti-like forms emerged, and according to her, these were influenced by the matt-black Cortinas that rumble around West Auckland: "It's the Gothic writing in the back window about your dead lost friend," she said, laughing. "And maybe I was looking for something that's just on the edge of that. Is that tragic? What is that? These guys are saying something. Quite what they're saying I don't know, but they're participating in a theatre of life."

So in *Matte Black*, Millar replaced all those easy and "delightful things" with a robust approach

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that sought to establish dramatic interactions between paintings, their histories, and their viewers. As we were leaving the gallery, we stopped in front of three works: "I'm wondering what happens if I just get these printed big," she said, "and whether the paint will be necessary in the finished thing. So many people are working the other way, using the camera to come up with the image and then hand-rendering it. But what if I go the other way? What if I rely on the body and liquidity to make the image, and then I'm completely blasé about the finished result of that image? I'm simply using the body as a way of thinking, an animal way of thinking in opposition to all the other digital ways of thinking that are around at the moment."

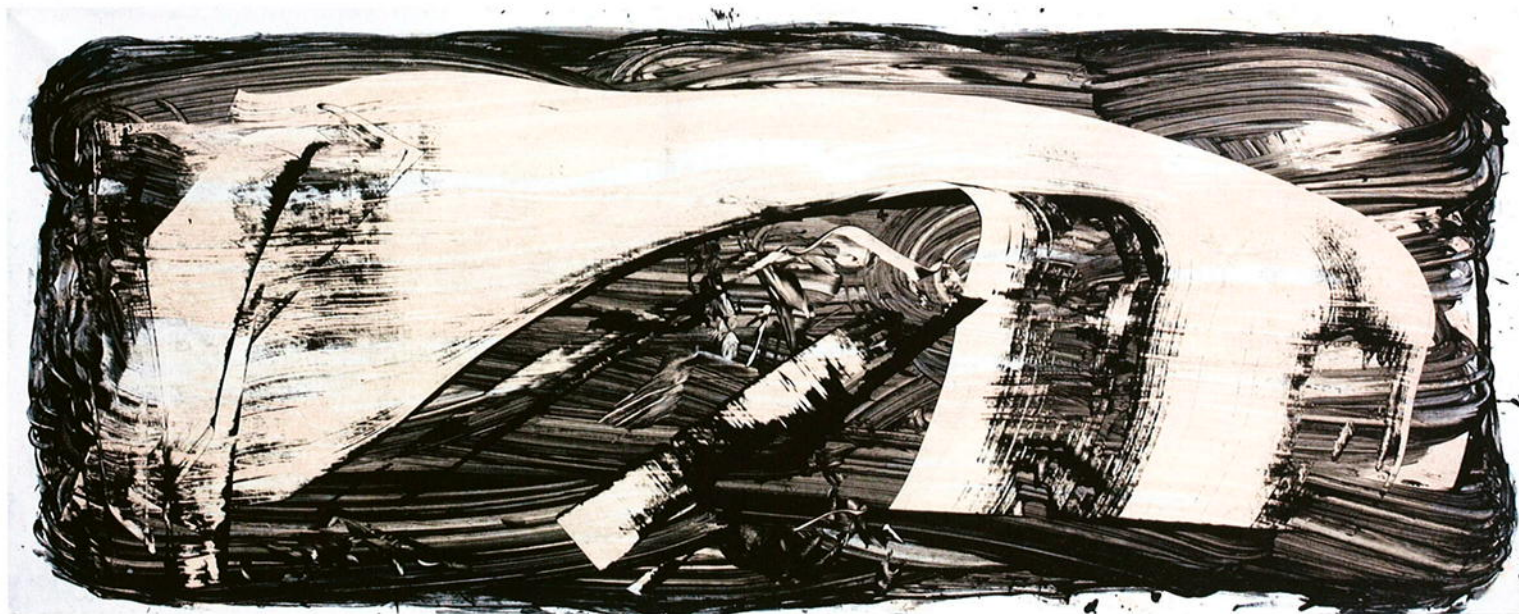
Back in Berlin, Millar and I discuss her preparations for Venice. It's not just the opportunity, but also the sense of symmetry that she's looking forward to: "Italy's where I turned back to painting," she confesses. "I left art school

fairly disillusioned, and I opened restaurants that I thought would be somewhere to meet and talk about art. But eventually I got commercially exhausted, so I went back to university. I got a scholarship, and went off to Italy to study art from the 60s and 70s – Arte Povera, that kind of thing. Surprisingly, what got me were the frescos I saw, and I became convinced that paint was a material that could still be used in contemporary art."

Appropriately then, her exhibition will be in a church. And she's doing exactly what she said she might as we were leaving the gallery in Zurich: blowing a painting up into a huge digital print, which will be supported by a circular structure that bulges out towards viewers. To demonstrate, she grabs a strip of canvas from the floor and coils it: "I got intrigued by the idea of bringing the gesture itself into space, so I started to curve the surface of the work. I thought that the pictorial space would become undone by the physical space, but I actually found that it got greatly heightened, and that was pretty exciting." This though, is a very different concept of space from her previous work. When I point this out, she takes a deep breath before she replies. "I know," she says. "It's because I've become very interested in quantum physics."

This is not where I expect the conversation to go. But on closer inspection, it makes sense. Since the start of the 20th century, quantum physics





[Millar's] goal is straightforward: to find new forms of space that affect viewers physically, emotionally and mentally. But achieving such a simple objective involves huge ambition, faith in the work, and a willingness to take big risks: "I could just sit at home and make small things," she says, "but I want to test myself"

and painting have shared the goal of finding new ways to define and describe space. Picasso, for example, was influenced by contemporary developments in physics as he worked towards Cubism. The revelation for many people will be that Millar, who is so often associated with expressionism, actually has closer affinities with painting's history of spatial exploration. "The way I'm doing and undoing space until I reach a point of exhaustion is about a kind of focusing of attention," she says, "and the implications of that. It seems to be about the folding and unfolding of some reality that I can't name, I can't explain, I can't describe. I don't want to suggest that this is the theory behind my work, but it has allowed me to keep pursuing it without having to find a theoretical framework for it." For her then, the act of painting is a way to help define and examine the real world – not a psychological means to escape it.

By placing her "painted" structure into a Venetian church, Millar will control all of the real, physical relationships within it: its time, its space, and even the way we move through it: "I want to block any sense of the entire church from any one point. You'll walk in and be met by this big curved surface, which will force you to walk around it. And as you walk around, the church will unravel itself." In unravelling the church, she will also unravel the history of Italian church painting and



Top: *Simon-Peter* (2009), oil on canvas, 80 x 200cm
Above: *Untitled* (2009), oil on canvas, 160 x 108cm

her own relationship, as an outsider, with it. This is a subtle, clever aspect of her project: she is coming full-circle, back to the type of painting that made her want to paint in the first place. "I'm placing myself back in there," she says, "finding out what it all means."

It's no wonder that people have struggled with Millar's work in the past. She has a complicated, synthetic vision, with sources as diverse as Brecht, frescos, quantum physics, Colin McCahon, church architecture, the history of European painting, and tough guys driving Cortinas through West Auckland. Her goal is straightforward: to find new forms of space that affect viewers physically, emotionally and mentally. But achieving such a simple objective involves huge ambition, faith in the work, and a willingness to take big risks: "I could just sit at home and make small things," she says, "but I want to test myself. It's a belief in art as well. A belief that art really is important."

After an hour or so of talking, Millar starts to look tired. I don't blame her; it wasn't just an early start – it's been a busy few years. So I ask her one last question about her Venice project. She pauses before she answers, and smiles: "Yes. There will be colour."

Judy Millar is represented by Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland; Hamish Morrison Galerie, Berlin; and Galerie Mark Müller, Zurich
53rd Venice Biennale, Italy, 7 Jun – 22 Nov