

Nick Miller

VESSELS : NATURE MORTE

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Riva sleeping (3/9/13) Watercolour on paper, 30 x 30 cm





Roses (6/12/13) Watercolour on paper, 30 x 30 cm

VESSELS: NATURE MORTE

I returned to painting flowers in 2011 at the start of a four year collaborative residency at North West Hospice in Sligo, Ireland. Each week I worked there, I would use cuttings from nature as subjects for paintings made in a temporary studio on the hospice ward. While this provided some distraction for patients, families and staff from ward life, it also opened the door to some remarkable human encounters and to watercolour portraits that sometimes followed. I focused on the need to work quickly; to hold life, rather than the illness or the wilting of the flower.

By early 2013, this hospice work had taken me by surprise and generated a renewed energy in my own studio. It mirrored experiences in my life during the period; losing my father in 2012 and then my mother becoming terminally ill soon after in London.

After each visit to her, I would joke that I was taking my inheritance early, returning to the studio with more of the vases, bottles and pots that she had collected during her lifetime. I painted them with whatever the season offered in terms of flowers, blossoms, weeds, branches, lichens or seaweeds, their vitality holding for as long it lasted, in the vessels in which they stood. These paintings evolved as ways to make remote connection to her; a way of attending, even if not always physically.

I know there is some urgency in this work, of seeing the fullness of life before it passes. Making paintings this way offered some release in the face of transience and mortality, while still gambling on an afterlife, in pigment itself.

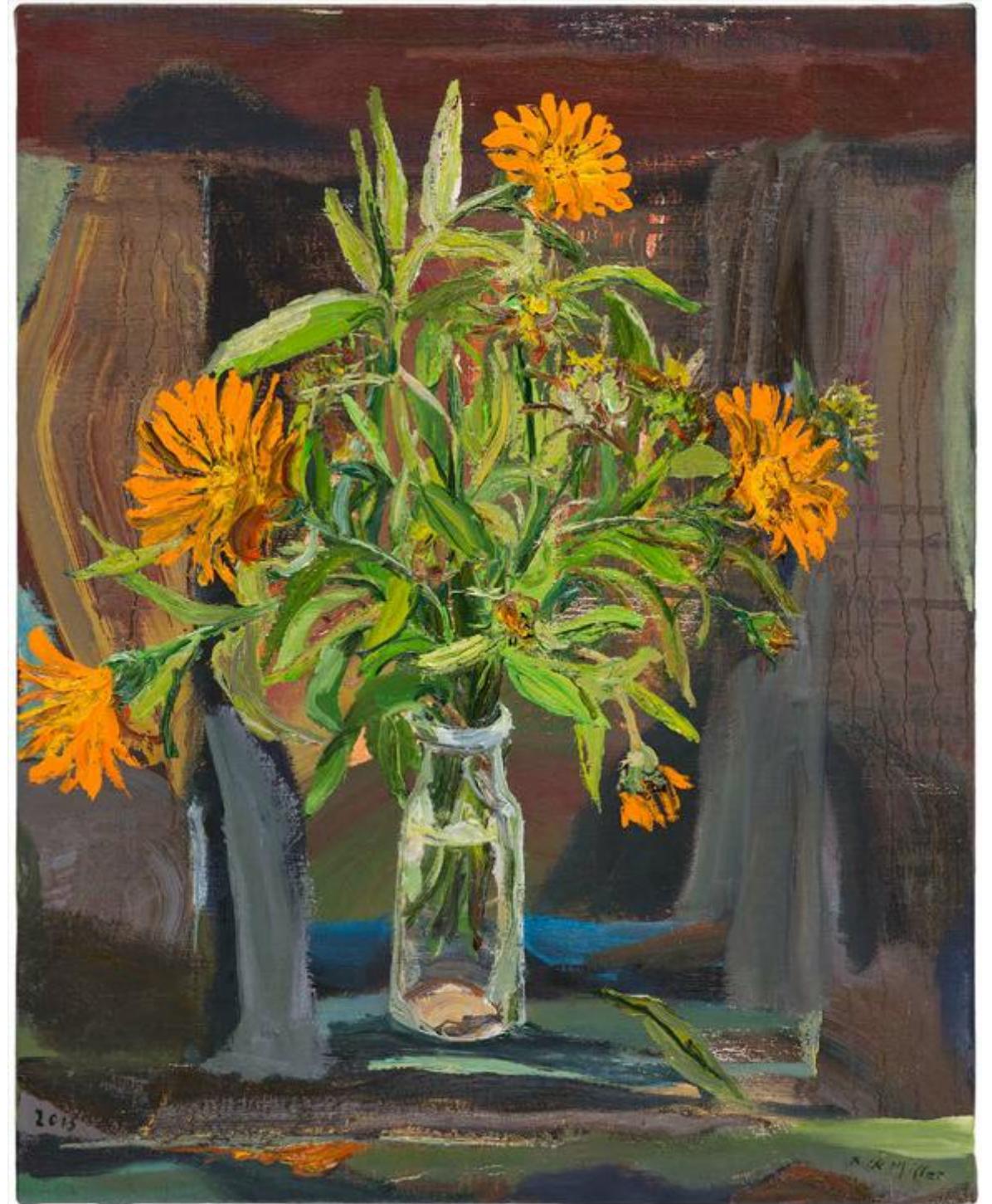
Nick Miller



Blackberries 2013, Oil on linen, 51 x 41 cm



Blackthorn berries 2013, Oil on linen, 51 x 41 cm



Calendula 2013, Oil on linen, 51 x 41 cm



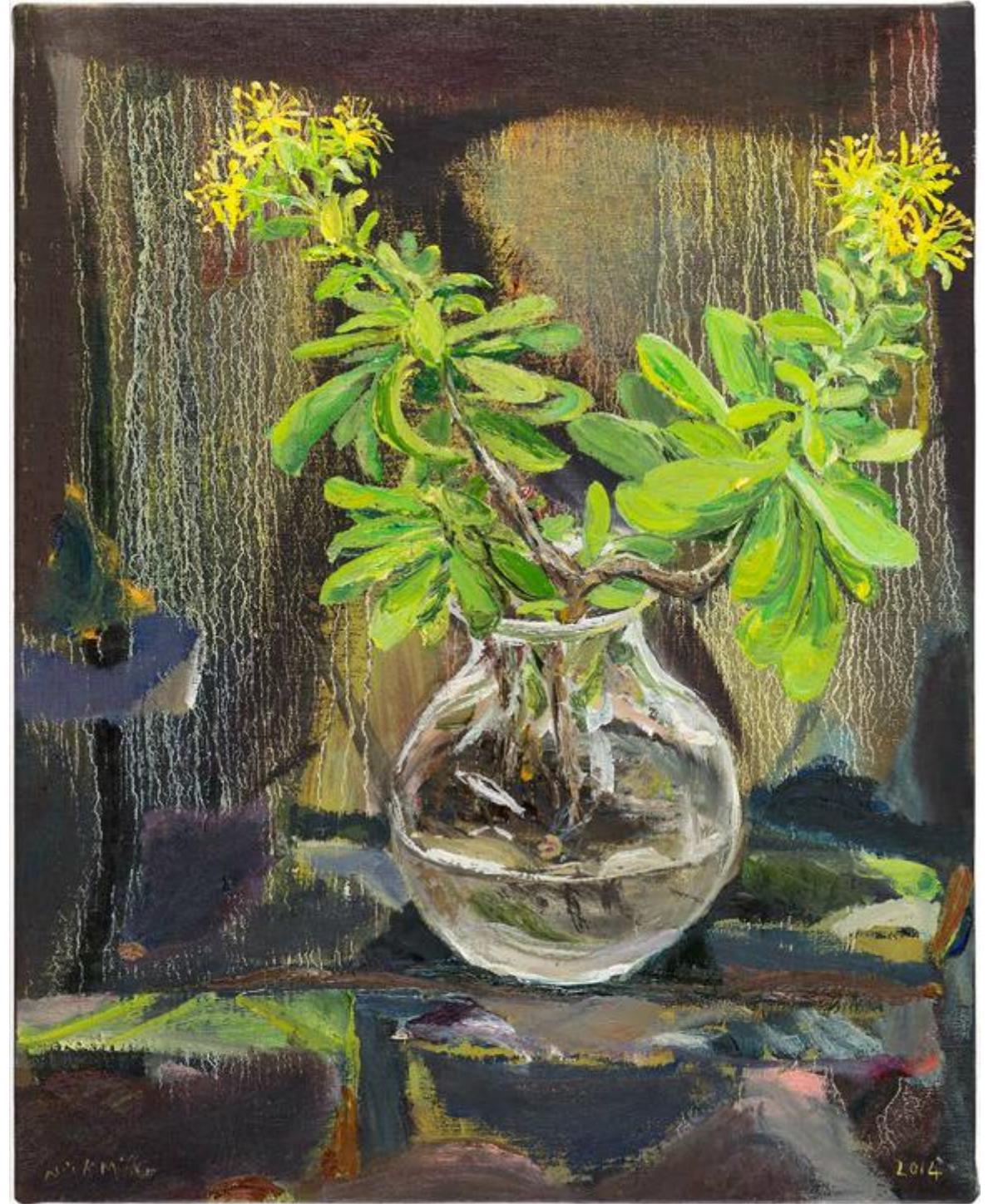
Catkins 2013, Oil on linen, 51 x 41 cm



Daffodils 2013, Oil on linen, 51 x 41 cm



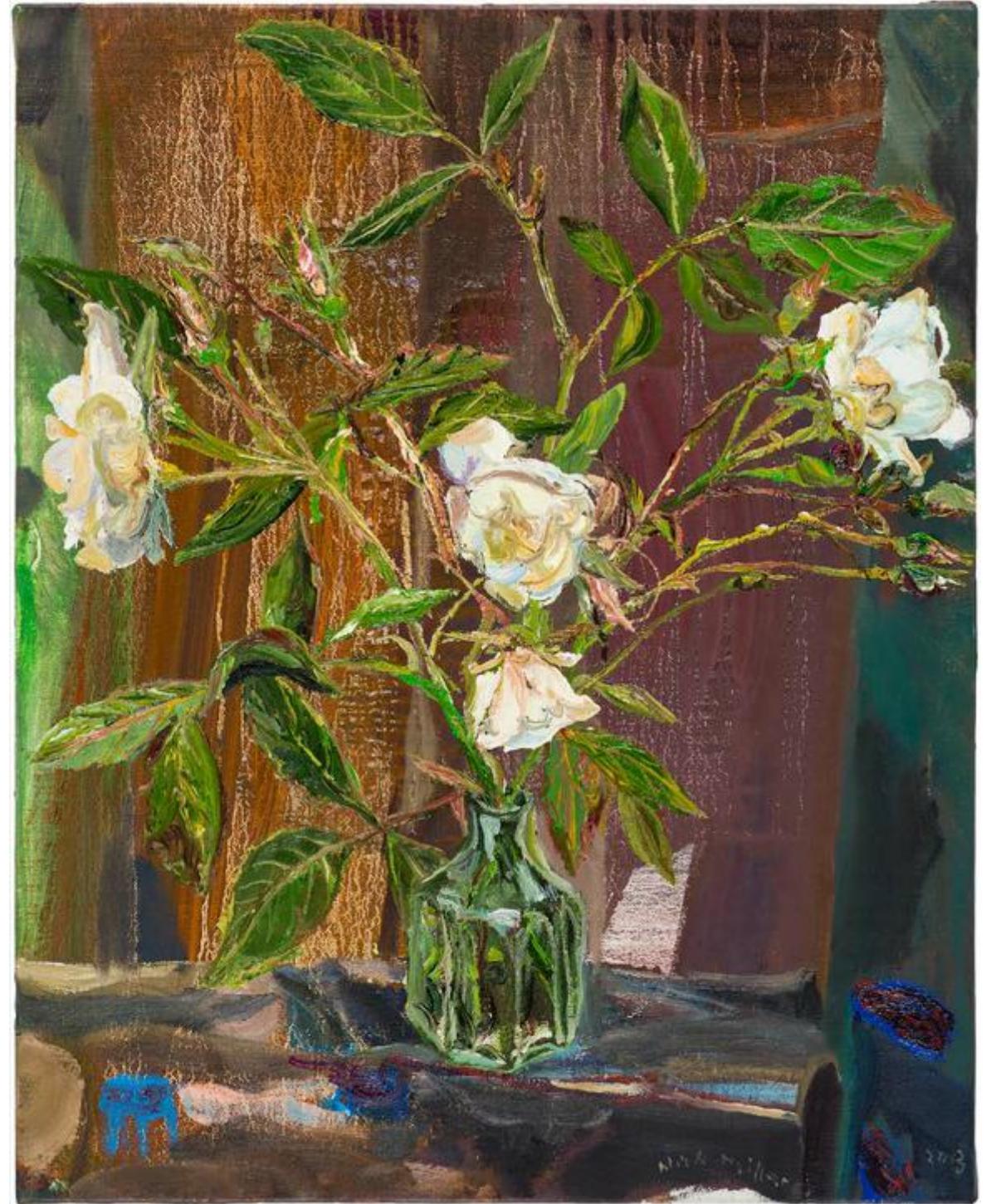
Faded Hydrangeas 2013, Oil on linen, 51 x 41 cm



Succulent 2013, Oil on linen, 51 x 41 cm



Hips 2013, Oil on linen, 51 x 41 cm



White Rose 2013, Oil on linen, 51 x 41 cm





Heaven's Gate 2014, Oil on linen, 61 x 51 cm (Above)

Seaweed Ascophyllum 2016, Oil on linen, 61 x 51 cm (Opposite)



Electra in the Garden 1

by Colm Tóibín

In the months that followed, my mother became a gentle creature, coming to my room to talk about food and flowers. I watched her calmly. I was almost sure that her sweetness was a way of masking the cruelty and determination that was growing within her, becoming random and pointless as she herself seemed to lose concentration easily, regularly asking me to remind her of what she had just been discussing.



Lichen 2016, Oil on linen, 61 x 51 cm

She appeared more dangerous to me like this. Some of her will was gone, to be replaced by soft appetite, self-effacing smiles. But there were days when she grew silent as we walked together in the garden and I noticed how deliberate her steps could be and I sensed that she was thinking over something, pondering some possible action, even as she nervously bent over to pull up a weed as though this was the most she could do at this late time of her life. It almost pained her to part the weed from the soil that had nourished it. She put the weed neatly into her basket so she could find a sweet resting place for it later.

She would talk then about her life, her concerns. She would imitate any mother on a warm day taking a stroll in a garden with her daughter. She would pretend that the guards all around us were not watching out for murderers and marauders, as afraid for themselves and their families as anyone else who came within the walls of this poisonous place which my mother and her lover had created. She would be all smiles, pretending that all her thoughts were simple.

'Aeghisthus,' she would say, 'has never been a great sleeper. I worry about this. I think he needs to sleep more. Will you tell him this? Will you tell him that he must sleep more? He wakes with the dawn, but sometimes I also find him awake during the night. I implore him to try and go back to sleep.'



Rhubarb 2014, Oil on linen, 61 x 51 cm

She would stop then and hold me by the wrist, her tone becoming more urgent and confiding.

'It is sleep that allows me to go on. I cannot imagine life without sleep. Your father was a great sleeper, a heavy sleeper. That is what helped to make him such a great man. But once he woke, he would be wide-awake. He would want the day to start instantly. He would call all his people, he would begin to make plans. He had so many plans.'

She made the word 'plans' sound like something real and tangible, like coins or blood.

I walked in the garden with my mother. I felt that she was testing my patience with this senseless chatter. She was trying to see into my soul with her ramblings. Since she and Aegisthus had tamed each other, or come to a pact, or bored each other sufficiently that neither one made any difference to the other, then I was the one who was important. In those hours, as I watched my mother give detailed instructions to the gardeners, I knew that it still somehow mattered to her that I was alive.

All of the others had been lost. If I were to be lost too, if Aegisthus were to murder me, as my father had murdered Iphigenia, or if Aeghisthus were to kidnap me as he had done with Orestes, then what my mother had struggled for would be in vain. Looking after me, making sure that I slept safely in my bed, going to gather flowers with me, soothing my fears, gave her a purpose. In her



White Hellebore 2016, Oil on linen, 61 x 51 cm

dreams, I was the reason why she remained alive. In her waking time, a great deal more occurred, but not a sign of that was offered to me in those walks in the garden.

She had, she was sure, already defeated me. I was no threat to her. But nonetheless she watched her, attended to every remark I made and every response. She would have given anything to observe me when I was alone. Every day then was a test, a new way for her to be certain that her only living daughter was a crushed and gentle being, a girl easily distracted, given to melancholy, someone who gave her allegiance to ghosts, who talked about the gods and wondered about flower arrangements and who nodded as her mother spoke, nodded in appreciation of how complex and pressing were her mother's concerns and how busy and worrying her mother's life.

'You know,' she would say, 'there is a line each morning to see me, to ask me about land and water rights, to consult me about inheritance and old disputes. Aeghisthus says that it is too much, that we must send those people away. Some of the visitors could even be dangerous, he says. But I know them. I knew those people when your father was alive. They come because they trust me as they trusted your father. In the mornings sometimes I have them brought into the palace. And often that is enough for them, and perhaps even for those left waiting. We have allowed them to come into the palace. I use that room where your father's guards



Oxeye Daisies 2016, Oil on linen, 61 x 51 cm

used to be. I sit and I listen. Some day you must come with me and help me. You must listen too. Will you come with me some day?

I smile distractedly, making sure that she believes that I have been paying attention, and that I would like to come, but letting her believe also that meeting outsiders would be too much for me, that such encounters would disrupt the brittle well-being which has descended on me, the calm and ease I exude now which my mother has done so much to nourish and control.

As I walk in the gardens with my mother, as we collect flowers together and fill bowls in the palace with bright blooms, I am my own ghost. I move slowly like we imagine the dead move. I waver between full attention and letting my mind move inwards. I seem both innocent and preoccupied, alert and ready to fade. Sometimes, I cut back briars and brambles to get to some flowers that are brighter, more enticing, than the ones more easily cut. As I do this, I am careful not to appear too much in control, but rather I suggest whimsy, I imitate someone fulfilling a sudden urge. As I bring the flowers back, I seek my mother's approval as though I were a child.

But I do not always make things easy. By now, my mother knows that there is in me a streak of stubbornness that she cannot break down. This amuses her, allows her to feel that I have not moved too far away from her, that I contain aspects of her and my father. For my room I will only take certain flowers. If something is



Ash Blossom 2014, Oil on linen, 61 x 51 cm Private collection, Ireland

yellow or red, then I will only take one stem and place it against some briars or bindweed or high green grasses that I have also cut. But when the season is right, I seek out iris and larkspur and rockrose and I will take them to my room and study them for their subtlety. Alone, away from her, I crave what is purple and blue and filled with shade. It satisfies me after those trips when we have decorated the corridors and the public spaces with bright scents and florid shapes to return here with some flowers whose dull rich colours mirror something that I keep hidden when I am not alone.

On the days when we move towards the steps to the sunken garden that remains overgrown I watch my mother. She takes each step with care, moving sideways at times so that she can avoid the stone that has crumbled. I follow her, savouring her presence here, enjoying the dank smells and the sense of a world that is approaching wilderness. I picture her on a day in the future. I imagine the guards being lured away for a moment by some other sound and then a shriek rending the air, a single cry, and then the sound of my mother moaning in pain, protesting, seeking to make her way back up the steps and then falling backwards and down into the mass of brambles and weeds that have been battling for light and nourishment from the soil. I imagine her bright blood against the green growth, her desperate efforts to turn and sit up and then the dull groans as the life flows out of her and everything around her begins to darken.





Rose 2014, Oil on linen, 31 x 21 cm



Blackberry flowers 2015, Oil on linen, 31 x 21 cm



Cherry Blossom 2014, Oil on linen, 76 x 71 cm

*'I dislike the word art as to painting.
There is only one art and that is the art of living.'*
(Jack B Yeats)

Still Life is possibly the least celebrated of the traditional genres of art. By tradition it was placed lowest in the hierarchy – the depiction of dead or dying objects, such as game or blooms – ranking below landscape, portraiture and history painting. Delacroix gave it new life in the mid-nineteenth century with baskets of succulent fruits and colourful blooms opening up a vision of sensuous feeling and visual appetite. While a similar fecundity animated Renoir's flower paintings, the mundanity of Manet's later still lifes – a bunch of asparagus, rose stems placed casually on a table top or dropped into a simple glass vase – and after him Cezanne's ensembles of apples, dignified the quietness of the everyday, making such consumable, transient pleasures as much a subject for art as any other. Indeed, the unassuming still life, comprised of musical instruments, bottles and newspapers, enabled the sustained visual analysis that led Picasso and Braque to evolve the visual vocabulary of cubism in the early 20th century.



Rosebay Willowherb 2015, Oil on linen, 71 x 64 cm

There has been a periodic re-emergence of still life, as in Chaim Soutine's elongated, eviscerated chickens, whose depiction suggested a swift execution in paint before being placed in the impoverished artist's cooking pot. Morandi's sustained engagement with minute variations in the spatial relationship of familiar ceramic pots and vases in his studio shaped his artistic outlook. Gerhard Richter's memento mori still lifes with skulls and candles, painted in the mid-1980s, were presented without great fanfare while his more desirable abstract paintings dominated taste in the market for his works. Their elegiac character was acknowledged from the beginning, although early responses questioned the originality of returning to such well-worn motifs from the long traditions of painting. Richter depicted them as a photographic blur, caused by running a dry brush over the still-wet paint, to create an optical distance between his photographic source image and the reality of the painted surface.

Of all the genres, still lifes' integration of time's passing is central to their meaning. The blossom on the cusp of wilting, the fruit on the verge of decay or the glistening plumpness of fish or oysters before they turn, are all fixed by the moment of the painting's completion. Holding time in this way does not halt natural processes; it merely implies stasis and changelessness. The glacial time-lapse pace of Sam Taylor-Wood's 'Still Life' (2001), a video, stretches and quickens this conceit as a bowl of fruit sprouts clouds of purple mould.



Silktassel 2015, Oil on linen, 76 x 71 cm

Nick Miller has made a profound connection with subjects in the natural world since moving to the west of Ireland thirty years ago. Among the most celebrated are the subjects – fields, stone walls, trees – viewed through and framed by the back door of his mobile studio-truck. They mediate between the atelier and landscape in as direct a way as Monet achieved while painting on the water in his studio-boat. An example of this is the viewer transported directly onto the river in ‘Argenteuil Basin’ (1874) in the collection of the National Gallery of Ireland. The mobility of Miller’s set-up enabled him to find and paint a broad range of unanticipated, chanced-upon views. He matched this urge for discovery and immediacy with a swiftness of execution. Miller incorporated and translated the vigour of natural energies, atmosphere and growth with a consciousness of the moment of making. His painting acquires the intensity of performance.

After a twenty year absence Miller returned to painting flowers in 2011. This renewed focus drew the animating power of nature in the landscape, in miniaturised form, into the studio itself. The trigger was a residency Miller undertook in a hospice in Sligo, near where he lives and works. There he encountered people at the final stages of life, addressing an inevitable endpoint with resistance, regret, reconciliation or resignation. Speaking with people at this stage in their lives, not knowing them as friend or family, led, he recalled in a conversation with the author, unusually free and wide-ranging conversations about their



Mountain Ash 2014, Oil on linen, 122 x 107 cm

memories, fears and hopes. With arrangements of flowers, a ubiquitous presence in hospices and hospitals, along with the patients, Miller found his subject. Many of his responses came in the form of watercolours, their fluid transparency a mark of the transience of the passing lives he encountered, their vividness and free forms matching the powerful exchanges he found he was having. They were also works he made quickly, as the watercolour medium dictates, capturing as swiftly as possible the emotional impact of those exchanges.

Some months later mortality within his own family began to consume his attention. First his father, the mathematician Hilton Miller, died after suffering a long decline from Alzheimers. Hilton Miller had left his permanent job as a statistician in his forties to become an avid painter, principally of landscapes. He took classes at the City Lit in London before converting a room of the family's north London home into a studio. He only exhibited his work at the very end of his life. Shortly after his father's death, Miller's mother, Riva Miller, who had worked as a clinical counsellor at the Royal Free Hospital in London and whose work on AIDs brought her to wider attention, was diagnosed with a brain tumour. Miller visited her frequently and it is during those visits to London that these still lifes were conceived. His filial attentiveness was leavened by gentle ribbing, telling his mother he was taking his inheritance as he removed on each visit one of the many bottles and glass or pottery vases she had accumulated over a lifetime.



Gorse 2016, Oil on linen, 142 x 122 cm

He returned to Ireland with them, taking back photographs of the paintings he then made to show her on subsequent visits. Each became the vessel for a piece of nature – seaweed, hedgerow flowers, roadside weeds, moorland blooms, garden blossoms, flowering shrubs – whatever could be found. ‘Chasing spring’, as Miller termed his search for these still life motifs.

The small oils, and occasional watercolours, he painted during this period were marks on the chart of his mother’s passage through her final illness, and of his artistic response to being with her. Miller bundled his energies into a tight period of time, often taking under an hour to finish an oil, to capture the rhythm of making, as much as a likeness of what he had observed. His concentrated purposefulness overrides any attempt at technical perfection – his rendering of glass, or the sheen of the glazing can appear ungainly. However, a precise likeness was never his goal, more the attainment of a certain truth to feeling generated by painting in the moment. Without doubt, the remarkably varied blooms and branches are highly recognisable, vivid in their colours and clearly identifiable.

Miller gives heightened attention to the plants in the foreground, which are placed before indistinct grounds. These consist of semi-abstract textures of surface, pattern and colour loosely based on studio set-ups of easels, canvases, textiles and the like. Painted beforehand to save time, they serve as readymade backdrops for the plants placed centre stage. An unusual but effective composite



Lichen, Hawthorne 2016, Oil on linen, 142 x 122 cm

for image-making, it allowed Miller a degree of playfulness, with random spills and drips becoming part of the whole. Their subdued tonalities recall Braque's late still lifes seen some years ago at an exhibition in London. By seizing the energy of the moment of painting, Miller puts himself under pressure, to give himself no escape. It means some works do not come off and so he abandons them. On the other hand he creates a concentrated channel within which he finds a freedom to create.

This series is a personal response to the passing of a life, to slowly letting go, while celebrating life's fragility and tenacity. As with so much of Miller's painting, its source is in Sligo, where he first travelled several decades ago, to become a painter in the manner he needed. With this moving group of still lifes, Miller closes the circle of return to the place he left to start out on that road.

Sean Rainbird
May 2016



Artichokes 2014, Oil on linen, 122 x 107 cm Private collection, London

Nick Miller (b 1962, London). Graduating in Development Studies from the University of East Anglia, he moved to Ireland in 1984, working first in Co Clare, then in Dublin. Since 1992, he has been largely based in Co Sligo. Miller pursues different genres and modes of working that allow direct engagement with subjects: portraits, landscape or object. Elected as a member of Aosdána in 2001 in recognition of his contribution to Arts in Ireland, he is the recipient of the inaugural 2014 Hennessy Portrait Award at the National Gallery of Ireland. Miller has exhibited widely including solo shows at The Irish Museum of Modern Art and the RHA and the New York Studio School. His work is held in many private, institutional and public collections nationally and internationally including The National Gallery of Ireland; Irish Museum of Modern Art; Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane; The Arts Council (Ireland); The Niland Collection, The European Investment Bank, Luxembourg.

Selected exhibitions:

Nick Miller and the studio of Edward McGuire, **Irish Museum of Modern Art** (Nov 2015–May 2016); *Vessels: Nature Morte*, **RHA**, Dublin (2015); *Sitting*, **Laois Arthouse**, Stradbally, Co Laois (2014); *YARD*, **Rubicon Gallery**, Dublin (2012); *Tree House 360°*, **OH Projects, Boston/Concord Arts Association**, MA, USA (2011); **Rubicon Gallery**, Dublin (2010); *Painting Patrick: after Venus and Olympia*, **Kilkenny Arts Festival**, Kilkenny (2011); *Truckscapes–Paintings from a mobile studio*, **New York Studio School**, New York (2008); *Truckscapes–Drawings from a Mobile Studio*, **Centre Culturel Irlandais**, Paris (2007); **Limerick City Gallery of Art**, Limerick (2008); **Rubicon Gallery**, Dublin (2008); *Genre*, **The Butler Gallery**, The Castle, Kilkenny (2004); *Figure to Ground*, **RHA**, Dublin (2003); *Closer*, **Rubicon Gallery**, Dublin; **Art Space Gallery**, London (2000); **Kilkenny Arts Festival**, Kilkenny (2001); *New Paintings*, **Art Space Gallery**, London (1999); *South African Works*, **Irish Museum of Modern Art** (1994); *Paintings & Drawings*, **Galerie D'Eendt**, Amsterdam (1992) and *The Shadow Line*, **The City Arts Centre**, Dublin (1991); *Twilights Raw*, **Project Arts Centre**, Dublin (1988). In 2002 he curated the Irish visit of Chinese artist Chen ZhongSen including: *Chen & Miller-East + West*, **The Model**, Sligo.

www.nickmiller.ie

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For Riva

And all the patients, families, staff and colleagues at Ag Cruinniú / Encounter collaborative arts project at North West Hospice in Sligo, who showed me life.

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