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JOHN MILLEI *MARITIME*

EXHIBITION ON VIEW THROUGH APRIL 2010

For the past nine years, John Millei has undertaken diverse series engaged with nautical and aqueous themes, culminating in the most recently completed large-scale *Maritime* paintings titled *Queen Anne's Revenge*. Addressing the history of painting by looking at disparate historical ideas and combining them, his references to seafaring explore various themes in this extended group of paintings: the ocean's apocalyptic power, the abstract and complex majesty of a ship's rigging, or the deceptive calm before a storm at sea. Within the nautical series there are five territories; the *Seascapes* which typically represent undulating waves, which began in 2001-2 in the series' *For Surfing* and *Twelve Months*, then a dramatic shift away from color to ominous black waves referencing the deluge, to the 2005 *White Squalls*, and *Maritime's* ships, rigging and wreckage.

Referencing and re-conceiving a wide range of art historical antecedents and sources from cinema to historical Dutch maritime painting, the most recent of these, are quasi-representational but focus on the abstract and dynamic interplay of ship's riggings and superstructure. Millei flattens the volumes and emphasizes contours using brushwork that suggests the flexibility of the complex tracery of ropes, cables and netting. The paintings surfaces glisten, shimmer, and run with fluid glazes, metallic pigments, and a transparency reminiscent of the ocean's atmosphere. Here, his technique enlivens the otherwise monochromatic palette of the shipping industry and alludes to his other source material - vintage photographs and black and white film stills. The scale and palette of these paintings are consciously cinematic. Works within this series reflect a stylistic change over time, with inky black forms dominating the foreground in the earlier works and glossy, silver tones appearing up-close in more recent paintings. Millei's titles (or subtitles) also occasionally indicate his interest in assigning specific meanings to the shapes he paints. *Queen Anne's Revenge* was the name of pirate Blackbeard's flagship (who also, some say, was Sir Walter Raleigh). The billowing dark mass that occupies most of *Maritime #20 (Early Navigation)*, from 2004, resembles a gauzy sail, other canvases bear the names of actual ships: *HMS Bounty*, *Black Pearl* and *Navigator*, while others allude to maritime adventure. He noticed in

film scenes that the ship's rigging were customarily shot in silhouette, merely prop's, and the sharp silhouettes of taut rope made their way into the work via mediations of photography then abstraction, with interest in the formal structures remaining. Straight lines refer to rigging while the curvilinear, undulating lines refer to boats, vessels, waves and ocean, but never occurring in the same painting. Also, within the *Maritime* series, the *Squall* paintings consist of five works which collectively form a narrative, referencing a white squall; a blinding white-out according to captain's logs, a myth according to meteorologists. Seafarers have legendarily written descriptions of the immersion in a white squall, a violent storm at sea causing complete disorientation. Millei was interested in the mythmaking and fictions around maritime culture, like fables, they morph over time with embellishments. Their influences appear in some earlier works such as the painting *The History of Ships*, dating from 1993-94, but have played a much greater role in his oeuvre since 2001. As Jasper Johns took pre-existing clichéd symbols, here, encoded and conscious of his precursors' superimpositions, converting them with a contemporary vernacular, Abstract Expressionist, Maritime and Renaissance traditions co-exist as source material. Superimposing different histories, a post-modern methodology like Sigmar Polke's silkscreen layers, ends up with a hybrid – rather than “after” i.e. a historical notion of precedence, they exist on the same plane contemporaneously, simultaneously. In 1991-2, he introduced significant use of metallic silver in the *Quicksilver* paintings, continuing into the *Nerve Meter* paintings (1995), *Ne-Be-Fi* triptych (1996), and silver *Terra* paintings (1998).

Millei painted the series *For Surfing* in 2001 and 2002. He captures the vantage point of being immersed, neck-high, in surf by using serpentine bands of white pigment to evoke the churning rhythm of waves, the minute patterns visible up-close on their surfaces, and to conjure in viewers the unsteady feeling of bobbing in swirling water. For much of his career, he has used the flatness of the picture plane to emphasize the beauty of forms and shapes rather than their masses and volumes. The artist's fascination with reworking and reinterpreting sources that relate to his subjects is apparent in the way he depicts water and sky in *For Surfing*. He found inspiration in the *Angers Apocalypse*, a massive set of tapestries dated from c. 1375 depicting scenes from the prophetic visions of Saint John the Evangelist.

John Millei was born in 1958 in Los Angeles, California. He lives and works in Los Angeles, California.

CONCURRENT EXHIBITION
JOHN MILLEI: WOMAN IN A CHAIR
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