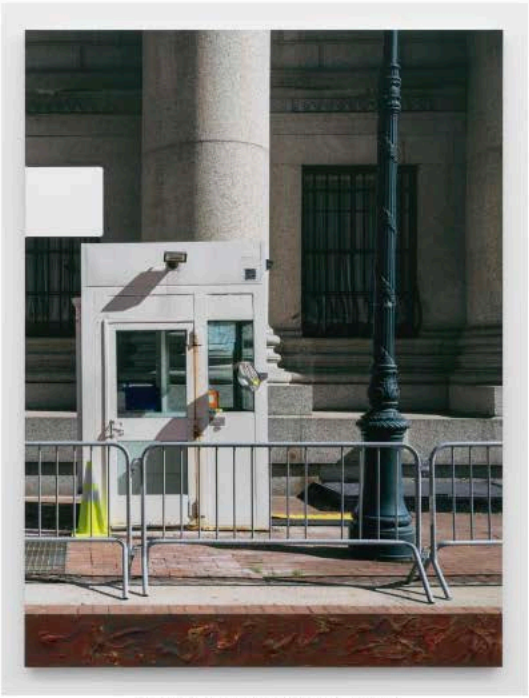
The New York Times
May 6, 2022

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries Right Now: John Miller

By Martha Schwendener



John Miller, *Confession*, 2022

Recent decades have seen the rise and eclipse of downtown art districts like SoHo and the East Village. John Miller's "Civic Center" at Maxwell Graham/Essex Street offers a glimpse into another downtown area (not exactly a "neighborhood"): the district that houses City Hall, One Police Plaza, the Metropolitan Correctional Center, several courthouses and New York's F.B.I. offices.

Photographic close-ups of brick walls, reflective glass, utility boxes and a few tawdry storefronts are arranged in geometric compositions that nod to modernist painters like Piet Mondrian and Kenneth Noland. Many of the works, like the photographic vinyl wallpaper "Still Life" (2022) and "Confession" (2022), a photo-and-mirror work, also hark back to the deadpan post-1960s Conceptual art that Miller encountered as a young artist in New York.

Several works include impastos of brown acrylic paint — a signature gesture for Miller — and there are two monochrome industrial carpets in the same hue. Miller's earlier sculptures were slathered in brown paint, a comic reference to Freud's theory of artmaking as a sublimation of the infantile desire to play with one's own feces. Decades later, the brown paint is contained in smaller areas on the works. The color reads differently, too: more as paranoid constipation or Freudian repression than artistic sublimation. Rather than the now-mythical art neighborhoods of downtown, Miller highlights the banal, high-security spaces of government and power, where recent protests have also occurred. It's a sobering vision, compared with the celebration of effulgent artistic energy — but perhaps a necessary one.