



Nick Miller and
Patrick Hall
working together
in Hall's studio

Irish painter Nick Miller reflects on two decades of working encounters with different artists, and how they have informed his practice

Time spent with other artists, both curatorially and through portraiture, has become an integral part of my painting life. My first formal dive into another artist's practice began in 2000, in China, when I visited the little-known but extraordinary Chinese painter and micro-engraver Chen Zhongsen (1941–2019). Meditative and energetic practices that are part of eastern wisdom traditions were a foundation of his work and life, offering a less progress-orientated understanding of being and doing. Back in Ireland, I curated a series of exhibitions and performances exploring Zhongsen's work. Perhaps counterintuitively, the experience opened up ways for me to explore the pillars of the western painting traditions of portraiture, landscape and still life.

Subsequent engagements with fellow painters have included a “post-mortem” residency and immersion in the studio, subjects and work of Edward McGuire (1932–86) resulting in a show at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in 2016. A long friendship with Barrie Cooke (1931–2014) as a close neighbour in County Sligo, led less formally to a series of portraits. The Gallery has the final work in this series, *Last Sitting: Portrait of Barrie Cooke* (2014), in its collection.

The source of these engagements likely originates with approaching my father's practice. Hilton Miller (1931–2012) was a mathematician-turned-painter whose work didn't leave his studio in 40 years. When Alzheimer's disease and age had loosened his resistance, he finally allowed me to curate exhibitions of his paintings in London and Ireland.

All these encounters have raised the questions about ageing and mortality that we inevitably face. I have found those Eastern practices that cultivate both “presentness” and “letting go” useful, both for learning something of the “art of living” and for the practice of painting.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS



Above Chen Zhongsen, sitting Nick Miller studio, Co Sligo, 2002

Left Nick Miller, *PH Head*, 2022

The Gallery recently acquired four small works from a joint exhibition, *Sanctuary*, held with the painter Patrick Hall at Hillsboro Fine Art last year. The works are the result of my longest and most collaborative partnership with another artist. I have frequently painted Patrick since the early 1990s – but weekly since Covid emerged in 2020, adapting to life circumstances through a shared working practice in his studio.

I have spent these past few years drawing and painting Patrick Hall in moments of creation, observing him working without either force or expectation. The piece *PH Head*, 2022 is a rare frontal portrait view from this time, depicting him looking up from his work but simultaneously focused inwardly in the moment. The second piece, *PH Hand, drawing*, 31-1-21, is a small ink drawing of Patrick's hand holding a dip-pen, poised in the defining moment of making a mark.

Stepping back and reflecting on the long-held fascination I have had with Patrick's work since the 1980s, there is an awkward, unnameable quality that lives in his paintings.

It is a privilege to observe these moments of simply "being in" painting emerge from his quietly courageous exploration of the "boundless void" that can be understood to be the reality at the heart of existence.

Our interests in eastern thinking often align in exploring the ways energy manifests, but as painters we present it very differently – his work being attuned to transcendental qualities of spirit, while my own is more focused on the "life force" animating our material world. Our symbiotic studio practice continues to evolve with a new project curatorially focused on Hall's work that is in preparation for Fergus McCaffrey's New York gallery in May 2023.

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Nick Miller is an Irish contemporary artist living in County Sligo