



They Say Taupe Is Very Soothing
by Bucky Miller

In the last month I watched all three Steven Soderbergh-directed Ocean's Eleven films out of order. If you haven't seen them, George Clooney stars as Danny Ocean, a master thief who assembles an all-star crew of conmen to rob Andy Garcia's Las Vegas casinos and impress his ex-wife Tess (portrayed by Julia Roberts). I began with my blind spot, 2004's critically-panned Ocean's Twelve. Midway through that movie it's revealed that Tess happens to look exactly like the real-world actress Julia Roberts. She has to act that she's tricking Bruce Willis (playing himself) into thinking that she is herself (a self whom she is not playing, except for elsewhere in the movie where she is). None of it makes sense, and it's deeply disorienting, but maybe there is some hidden value in that.

Next I backtracked to Ocean's Eleven (2001), a truly great movie that I hoped could tidy up the mess Twelve left in my mind. Unfortunately, going in with fresh knowledge that Tess was a veritable doppelganger added a thin yet vibrant membrane of "what is happening??!!" to my rewatch. Stay with me here: Such a membrane could be a crucial asset to an artist like Erin Miller; someone who already works with layers; who values comfort and confusion in equal measure and often in the same serving.

For completion's sake I then watched the pretty good Ocean's Thirteen (2007), which ends up being a bit predictable but features a sorta fun villain turn from Al Pacino. Pacino, throughout the latter half of his career at least, has consistently made the case that it's cool to go big. In Thirteen, honestly, he could have gone even louder. Like, to the volume of certain Erin Miller prints.

In retrospect, it is clear that the casinos where Ocean's Eleven and Thirteen take place are more than just convenient settings. They are propulsive playing fields for the heists in the movies. Action oversaturates these spaces in all directions and at all times, making it easy to believe in the complexity of the capers and even easier, as a viewer, to get fooled by Soderbergh's deft filmic misdirects. Contrast this with the muddy Twelve, which is set, honestly, I don't even know where—merely adrift in some stuffy European opulence—and it's clear how the totally American glitz that dominates Las Vegas is an important part of the formula. Could Erin Miller say something similar about her work? The Texas/Vegas Venn diagram is a curious but crowded one.

Miller, who is from Houston and lives in Austin, has this show at the Galveston Arts Center called Lucky Charm Casino. She asked me to write about the exhibit, and happily obliged, though once again I am doing things out of order. The show opens on June 1, it's currently May 11, and here I am attempting to perform ekphrasis. The risk, as I can see it, is in making too bold of a claim, the spiritual equivalent of forcing a viewer to consider whether or not everyone knows that Julia Roberts looks like herself. Instead, this Miller suggests you let that Miller guide you through the playground she's been building for years.

(We aren't related. Every time I write about Erin I have to make it clear that we aren't related.)

Printmaking might always be a multi-part scheme, and in Miller's case it definitely is. Over the past few months she's texted me a continuous stream of documentation as she's added more layers, more charms, and more material to the plot. These iterative clues confirmed something I already knew about Miller: her work embraces a lavish sensibility that, from my perspective as an on-and-off resident of the Lone Star State, feels particularly Texan. When she lived in Ithaca, her prints power clashed with the gorge-rich Middle Earth landscape. I am confident that the sensation will be much different a few blocks from the cruise terminals of Galveston. But like my third straight experience with a Danny Ocean ruse, I know not to mistake the bits and pieces that have been revealed for the finished product.

At the center of Miller's new plan, she will confess, is a parallel that she's encountered between casino architecture and the serotonin pathways of the human brain. Antidepressants work by increasing the activity of serotonin and other neurotransmitters, while casinos are designed to perform like sinister antidepressants that keep players playing by maintaining elevated states of stimulation. Flashing lights, buzzy carpets, like Frank Sinatra or someone, ring-a-ding-ding. Zoloft, Prozac, Paxil, Lexapro. It's a funny and fitting comparison, albeit a little dark. It's also an appropriate framework through which to encounter Miller's peppy maximalism. Previewing her new works via text, I was never quite given a chance to rest.

Instead I was coaxed on by a shouting chorus of colors and somewhat recognizable forms, simultaneously all jazzed up and comfortable in the chaos, never not primed and ready for more. And jeez, of course that sensation was coming through a phone! Though I think, had she not said anything about casinos, that I would have gravitated more toward a comparison with popcorn-stained cinema carpet. My mind is clearly on the movies.

It's not too difficult to imagine the twin hemispheres of Miller's brain as Ocean's Eleven stars Geroge Clooney and Brad Pitt. They sit together in the darkened hotel bar that is her studio, mindlessly watching a strobelight of a boxing promotion on a CRT TV. It is 2001, after all. If you've seen the film you know what I'm talking about. The half of Erin's brain that is Brad Pitt looks worn out, its muzzle dug into its arms which are folded atop the bar. Clooney-Brain is a bit more alert, in the moment, sipping its stiff drink.

"That makes ten charms" says Clooney-Brain, "ten oughta do it don't you think?"

Pitt-Brain is silent, unblinking, staring dead ahead.

"Do you think we need one more," says Clooney-Brain.

Pitt-Brain says nothing, doesn't move.

"You think we need one more," says Clooney-Brain.

No change from Pitt-Brain, not even an eyelid.

"Alright we'll get one more."

