

Names, smudges dot Miller's paintings

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gestural," Miller explained. "They are freeze-frames or snapshots. There's certainly a narrative going on, but people have their own take on them."

Miller's work exhibits strong spontaneity. Crossed-out words, bold colors and smudges make the work seem like an event instead of a painting.

To achieve this energy, Miller said, her creative process pivots around the unexpected things that can happen while working.

"I like when you're not quite sure what's going to work," Miller said. "I like that danger zone."

But even disorder needs order, she

added. To give her pieces form, Miller relies on a basic grid system and geometric shapes.

"They give a basic skeletal structure to all the craziness," Miller said.

The grid system also makes the works seem like little vignettes.

"It might make you think of windows," Miller said. "Each painting represents a different scene."

For this exhibit, many pieces were inspired by names of places and people. A number of the pieces revolve around the year and a half Miller lived in Montana.

While mountains are conspicuously absent from the Montana works, Miller said, the pieces still

capture the essence of the Montana landscape.

Other pieces are influenced by the names of people — people Miller doesn't even know.

For the piece "Dolores," Miller allowed the name itself to dictate the emotional mood of the painting.

"I don't know a specific Dolores," Miller said. "This name popped into my head, and I had all these visions of colors and shapes."

The exhibit provides a harmonious representation of Miller's work, both from the present and the past.

"These are things that have appeared in my work over the last 15 years," Miller said.

Book makes home run with baseball histories

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first and foremost. But, Hays' stories also serve as microcosm of the cultural history of his era.

Hays said the success or failure of town teams often affected the self-image of the communities they represented. Simply put, almost everyone went to the ball game.

Larry Gerlach, president for American Baseball Research, said the book is the first of his knowledge to cover the life of a semi-pro player.

The vast majority of baseball literature is about the major or minor leagues, he said.

"But in reality those books only represent a small part of the American baseball experience," Gerlach said.

"When people write about semi-pro or amateur baseball, it serves as a nice corrective to the exaggerated emphasis on the big leagues."

He said it was important for stories such as "Take Two and Hit To Right" to be written because they represent "an age that is being lost."

The number of town teams during the past 40 years has decreased significantly in Nebraska.

Hays said in his era "every town in the state had its own team." Comparatively, there are only three remaining leagues in the state (one in Omaha and the other two are in northeast Nebraska) that resemble the semi-pro squads of years past.

Gerlach spoke with a sense of romanticism concerning the subject matter of Hays' autobiographical work.

"These guys played purely for the love of the game," he said. "Most of them had no future, no money. They worked by day and then packed as many guys into a car as possible to go to the next town to play. These guys were kind of rough-and-tumble characters, and this aspect is loud and clear in the book."

After moving back to Nebraska in 1995 after 30 years of New York, Hays began working on "Take Two and Hit To Right" within a matter of months. He finished it in 1998.

Hays, who received his 1965 master's degree in fine arts from UNL, said he was unaware of the book's unique material until he presented it to the University of Nebraska Press. The university publishing organization released the finished work earlier this year.

Hays said, "I was just writing what I knew. I felt compelled to the subject

because I had lived this lifestyle and had such a good time."

His book makes one thing clear — baseball in his era was more mentally and physically coarse than the version played today. The strike zone was much larger and batters who experienced beanballs were shown no sympathy from the umpires, he said.

Hays played his last six years for McCook in the now-defunct Nebraska Independent League and called it a "freewheeling, frontier league."

Bill Denker, former teammate to Hays and longtime semi-pro player, said '40s and '50s baseball was indeed the dog-eat-dog world described in "Take Two and Hit To Right."

"Oh yeah, you'd slide with your feet high and spike people," Denker said. "It would be basically anything to win."

Hays, who turned down a tryout with the Chicago White Sox, believes his talent would have only gotten him to the minor league, Double A level.

Though in his career he did get the chance to compete against a legendary Negro League team, the Kansas City Monarchs. Another story Hays tells in his book is that of when he once struck out a young hot shot from Neligh named Richie Ashburn during an American Legion game. Ashburn went on to become a Hall of Fame center fielder for the Philadelphia A's.

"Those were great times and I remember them more vividly than other moments," he said.

However when 1953 rolled around, he was 28 and ready to lead a life and career outside of semi-pro baseball.

"It was a fun but uneasy life and I just got tired of it," Hays said.

So after completing his master's degree, he left with his wife for New York for a career in the arts and arts education. His wife, Bonna Hays, became a successful actress, appearing on the soap opera "As the World Turns."

Hays said his days as a semi-pro player were a formative time and prepared him for the tough and competitive nature of making a living in New York.

After all, baseball players in his era didn't even wear helmets, much less the hockey-like gear that often covers a modern player's forearms and shins.

"I had to go to the hospital one time after taking a curve ball in the back of my head," Hays said. "If it would have been an 89- or 90-mile-an-hour fastball, I might have been dead."

The author will be signing "Take Two and Hit To Right" Saturday at Lee's Booksellers, 5500 S. 56th in the Edgewood Plaza, at 2:30 p.m.

Writing has been an important part of Hays' life since his semi-pro days in McCook where he worked as a sports reporter at the McCook Gazette.

Hays also wrote and illustrated a children's book, as well as completing a script for an off-Broadway play.

His writing experience and his memories of playing small-town baseball during the sport's golden age were the main factors in "Take Two and Hit To Right."

"I went down to the Nebraska Historical Society to research some old newspaper stories for a short story I wanted to write about a particular game," Hays said.

"I started talking to the people down there and they said, 'You should write a book.' I got to thinking about the times and television and how things are so much different now; how important semi-pro ball was to those towns and thought — that's a book."

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