

MUSIC & VISUAL ART

VISUAL ART

Closing the gaps

In Nick Miller's current show at the RHA, the walls are filled with views of his immediate locality, but also his works which bring him closer to reality

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NICK Miller didn't train as an artist, in fact he studied Developmental Studies but he always drew and painted. And though he worked in areas related to his formal studies, he found himself increasingly absorbed by painting so that within a few years of leaving college he was painting full-time. Developmental Studies, he says, is to do with "fixing the world" and while there may have been an element of him fixing the world through his painting in the early stages he says this continues only in the sense that he is trying to wake himself up to a connection to nature. Elsewhere he has said: "What makes a painter paint? It's usually some dysfunction or dissatisfaction with our connection to the world."

In 1984, when much of Ireland's youth was emigrating due to the recession, Miller, then in his early 20s, moved from Norwich to Dublin. He worked there for a number of years before heading to a fairly remote part of Sligo where he and his young family set up home.

In his current show at the RHA, the walls are filled with views of his immediate locality. There are canvases large and small, of his garden, his vegetable plot, the trees, the adjacent field and further afield – but not very much further. In his landscapes Miller's focus is on the natural surroundings within just a few miles of his home. He feels no urgency to travel further – all that he needs to paint is at hand and in abundance. He does not choose romantic vistas nor dramatic landscapes so much as unexceptional trees and fields and bushes and hedges in all their verdant lushness or wintry skeletal beauty.

For some reason the landscape series of the Seasons by the 16th century Antwerp painter Breugel comes to mind. It is the strength of observation and the sensitivity to the atmosphere and natural environment that is common to the two. Because Miller may paint the same scene in different sea-

sons, and the subject matter is so close to his home, you might think of links with Monet's later paintings, but where Monet was concerned with the pursuit of visual truth through light and its effects on colour and form, Miller's motivation is "the closeness, the physicality, the presence of the subject."

Miller paints quickly, often completing a work in a day or a few days, but in a number of instances he returns to the same work, takes it back to the original scene, perhaps a year later, and reworks the entire painting.

"I try to work within the cycle of a day and if I have to go back a year later or in the following years then I don't try to 'fix' the painting, I use the ground of the painting as a beginning of the new day."

He says his landscapes are somewhere between those that are painted outside and those worked up in a studio. And an interesting aspect of these landscapes is that in nearly all there is evidence of the 'studio', just the top or the edge of the doorway through which he is looking when painting. This is because Miller works in a kind of wanderly wagon, a small truck kitted out with the complete works as regards his painting. If you are painting outside, there is generally only so much stuff you can cart with you, and you are to a considerable degree dependent on the weather and environmental conditions. Miller has solved many of these problems by bringing his studio to the site.

In many of the works, the picture is 'framed' by reference to the perimeters of the truck door and in some works you are given a further glimpse of the studio interior and its contents.

The studio-truck is for landscapes, there are other works which are created elsewhere, such as the anatomical drawings from corpses, the free-flowing, 'Innocence' series, and the 'Closer' portraits of family and friends. (He also does still lifes and notable portraiture executed in a more conventional manner than the Closer series,

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which are not represented in this show.)

Generally when he exhibits he just shows one particular type of work, portraits, or anatomical drawings, etc. He has never shown different bodies of work together before, but he says this is the reality of his work, that he goes from one to the other; that he can't do one without the other; and that they all affect each other. For instance, he explains that the anatomical drawings which he did in the College of Surgeons some years back sparked off the exploration into the Closer series, of intimate portrait drawings. “You could look at the anatomy like this (he demonstrates moving up very close to subject matter) and that gets you fired up in some way. And then, I began to need a way to be closer to what I am looking

at – what made me work was a kind of adrenaline that comes from intimate looking.”

“I realised that the stuff that I had been doing in the studio, with people at a distance, wasn't doing the same thing to me... And that brought me, over the next few years to that kind of strange process (in the Closer series) of drawing people while I am kneeling on top of them. There was no logical progression to it, there was a dissatisfaction with distance, with the traditional observation distance of a painter and model. I had been going that way for some time, but hadn't found any language for it or way to do it. I did the anatomy drawings but then forgot about them, but in the studio I unconsciously began moving closer and closer.”

Drawing the Closer series, Miller has his subject lie on the floor and then he kneels astride them and draws. In these works he focuses on the face while a sketchy line suffices for the body. “I did some full body ones ... but essentially in that position you can only focus on one thing 'cos if you move, you start to make it up and fabricate it. You start 'making art' rather than drawing. I just wanted to reflect the strange intimacy, and

to draw what was there.” Some were done in a few hours, others over a number of sessions with the subject lying down, relaxing, and the artist kneeling across and drawing. “It was not a decision to do it that way,” he says, “it was a need to be sparked into work.”

His 'Innocence' works were created after doing Ti Chi training with the sitter and again standing up very close. He describes them “as much more chaotic, much more spontaneous, much more responsive. They are much freer than previous works, I had no view of how the picture should be ... I was in some way trying to break down the traditional barriers of artist and model – undoing that – not for any conceptual reason, but because that's what makes me work, I get excited by that, that makes me paint.”

All the while that Miller was working on the Closer and Innocence series he was also painting outside and he seems to have the same approach whether he is painting a figure or a tree...

“You are responding to nature without editing it, it's not that you are not simplifying it, but you are not consciously simplifying it. I just found a way to be as open as I could to whatever I am looking at, and to

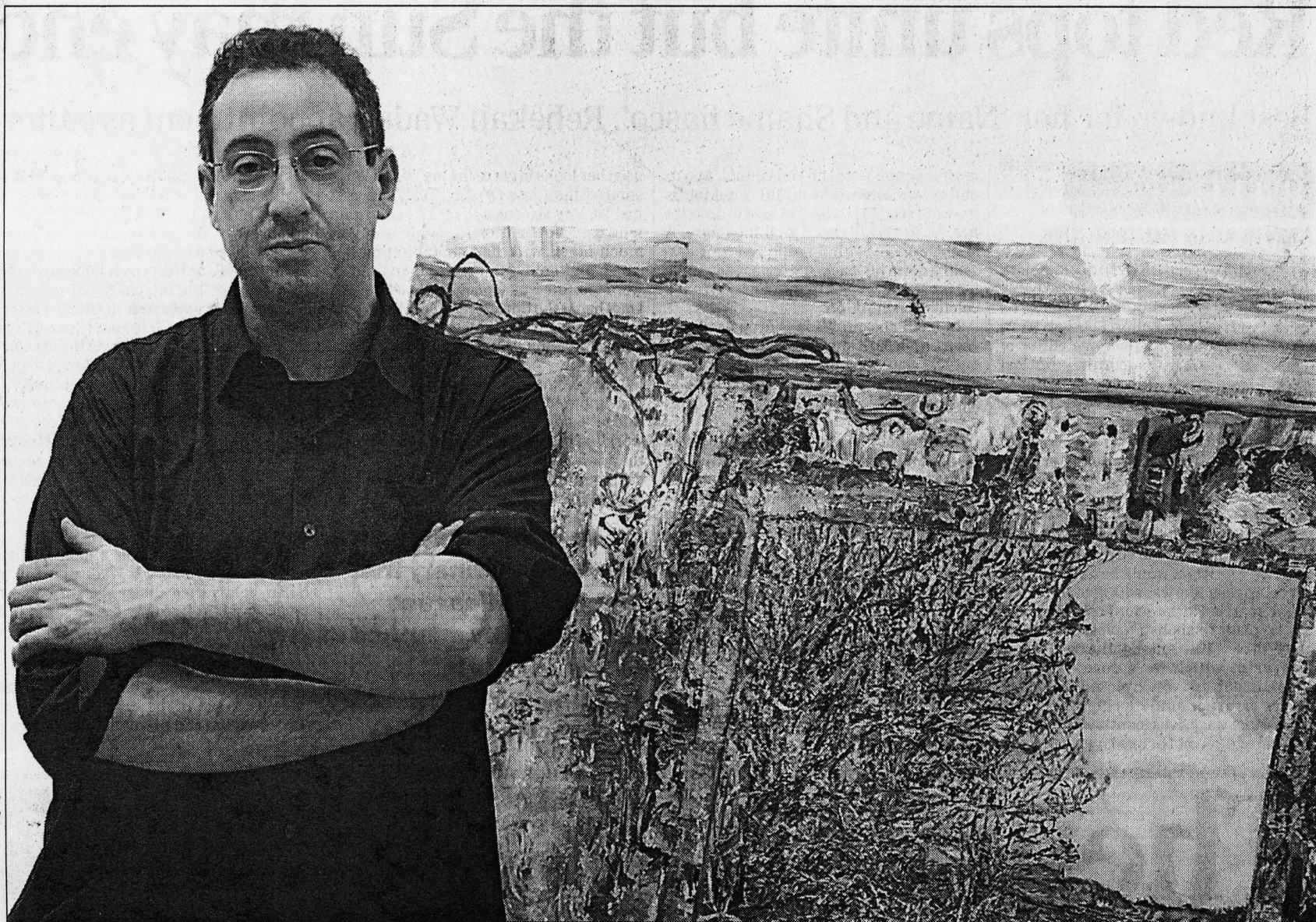
respond to that. In a way I don't care what they look like as images if they truly reflect the time of being there. And that's the same with all the other work, I am not trying to construct anything, I am just trying to be there and paint in that moment, and that's what is important.”

Much of his work is “about the life I am living. All these views are about home in a way, my garden, things around me.” Though he says they are not biographical. “No, they are experiential. If you put them all together they become biographical but not in themselves, they are about being and doing, and being alive.

“I don't try to structure, or simplify or abstract ... I enter them as much as I can. It's being as close as I can and undoing my own barriers to seeing. That's what I am trying to do, if – I am trying at all – it's trying just to be in the painting, and accept that mind-boggling infinity of intense nature, the universe just outside your door, and to realise you are part of it too.”

Nick Miller, 'Figure to Ground' is at the RHA, Ely Place, Dublin 2.

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Nick Miller: 'What makes a painter paint? It's usually some dysfunction or dissatisfaction with our connection to the world'

MICHAEL CHESTER