

JUDI MILLER

Moving Around Boundaries, 2002
oil on canvas, 36 x 70 in



courtesy the artist

K'DEE MILLER

River of Life Remembering the work of Judi Miller

It was exactly one year after the death of my mother, Judi Miller, and I was out for a run. Not an unusual act, by any means—in fact, since relocating to Berkeley two months prior, running had become my most recent addiction. I had run past the same designer shops, past the Occupy banners that clung to the pedestrian overpass, and onto the bike path that hugged West Frontage Road—but I could never outrun the sense that I was lost.

The bike path was the only place that felt familiar. On the west side of the path sat the bay, its mountain-fed waters lapping Berkeley's rocky marina before continuing west to glisten under San Francisco's cityscape. On the east side sat thousands of commuters as they inched their way through a threesome of highways known as The Maze. Over the past year, my life had adopted a similar bipolar nature. To my closest friends, I looked strong and steady like the bay's current; but in the quiet confines of my vehicle, I was stuck in The Maze, unclear of my destination, talking to myself. I tried to keep my tone calm but it would always become animated. Over the course of eight months, I had moved from Los Angeles to Nevada to New York to Los Angeles again. By month nine, my voice had gone from calming to outright concerning, so by the time I moved into my mom's art studio in Berkeley it seemed only natural to start talking to her paintings. Or rather, to the artist who now remained only in canvas form.

The paintings were large and hung elegantly in the studio. At night, the skylight exposed the acrylics and oils to the moon's beam, making the blues and greens dance and flow across the canvas like water. Inspired by months of standing in the middle of Northern California's tributaries after her twenty-five-year marriage had ended, she captured the state of the water as it rippled, bubbled, splashed, eventually creating a space for her before graciously flowing by. "The river was a place with no boundaries," she wrote in an essay that accompanied her thesis show, *River Stories*. "It's where past and future pool into the moment, showing me how two currents can flow side by side, reflecting and accepting one another."

"My currents aren't accepting one another," I'd confess to the canvas. The essay was one of my latest discoveries from her files, along with a photograph taken at the river's edge. Hair messily slung up in a side ponytail, flashing her gummy smile, she was wearing paint-stained waders with

a purple fishing vest that held tubes of acrylics instead of lures. I imagined her wobbling over the mossy rocks, armed with a paintbrush instead of a fishing pole. “I don’t think it was very nice of you to leave me without a clear road map of how one gets their currents in line,” I said, continuing my one-sided conversation with the canvas before going on another run.

As I rounded the corner of the bike path, I looked toward the bay. The thought of finding solace in its frigid waters sent a shiver up my spine. I stood taller and breathed in the saltwater’s mist. “Refreshing; I feel cleansed,” is how one observer first described *River Stories*, upon the series’ debut at JFK University’s gallery. “I dream here and my heart opens,” another wrote in the guest book. It was April of 2003, one month shy of my mom’s graduation. I flew to Berkeley for her artist reception.

Only two years earlier, after my younger brother graduated from high school, she had ventured from Alaska to California to earn an MFA in studio arts from JFK. She planned to return to Alaska each summer to work at the family’s fly fishing lodge; my dad planned to spend a few months in California during the winter. From the outside, everyone accepted this transition: she was a recent empty nester migrating to warmer climates and intent on spending her time tinkering with pastels. But I knew the escape was calculated. She was intent on transforming her craft, and desperate to transform her life.

We walked briskly toward the gallery, my mom’s dirty-blond bob taking flight in the marina air. We were running late to the event, on “mom time” as it was often referred to by my brother and me, so when the rickety elevator stalled mid-flight for a moment too long, she pushed her long bangs behind her ears and shot me a concerned look. “At least you have good hair,” I smiled, a joke I’d offer up anytime she was having a hard day. She shot back an exaggerated smile that could have been a substitute for a four-letter word.

Even in her agitated state, I couldn’t help but notice her beauty. She wore a black high-neck halter that showed off her delicate collarbones, and a fitted skirt that ended right before her knee-length boots. Her favorite pink shawl hugged her arms. She had a jeweled pink clip-on earring fastened to the halter’s ruched details, a souvenir she’d bought at her favorite consignment shop. “I adopted more

rich-lady clothes!” she’d often sing into the phone before reporting her latest find. But it wasn’t so much her appearance that had me smiling in admiration, it was her confidence. She seemed younger and happier than I’d ever remembered. She looked like the high school pictures in her yearbook that I used to gawk over as a child.

The elevator jolted down before resuming its steady upward crawl. My mom let out a giggle that sounded like the noise babies make right before they scream. She was nervous, and it had nothing to do with the elevator. It was then that I registered the weight of that night’s event. In Alaska, there had been several art openings; but there, the audience consisted of hunters and gatherers sophisticated enough to attend the exhibit but not sophisticated enough to talk about it. In New York, her work showed in a handful of venues, but she was always just one of several artists. This was different. This was a solo show, a significant detail that had been lost on my twenty-four-year-old self. It was the unveiling of her new life—unattached from the children who called her Mom and the man who used to call her Wife. It was a chapter of Judi Miller that no one had ever seen before.

I put my arm around her, my larger frame protecting hers, her right shoulder fitting perfectly into my armpit. She leaned her head on my shoulder and I smelled her hair. “You look beautiful,” I said. Linked like two pieces of a Tetris game, we proceeded down the hallway’s old wooden floors toward the gallery’s main entrance.

It wasn’t that long ago that we were linked in a similar fashion, but in support rather than celebration. Standing in her Oakland apartment, I held her tight as she cried. She was thin; I could feel the bones in her shoulders. Her hair was coarse against my face, and smelled musty like the mushroom tea the acupuncturist prescribed to help her sleep. “California vegetables,” was her initial reasoning when I questioned her about the weight loss, before she confessed: “Kickboxing every morning at six a.m., but always followed by a few donut holes.” My mom had obviously found an outlet for her anger. I imagined her wearing her worn tie-dyed stretch pants pretending to kick my dad’s ass. Apparently there was no right equation to splitting a family business, and their divorce would eventually involve seven years of lawyers, court dates, and appeals, dividing our family into two teams: Alaska versus Cali-

fornia, Girls versus Boys. Divorce had not come easy for either of my parents, although given my team, I admittedly was only privy to the intimate details of my mom’s experience.

I held her close as I stared at the stained canvas that covered every inch of wall space in her Oakland apartment. *The Bleeding Heart* series, she called it, depicting the gruesome act of separating one heart into two. Held to the wall by staples that pierced the innocent plaster, the canvas radiated oranges, deep reds, and dirty yellows. Layers upon layers of oil paint were smeared smooth in some places and carved jagged in others. Bloody tearstains ran down the canvas where the weight of the paint had caused it to crumble. Standing in front of those paintings, I could feel my molecules start to vibrate, bounce around, spin out of control—and suddenly I was in a world that moved in slow motion, where every sense was multiplied by fifty. A State of Technicolor, I would call it, after my mom’s death, when my own heart split in two, when every touch bruised and pulsed in oranges and reds. There’s something oddly beautiful about the color of heartbreak.

I don’t know what happened to *The Bleeding Heart* series—it didn’t sell, I know that. “It was art for the artist’s sake,” my mom would say, “not for the consumer.” If I were to guess, I’d say she pulled on those tie-dyed stretch pants and sanded that canvas smooth until those bleeding hearts took on another color.

I ventured into the JFK gallery alone. First into the main alcove, or “The River Chapel,” as my mom called it; then toward the patchwork quilt of canvas that hung on the walls. Thirty-eight paintings in total—the transparent blues, lush greens, earthy oranges, and sun-kissed yellows twinkling under spotlights. Although far away, Alaska was near. I could hear the soothing sounds of our river as it moved downstream. I dropped my shoulders and took a breath. She survived, I thought; she’s on the other side of the river.

Transformation proved to be a hot commodity in Berkeley that year, and except for a few treasured pieces, *River Stories* sold out. Today, strangers have my mom’s blood, sweat, and tears hung on their walls, unaware of the emotional turmoil that had to occur before she knelt in front of the canvas and succumbed to its healing blues. I do hope she sanded down and reused that *Bleeding Heart*

canvas, because it’s amazing to think that behind all the *River Stories*’ blue and green was once a bleeding heart.

“If you approach life as art, there is the potential for creativity in every situation,” my mom’s voice cut through the quiet murmurs of the gallery as she began her speech. I stood in front of *Remembering*: the 36 x 36-inch canvas was covered in light blues and threads of pale pinks, then doused with a mixture of turpentine and detergent until it resembled the frothy pool of water that swirled at the base of our river’s first canyon.

Directly after the rocky patch of white water known as “The Flipper,” a deep pool swirled with years of travelers’ sunken belongings. For my brother and me, it was our wilderness toy store; for my mom, her personal art depot. She rose from the dark water and crawled toward the gravel bar. Her jean cutoffs and tennis shoes were soaked from the excursion; her ponytail clung to the side of her face. “Look what I found!” she yelled towards my brother and me as we smeared ourselves with gray clay. The broken fly rod was exactly what she was looking for—once smooth with varnish, it would hold our new curtains. “Treasure!” she yelled as she raised her arms in victory.

I smiled at the memory.

“Pick one out,” she’d later say to me, once the reception had ended.

I chose *Remembering*.

I stood before the painting, now hanging above my bed in the Berkeley studio, and thought about my mom’s bleeding heart and the stories of her standing in the middle of the river. And finally, I heard her voice.

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