

Having Cheese Makes You Happy

By **Dylan Rainforth**



| Daniel Stephen Miller, *Gold Watch (for Steve)*, 2014, oil on canvas, 2.6 x 3.0 m.

They replaced him like a worn-out watch part. Or perhaps his particular cog in the banking machinery was simply no longer required. Either way, recently, after 25 years' service in middle management, Steve Miller was made redundant from the Perth bank he worked for.

Having Cheese Makes You Happy was an installation by his son, Melbourne-based emerging artist Daniel Stephen Miller. The exhibition took its title from a line in one of the best-selling business books of all time, Dr Spencer Johnson's *Who Moved My Cheese?* Published in 1998, around the time Miller senior's career was at its zenith, the book, presented as a fable depicting two miniature humans and two mice who live in a maze, ostensibly promotes a proactive attitude to continual change throughout our working lives.

The installation, presented in a small room at the back of Melbourne's flagship non-profit

gallery West Space, included a looped 46-minute recording of Steve Miller reading from *Who Moved My Cheese?* His voice came from the tinny speaker of his own bank-issued microcassette recorder, which rested on a plinth created from the cut-down components of a generic modern-day office desk.

There is, of course, a sadness to this fact. Through no fault of his own, Steve Miller was not able to "move with the cheese". In fact, as his son has said, his cheese has been "definitively moved out of the maze". Through one person's story, a wider narrative can be seen. The book's underlying neoliberal message amounts to victim blaming – perpetuating an illusion of worker empowerment in the face of profit-driven arrangements that are presented as natural rather than deliberate and ideological.

The perils of the corporate maze were alluded to in *Having Cheese Makes You Happy* through the construction of a stereotypical office ceiling, but which was too low and pitched on an angle as if it were falling in. The effect was oppressive. Below the tilted ceiling, Miller's exhibition was dominated by a giant, idealised painting of a gold wristwatch. This was not just any gold wristwatch though: this was the one Steve Miller never received for his long service.

The late US artist Mike Kelley made a work in 1987 called *More Love Hours than Can Ever Be Repaid*. A wall hanging assembled from hand-made stuffed toys collected from thrift stores, the love hours were those of the countless anonymous mothers and grandmothers who knitted them.

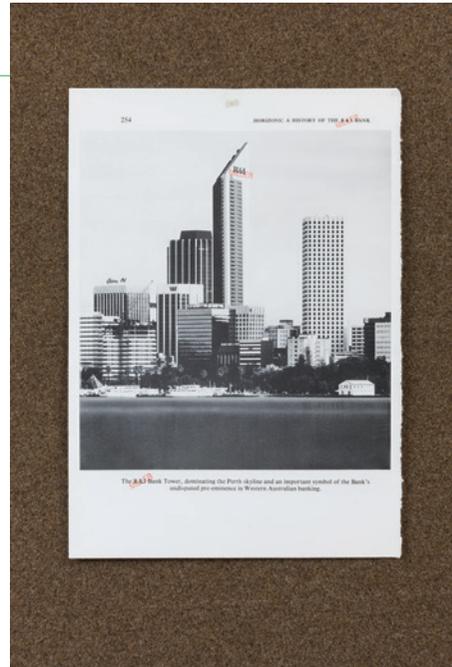
The wristwatch painting functioned in an analogous way to Kelley's love hours. As Miller said in an unpublished artist's statement, "Every artist has to deal with their daddy issues sooner or later... I aim to celebrate [my father's] years of mundane labour, of which I have been a direct beneficiary, while working with my dad in a therapeutic attempt to confront the pleasures and terrors of white-collar work."

Miller opted to repay mundane labour in kind. He is not a painter and the photorealistic painting was the result of the applied study of painting tutorials and around 500 hours of patient work.

There was an interesting gendered dynamic at work here in a nexus of love, labour and therapy. Earlier I asserted that anonymous mothers and grandmothers made the soft toys that Kelley collected. There's a contradiction there – since the toys are anonymous we have no way of knowing who made them. Historically though, this kind of unvalued labour – unvalued if compared to the price tag on a Rolex watch – has undeniably been performed, in the majority, by women.

"Basically, gift giving is like indentured slavery or something. There's no price, so you don't know how much you owe," Mike Kelley once said in an interview. "I said if each one of these toys took 600 hours to make then that's 600 hours of love; and if I gave this to you, you owe me 600 hours of love; and that's a lot. And if you can't pay it back right away it keeps accumulating..."

Where Kelley was guided by Catholic guilt, Miller's work looks more like the Protestant work ethic. Where Kelley's mums accumulated love



Daniel Stephen Miller, *Our Bank*, 2014, stamp ink on book page, push pin, modified office pinboard, picture framing glass, 41 x 52 x 2 cm, ed. 1/2 (detail).

hours, Miller's dad discharged his paternal duties in the form of material, monetary support for his son. However dispensed, family is a gift, or sometimes an accursed share, that cannot be repaid – it can only be accepted or rejected.

Thinking of fathers and sons, and near-Biblical levels of sacrifice, I cannot help but think of a funny, yet nonetheless very moving, scene from a movie. Watches are traditionally handed down, from father to son. In Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film *Pulp Fiction*, Captain Koons (played by Christopher Walken) visits a young boy to give him a watch that the boy's father carried "up his ass" for five years in a Vietnamese POW camp. It's too tempting to say that Steve Miller, Pa Miller, carried "this uncomfortable hunk of metal" up his ass for a full 25 years. No matter what he's done in the exhibition, Daniel Stephen Miller cannot repay that. He cannot misquote Captain Koons and say, "Old man, I give the watch to you."

Having Cheese Makes You Happy was at West Space, Melbourne, from 27 June to 26 July.