



Bucky Miller, "Horse", 2017

Bucky Miller

Bucky Miller is an internationally exhibited artist and writer who was born in Phoenix in 1987. He has been a Russell Lee Endowed Presidential Scholar in Photography and William and Bettye Nowlin Endowed Presidential Fellow in Photography at the University of Texas, where he earned his MFA. In 2015 he completed a residency in London as part of an exchange with the Royal College of Art Program in Sculpture. Prior to that he participated in the Little Brown Mushroom Camp for Socially Awkward Storytellers in St. Paul, Minnesota. He currently teaches photography at both the University of Texas and Texas State University. His work has been featured in *n+1* magazine and he is a recurring contributor to *The Believer Logger*. His self-published book, *The Picture of the Afghan Hound*, was selected as one of Photo-Eye's best photobooks of 2016. For his UMLAUF Prize 2017 exhibition, he created the paperback book, *Grackle Actions*.

Bill Arning

Bill Arning is the Director of the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, where he also organizes and contributes to award-winning exhibitions. He was formerly the Curator of the List Visual Arts Center at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he gained a reputation for critically acclaimed exhibitions. His essays have been published in *Time Out New York*, *Aperture*, *Modern Painters*, *The Village Voice*, *Art in America*, *Trans, Out*, and *Parkett*.

UMLAUF sculpture garden & museum

The UMLAUF Prize was founded in 2005 by UT alumnus and UMLAUF Board Member Damian Priour (1949-2011) and his wife Paula to support emerging artists from the Art Department of the University of Texas at Austin, where Charles Umlauf taught for 40 years. Umlauf's own work acknowledged his artistic forbears while presenting new approaches that looked toward the future. In addition to providing a compelling, contemporary exhibition at the UMLAUF, the Prize provides a platform of mentorship and creativity for emerging artists.

Bucky Miller: Grackle Actions UMLAUF Prize 2017

September 5 - November 26, 2017

Opening Reception*

Tuesday, September 5, 6-8pm

Insights: Bill Arning & Bucky Miller*

Wednesday, September 27, 7pm

**These events are free and open to the public.*

UMLAUF Mission

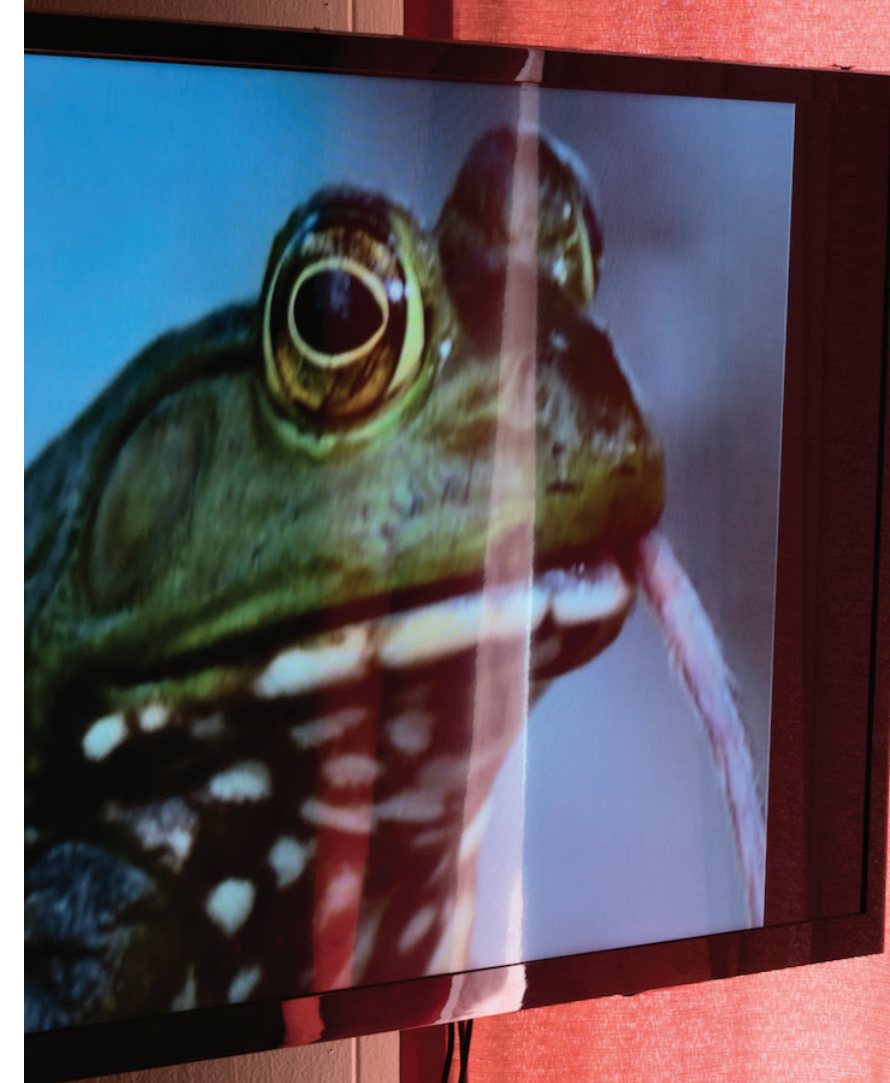
The UMLAUF Sculpture Garden & Museum exhibits the work of Charles Umlauf, his influences, and other contemporary sculptors in a natural setting, and provides educational experiences that encourage the understanding and appreciation of sculpture.

umlaufsculpture.org



This project is supported in part by the Cultural Arts Division of the City of Austin Economic Development Department.

Bucky Miller: Grackle Actions



UMLAUF Prize 2017

Bucky Miller: The Singing Frog

Spending time with Bucky Miller while he prepared for his UMLAUF Prize exhibition meant surrendering to a surreal, disorienting universe. His art has long incorporated animals, both real and fictionalized, including dogs, raccoons, swans, geese, pigeons, frogs, plus a host of less recognizable quasi-critters. Bucky’s art encourages an attunement to human and animal presence, even within seemingly inanimate objects. Ultimately many of his objects (a table leg, a chair, a column) are imbued with personality, and the situations he creates feel uncanny. The subject of a photo or sculpture can seem comfortably familiar, but at the same time unsettling. Bucky also has a heightened sensitivity to similarity. Even his name is similar to another: his father named him after the polymath American architect and inventor, Buckminster Fuller. Bucky Miller, Bucky Fuller.



Bucky Miller, *Kitchen Scene*, 2017

Early in his research, Bucky was drawn to the UMLAUF’s brown garden shed. It happened to have the identical brown paneling as his Austin apartment. Because of the similarity, the shed exerted a powerful force on the artist, moving him to revisit the shed repeatedly, like a homing pigeon. In another instance this summer, while pet sitting for friends, Bucky noticed that someone else in the same apartment complex owned two dogs nearly identical to his friends’ dogs. Similar animals, same place, but not the same creatures. His sensitivity to doppelgänger situations is infectious. One day he texted me, thinking he had forgotten his blue cap at the Museum. I pulled a blue New York ball cap from the Lost & Found (Bucky had recently returned from New York). I replied to his text, triumphant. He responded with a photo of his blue cap, on a chair at his apartment. “It was here all along,” he wrote. Bucky’s universe is filled with such parallel instances.

In one of Bucky’s photos, the head of a white dog is blurred in motion, although it is otherwise sitting still. Another photograph shows an animal-like mass of white foam in a dingy room, making it hard to “un-see” the dog from the other photo. In *Kitchen Scene*, a wax squirrel faces the viewer from atop a chrome bread box. A large reptile head, perhaps a turtle or lizard, seems to be reflected in the chrome. Noticeably absent in the photo is the animal who made the reflection, as if it could only be captured through its mirrored reflection. In other cases, Bucky’s photographic manipulations make it hard to believe that the subject (a cat, a goose) is a living creature.

As part of his exhibition research, he hoped to photograph the UMLAUF Garden at night. Bucky didn’t know what to expect, but wanted to see the Garden when no one else was present. I was pleased to accompany him and excited at the possibility of showing Bucky our nocturnal creatures. I listed off every animal the Staff had ever seen. In my enthusiasm, I practically

guaranteed Bucky an animal sighting. It seemed like a fair bet, but I worried that I’d promised him a singing frog.*

But our first evening trip to the Garden began with an unexpected jolt. At dusk, we locked ourselves inside the gated Garden. “Is anyone else supposed to be here tonight?” asked Bucky, as he stared into the Garden. “No,” I said nervously, following his gaze to see a man sitting on a bench with his back to us. “Please walk with me to ask him to leave,” I asked Bucky as I grabbed my pepper spray. As we grew closer, the man did not respond to our calls. Then I realized the man was Julius, the UMLAUF’s mascot: a scarecrow made of straw. (Julius is named for Charles Julius Umlauf.) One of the Staff had placed him in the Garden that afternoon to promote Zilker Park and our upcoming Last Straw Fest.

After my heart settled down, Bucky told me that a specific scarecrow had a profound impact on him in childhood. He even wrote about it in his 2017 MFA thesis. Mr. Thingy was a headless scarecrow made of Bucky’s father’s clothes and stuffed with newspaper. Mr. Thingy was nice if you were good, and mean if you were bad. But, as Bucky points out, “the issue wasn’t nice or mean, good or bad. Those dichotomies are too simple.” That observation lends insights to Bucky’s art: the dichotomies between truth/fiction, animate/inanimate, are too simple. The Buckyverse can hold all options. Ambiguity is the norm.

We did end up seeing animals at the UMLAUF. Loads of them. But they proved to have less of an impact on Bucky’s exhibition than the unexpected experiences, such as how stumbling on Julius transported Bucky back to a childhood memory. Or the presence of a pale orange modernist chair in the Umlauf home that still seems to hold Charles Umlauf’s presence.

While testing out his installation, Bucky repurposed a found object and placed it in the UMLAUF’s stream. It was a 1970s stainless steel chair with a green molded seat that he modified by bending the legs out. He put the chair in the water, with its distended legs straddling the stream. “It works,” he said. “I call it Frog.” Of course he did.

Katie Robinson Edwards

UMLAUF Curator

** In the classic Looney Tunes cartoon, a construction worker discovers a frog who dances and sings show tunes for him alone. Whenever the construction worker tries to make the frog perform for an audience, the frog will only ribbit.*



Bucky Miller, *Frog (Samsonite)*, chair, 2017



Bucky Miller, *Portrait*, 2017

Bucky Miller and the Undefinable

Bucky Miller’s artwork is best understood more as a philosophically loaded quandary than as a straight aesthetic experience. It became clear in the simple descriptive language one needs for a press release that as soon as one uttered a declarative sentence about Miller, one was already lying. To say, “Bucky Miller is a photographer”—which he probably is—brings up all the ways in which he is not, and his exhibitions are not photography shows, although the most memorable elements are photographic. Miller clearly cherishes the many category crises that his practice creates and urges us to try (and fail) to disentangle the elements.

A photograph is not identical with the thing it depicts. Yet, it always is identified with the subject in terms of our experience. The mental gymnastics to say, “This is a photograph of my dog,” versus holding up the same snapshot and saying, “This is my dog,” is nearly impossible. Despite dealing with the disappearing objecthood of photographic prints in our digital age, when an actual print is made, decisions must be made as to how it should be displayed. The strength of our assumptions (framed, mounted, preserved in albums) is based on where we associate looking at pictures in our personal histories. And finally, there is the larger issue of how exhibition space is already a sculptural question. Every object put into a space needs to be dealt with sculpturally. (The way Bucky dealt with this in his University of Texas thesis exhibition was so deft that it won him this Award.)

Miller’s photographs, when placed in the UMLAUF Gallery and merging out into the Sculpture Garden, further confuse definitions. They depict unnatural nature: a puppet of a bird that looks more alive than an out-of-focus flashed-out goose. Images of a chimpanzee on a towel and a frog from a nature show conjure parallel responses with viewers. The subjects’ big eyes and memorable facial expressions capture our human sympathetic imaginations of nature and its metaphors, even though they are clearly at a far remove from anything remotely wild. The disequilibrium between the two words in “sculpture/park” function similarly, in that the more we see a park as already sculptural (meaning designed for psychological effect), the further it is from pure nature. The historical design battles between bucolic versus highly manicured and geometric parks remain as background buzz when framed by Miller’s nature/not nature works. Similarly, Miller also includes photographs of found leftovers of architecture, such as a brick embedded in concrete. While these formations appear to have been constructed for some long forgotten unaesthetic purpose, they will remind savvy gallery-goers of well-known artwork by sculptors like Isa Genzken and Franz West. They become sculptures by existing only in Miller’s photographs, so the photographs are now sculpture, too.

It is a brave artist indeed who designs his work to slip between definitions and descriptions, and the game he invites us to play—trying (and failing) to define what our eyes see in language—will, for many visitors, bleed into the rest of their day. The snapchat image your 13-year-old niece sent of her favorite stuffed animal will send you into a philosophical hole, and that is a very sophisticated and pleasurable aftereffect of Bucky Miller’s art effect.

Bill Arning

Director, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston

UMLAUF Prize 2017 Juror



Bucky Miller, *Bathroom*, 2017