

**N i c k M i l l e r**

**FIGURE TO GROUND**  
**1999 ~ 2003**



The Well Field, truck view.  
Photographed, 2002



Kilronan to home, 1998-2002 Oil on Linen, 167.5 x 213.5 cm

**N i c k M i l l e r**

**FIGURE TO GROUND**

**Essay by Catherine Marshall  
Interview with Patrick T Murphy**

**ROYAL HIBERNIAN ACADEMY, DUBLIN**



Kilronan view from mobile studio, photograph, 2001

## FOREWORD

By Patrick T Murphy

Here at the Academy it has been a tenet of our programming to present art that encompasses craft, visual satisfaction and profound speculation. Nick Miller displays an admirable ambition on all of these fronts. His work never analyses simplistically into a dialectic but insists on an older non-secular philosophical proposition of the synthesis of the body, mind and soul. With Western culture so synical and perhaps afraid to return to such a triad of experience it is no surprise that the artist turns to Eastern paths to reconcile his practice.

The exhibition surveys ten year of work ranging across a number of series. However each is bound to the other in the artist's attempt to engage with the essence of his subject. Miller works beyond the molecular, trying to define the force that may even give those tiny particles their energy. He is not interested in what binds the matter of life together but what animates all matter.

We are grateful to Catherine Marshall for her personal and thoughtful essay on the work. And to the Irish Times for their association which will ensure a wide audience becomes familiar with the exhibition. Also, Josephine Kelliher and her staff at the Rubicon Gallery for their assistance.

Our gratitude to Nick Miller for bearing so well with the enforced patience of the organizational processes surrounding this project and for his work and intelligence, a great contribution to the practice of art.

Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin.



The Well Field; spring hedgerow, 2002 Oil on Linen, 101.5 x 101.5 cm

## THE WELL FIELD

By Catherine Marshall

Years ago in rural Ireland I played in a field called the 'Well Field'. A decade later I heard the Clancy Brothers talking of growing up in Carrick on Suir in the 40s and 50s. They, too, played in a well field. I had underrated the value of that experience until I saw Nick Miller's landscape paintings. Suddenly the closeness of his observation propels me right back into my Well Field, I can feel the ire on my legs where the top of my Wellington boots chafe against my damp legs. There is no need to go on. What we are talking about here is a confrontation with the real thing - paintings that tunnel into the plane of vision so much that they become sculpture, where the childhood wonder at the detail blocks out the over view of the landscape. I would be hard put to it to draw a map of my well field but I could describe the well and the stream, the rushes, the sting of the grass, the seac hedgerows and hear the squelch as we, children, raced over the marshy ground as well as if I were there now. I never saw the whole field because I was lost in the excitement of its component parts.

That primal excitement returns in front of the landscape paintings of Nick Miller. The term landscape was invented by the Early Netherlandish painters during the Renaissance to suggest a view of the world, usually enclosed in a frame and separated by it from our ordinary world. Miller's landscapes are not separated from the world beyond by any such conventional barriers. We see them as the artist did through the open doors of the converted truck, which is his outdoor mobile studio. The truck is in the landscape, sometimes so close to the subject of the paintings that branches, leaves and the life they support push their way into the studio itself. Artist and subject are so close they become inseparable.

Miller's practice has been moving in this direction for some time. In his earlier South African Works he distinguished between the thing seen and the experience remembered.<sup>1</sup> Memory itself is the subject. Even then Miller knew that seeing implies separation from the subject but remembered imagery comes from a fusion of the perceiver and the thing perceived. Miller abandoned that particular mode of exploration when he realised that he was 'inventing' memories'. The challenge was to retain his desired closeness to the subject, without allowing his critical mind to edit it. One successful means of achieving the degree of intimacy he wanted can be seen in the "Closer" Drawings, 1993-1999 [p16-21] in such works as his portrait drawing Corban.<sup>2</sup> This and other portrait drawings of the same period derive extraordinary presence from Miller's practice of kneeling astride the body of the sitter, their faces inches apart, as he draws. The end product is awkward but entirely convincing.

It marked a breakthrough in the representation of the body and it energised Miller to try further experiments.

A long-term interest in Chinese thought; particularly in Taoism, calligraphy and the art of T'ai Chi Ch'uan has an acknowledged influence on his painting practice. The understanding of energy

1. South African Works 1991-92, exhibited Irish Museum of Modern Art, 1994

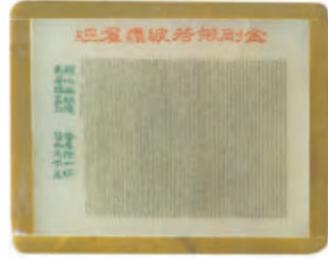
2. "Closer" Drawings Before the End, 1993-1999 Rubicon Press Ltd, ISBN 095327044 7 4, Exhibited 2000-01 Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, Art Space Gallery, London & Kilkenny Arts Festival. 'Corban' is now in the IMMA Collection, donated by Maire and Maurice Foley.



Mobile studio: Kilonan view, photographed, 2001



SA memory Series I, Nick Miller, 1991  
Watercolour on paper, 90 x 91 cm  
Irish Museum of Modern Art.



The Diamond Sutra, 2000. (actual size)  
Chen Zhongsen. 5000 characters.  
Micro carving of Buddhist scripture  
carved on Shou Shan stone, 4 x 5 cm  
Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.

cultivation and use that is embodied in these thought systems has become a parallel study alongside painting. While his work is firmly rooted in Western figurative painting, the subject that really absorbs him, be it the figure, still life or landscape is, energy or manifest “vitality”- the “Chi”, that is in Eastern thinking a central subject, and not in the least exotic. The disciplines of T'ai Chi enable him to achieve things in painting that he had not believed possible, a fortuitous by-product of the activity. Working with the Chinese artist Chen Zhongsen proved to Miller that the impossible is a state of mind.<sup>3</sup> Chen’s ability to carve a complete poem on a single strand of his wife’s hair while working with his eyes closed and in a meditative state convinced Miller of the practical application of the disciplines he had been exploring. An experimental offshoot of this study is the large-scale watercolour drawings, The Innocence Series [p22-27]- executed directly after T'ai Chi sessions when the artist feels a heightened sense of concentration, responding to energies within himself and the sitter and when he feels liberated from his normal critical state.

The current series of landscape paintings emerge from this new awareness. Miller has intermittently painted but rarely shown landscapes and this is the first time he has exhibited more than one or two. His creative rhythm oscillates between periods spent working on the body and others when he looks to nature and the landscape. One genre informs the other, they are not separate activities. The landscapes in this exhibition, however, differ from their predecessors and from most other landscape paintings, in the extraordinary degree of closeness they embody between viewer and subject. The practice of T'ai Chi “helped build physical and mental stamina... and the necessary concentration to face the impossibly intense detail of the visible natural world as I find it outside the truck, without simplifying or consciously abstracting in the face of the nature. More than with the figure work, the phenomenal intensity of Chen’s micro-carvings and my relationship to that inherent knowledge, supported my attempts to enter the completeness of nature.<sup>4</sup>

Painted in and around Sligo, Roscommon and Leitrim, in all weathers, from the back of a truck/ studio these landscapes eschew romantic notions of the West of Ireland, focusing instead on what is ordinary and uneventful. Miller’s close scrutiny of the banal turns it into its apotheosis, a Grimm’s fairyland of dense and unfathomable energy, sometimes beautiful, sometimes threatening, always mesmerisingly powerful. In a recent lecture about photography at the Irish Museum of Modern Art Ian Jeffrey drew attention to the opposing meanings of the word spell, on the one hand the imperative of the verb to spell and on the other a noun denoting a magical charm. Jeffrey might have been talking about the two different but interlocking facets of Nick Miller’s landscapes. We are brought up close to the minutiae of growing things so that we can almost spell out the details, count the building blocks, yet at the same time forced to acknowledge the mindbending magic of it all. Nature holds itself aloof from a child’s toys in Snow, Slide 2001 [p55] refusing to merge with them, forcing a realisation of their foreignness. At other times (Autumn Rain [p67], Blackthorn Blossom [p47], Bluebells, Beechwood [p58] and Winter, Lane[p49] all from 2001), it pushes its way into the truck/studio, ignoring spurious distinctions between nature and culture.



Autumn Rain, Nick Miller 2000  
Oil on linen, 41.5 x 51 cm

3. Chen +Miller: East – West, Model Arts and Niland Gallery, Sligo, 2002, ISBN 0 9540352 2 4

4. The artist in a note to the author, July 2002

The presence of the subject is everything. Whether working with animals as he did during a residency in Dublin Zoo in 1988-89, or drawing cadavers and body parts as he did, in Dublin’s College of Surgeon’s Miller gets adrenaline flows in direct proportion to his proximity to the object of his gaze. Working with caged animals or conversely with dead humans in these residencies heightened his consciousness of vitality as a subject. “If you only work when the subject is in front of you, you need to develop a physical stamina and speed of working, particularly in the context of big landscape canvases... that is not rushed...it is working fast to slow time down or trying to paint with a slow concentration while actually working at quite a speed. These, incidentally, are some principles of T'ai Chi Ch'uan which you cultivate when doing the strong (internal) within the Soft (external) form and the fast within the slow ...I hope the paintings look as if you can’t tell how long they took...some are completed with in a day and some over three or four years(returning each year at the same time), there is no definitive system, but the truck allowed me to keep returning to the same site with practical ease”.<sup>5</sup>

But there is another dimension to this endeavour. Miller’s successful efforts to eliminate critical distance also eliminate any sense of hierarchy between artist and subject. In this he puts himself firmly within the Northern European, Nominalist tradition. While the Italian Renaissance opted for an idealised, cerebral world where man was firmly in control, Flemish painters like Pieter Brueghel continued to assert the equality of all natural phenomena. Thus Brueghel’s Icarus plunges to his death while a Flemish farmer continues to plough his field and doesn’t even notice that history (of a kind) is being made at the other side of the fence. In another Brueghel landscape a group of soldiers arrive at a distant snowed up village but their human presence is subtly diminished by the greater presence of a black crow perched on the bare branch of a tree in the foreground. As in Taoist thought whatever the human drama Nature will not be ignored. Humanist rhetoric gives way to the Nominalist belief that God is to be found in equal measure in all aspects of his creation. This is most clearly spelled out in Miller’s landscapes in such paintings as Carran Hill to Sligo, 2001-2 [p41], where the bent figure of a man cutting turf is barely distinguishable from the overgrowth around him. In Highwood to Home 1999-2002 [p33], the small, white figure, of a farmer surveying the fields in the middle left ground, was actually the first mark on the canvas, the first thing seen, even though tiny and almost invisible now. Miller’s insistence on covering the whole canvas with a new layer of paint each time he wants to make an adjustment to one area is a practical embodiment of this egalitarian approach to his subject matter as much as it is a gesture towards aesthetic unity.

Brueghel is not the only Flemish painter evoked by Nick Miller. Quite unconsciously his method of painting through the restricted doorway of his mobile studio led him to adopt another Flemish idea. The curtailed space in the van means that it is never possible to stand back and look from the easel to the subject and back, nor is it possible to see what is going on in the corners. In art as in life we have to take some things on credit, surrender control. To minimise this Miller uses a small, round convex mirror to help him to extend his peripheral vision and to enable him to see the whole canvas while he works. Typically, then, the mirror is made visible in such paintings as Rockview to Home, 2001 [p15]and Swing, Truck view, 2002 [p39]. The artist reflected in the

5. Ibid



Jaguar, Dublin Zoo, Nick Miller 1988  
Coloured pencil on paper, 80 x 90 cm  
Private collection, London



Landscape with the fall of Icarus, C.1558, Bruegel.  
Musées Royaux Des Beaux-Arts, Brussels.



DETAIL: Carran Hill to Sligo, Nick Miller,  
2001-02. Oil on linen, 167.5 x 213.5 cm.



DETAIL: Swing, truck view,  
Nick Miller, 2002  
Oil on linen, 167.5 x 213.5 cm



Vincent van Gogh

mirror is incorporated into the painting just as he was in Van Eyck's Arnolfini Wedding portrait and the fusion of artist and subject is complete.

Where does Miller fit in? Where should he be positioned in the greater scheme of things artistic? There is no doubt whatsoever about his northern European sensibility but this by no means suggests that he is imbued with an Irish one. There isn't a Sile na Gig nor a thatched cottage to be seen. Wire fences occur not as signifiers of territory but because they belong there. Miller's refusal to edit out what lies in front of him means they are allowed to remain in the pictures. But these are not scientific landscapes either. Despite very superficial similarities to the Impressionists, in the landscapes with rain falling, (Kilronan View, Raining [p62], and Autumn Rain [p66] from 2001) or the snow paintings, Miller is not motivated, as the Impressionists were, to understand and document the effects of changing light on colour. While they were more interested in the working of the human eye than in nature Miller is fired up with a deep respect for the intangible energy of growing things. Miller will not be the Cézanne of the North West either. Cézanne could only paint Mont Saint Victoire as he did because he could detach himself from it. Detach... observe ...and analyse. Nick Miller is driven by a different goal. In his landscapes texture, the tangible physicality that drives the paint in an attempt to make reality, is more important than light and the sensuous thrill that accompanies the tactility of his trees and bogland is precisely what eliminates separateness. Vision implies distance, touch overcomes it. In the final analysis Miller comes closest to the visionary landscapes of his compatriots, the great English landscapists Constable and Samuel Palmer and to the volcanic presence of Vincent Van Gogh whose influence on his early development Miller readily acknowledges. It was seeing Van Gogh's "Fields in the Rain" in the Philadelphia Museum of Art that led him to understand the value of what he was learning from the East and to see that the physical, mental and spiritual apprehension of a subject can be fully embodied in paint. Miller may not share the religious beliefs that supported the earlier artists but he completely endorses their awe at the complexity, variety and fecundity of the natural world.

Fitting Miller into a contemporary context is not easy. He readily points to Giacometti and his discipline of looking/exploring – seeing - as a major influence on his own way of seeing and it is relevant, too, to draw parallels with others such as performance artist Marina Abramovic who also looked to the East and to Zen Buddhism to release internal strengths that she could not otherwise access it is hard to find painters who work in a similar fashion. That may well be because Miller, like his older compatriots, the painters Barrie Cooke and Camille Souter is self-taught as an artist, and like them, impervious to current trends in art theory. Not having to unlearn the lessons of art school they were free to develop their own independent practices. Their prior experiences in socially committed disciplines – Souter trained as a nurse in World War II London while Miller graduated with a degree in Development Studies from the University of East Anglia in 1984 - may have contributed to their commitment to subject in place of the artworld's insistence on abstraction or the more theoretical positions of post-modernism. Greenbergian Formalism has never had a place in Miller's practice. That aesthetic requires us to appreciate art in terms of the materials and processes of art itself – colour, line, ground and gesture, Miller's artistic mission is quite different. As he put it in 1999 when discussing the CLOSER drawings "I want to shift the

balance from art into Life"<sup>6</sup> Abstraction "side steps the ordinary", according to Miller's friend and neighbour, the painter Patrick Hall.<sup>7</sup> The ordinary in all its overlooked vitality, its messiness, its earthiness is what we get in Nick Miller's paintings and drawings.

Ultimately this body of landscapes finds its closest parallel in Ireland, not in visual art but in literature. John McGahern's novel *That They May Face the Rising Sun* is less a novel in the traditional sense than a new kind of pastoral, one in which the writer's love of rural life is not blinded by any romantic idealisation of it. McGahern focuses on a small lakeside farming community, etching a series of human stories into the soil of County Leitrim. Ultimately the most important character in the novel is the place itself and the positive and negative effects it has on the people who struggle to exist within it. "The rain comes down. Grass grows. Children get old." The Shah said suddenly. "That's it. We all know. We know full well and can't even whisper it out loud. We know in spite of them".<sup>8</sup> The novel has the same close perspective that Miller's landscapes have, the same dense, prickly rawness. It is no surprise to learn that when Miller painted McGahern's portrait in 1998 he produced the most challenging and finest of Irish literary portraits.

There is much discussion nowadays about the relationship between figure and ground in painting. The discussion is, of course, a post-modern one. Greenberg and his generation were so opposed to the very existence of the figure that it was not likely to stimulate their *bons mots*. More recently, with a return to figuration in much contemporary art a great deal hinges on the artist's ability to position the figure on the canvas ground and to either detach or integrate them as the concept requires. Leon Golub scrapes the paint away from the surface of his pictures forcing the residue down into the canvas, ruthlessly dissolving the two into one, eliminating any vestigial space between them. Nick Miller is not concept led. It has been said that he has never been comfortable with post-modernism yet the integration of figure and ground in his recent portraits and landscapes is absolutely compelling.<sup>9</sup> The physical proximity between him and his subject is so honestly, even messily presented that the subject itself becomes the ground. Horizons are cut off, projecting the landscape into the face of the viewer, blocking a clear view of the objects in our peripheral vision so that the viewer, him/herself becomes the figure in the ground of the painting. The familiar 'picturesque' landscape does not feature in this body of work. Instead the door is opened and the frame of the truck opening defines and frames the subject, reminding us that these are 'studio' paintings rather than traditionally composed 'plein air' pictures in which the horizons are limited by nature and position rather than the physical limitation of the studio from which they are painted

Miller has given himself one of the most difficult of all challenges. He continues to paint (despite claiming that he is "more of a drawer than a painter") in a world where painting is often dismissed as uncool and *retardaire*, where critical attention is drawn instead to new media, installation and performance. Miller, with typical independence sees this marginalisation as a real source of strength. When you are on the edge you can see what is going on in the centre while those who are immersed in it often cannot. New technology, from this vantage point, does not offer the same



John McGahern, Nick Miller, 1998  
Oil on canvas, 96.5 x 96.5 cm  
Model Arts & Niland Gallery, Sligo.



Whitethorn, mobile studio; truck view.  
Photographed, 2000

6. "Closer: Drawings Before The End, 1993-1999, Op cit

7. Patrick Hall, *Gandon Works 12*, Gandon Editions 1993, Ed; John O'Regan. ISBN 0946641 331

8. John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, Faber and Faber, 2002. P150

9. Aidan Dunne, "Portraits Worth Lying For", *Irish Times*, 26/01/00

opportunities for integration with the subject as painting does and so does not attract him. Patrick Hall, one of the most spiritual of Irish painters, also remarked that the process of “painting saved me from the abstract, from the unworldly.”<sup>10</sup> It certainly seems to work in a similar fashion for Miller. Painting may not offer the same potential for mass communication as the computer but Miller feels strongly that it forges deeper connections between subject and artist, artist and viewer.

As if adherence to an old fashioned medium were not enough, he doggedly continues to work with the old conventional genres of portraiture, the nude, the still life and the landscape. Writing about the nude for his exhibition *The Naked Formed* in 1993 Miller argued that, “the body has been used to the point of exhaustion.”<sup>11</sup> In 2000, he found a way to inject new vitality into the portrait which he shared with the rest of us in the exhibition *Closer*. With this body of work he does the same for landscape. Talking about that approach to working Miller said poetically, “The freedom to look is the gift of intimacy”. These landscape paintings from the back of the truck give us all a share of that gift. If, as Paul Klee famously stated “Art does not imitate the visible, it makes visible” then Nick Miller’s paintings provide us with an opportunity to look and see such as we have not had before.



‘CLOSER’: Video Still; drawing.  
Courtesy Patrick Perring, 1998

Catherine Marshall  
Irish Museum of Modern Art.  
August 2002



Rockview to home, 2001 Oil/Linen, 122 x 152.5 cm P  
Private collection, Beirut.

10. Gandon Works series – Patrick Hall, Op cit

11. *The Naked Formed*, catalogue notes. Curated by Nick Miller July / August 1993, Rubicon Gallery, Dublin

**C L O S E R**  
**D R A W I N G S**  
ANATOMY 1993 FIGURE 1996~1999



Reuben, 1996 Charcoal/paper, 152.4 x 121.9cm . Private Collection, Ireland.



Anatomy Drawing I, 1993 Lithographic crayon on paper 28 x 33.1cm



Anatomy Drawing II, 1993 Lithographic crayon on paper 39 x 45.5 cm



Anatomy Drawing III, 1993 Lithographic crayon on paper 28 x 33.1cm



Aaron, 1999 Charcoal/conté on paper, 152.4 x 121.9 cm  
Private collection, Ireland



Noreen, 1996 Charcoal/conté on paper, 152.4 x 121.9 cm



Riva, 1996 Charcoal/conté on paper, 152.4 x 121.9 cm



Corban, 1996 Charcoal/conté on paper, 152.4 x 121.9 cm  
Irish Museum of Modern Art.



Eoin I, 1996 Charcoal/conté on paper, 152.4 x 121.9 cm



Michael, 1996 Charcoal/conté on paper, 152.4 x 121.9 cm



Sharon, 1996 Charcoal/conté on paper, 152.4 x 121.9 cm



Patrick, 1996 Charcoal/conté on paper, 152.4 x 121.9 cm

# INNOCENCE

WATERCOLOURS  
FIGURE: 1998 ~ 2000



One: release, 2000 Watercolour on paper, 153.5 x 121.9 cm



Female form, 1999 Watercolour on paper, 153.5 x 121.9cm



Resting form, 1999 Watercolour on paper, 153.5 x 121.9cm



Absorbing form, 1999 Watercolour on paper, 153.5 x 121.9cm



Male form, 1999 Watercolour on paper, 153.5 x 121.9cm



Golden Flower & ashtray, 1999 Watercolour on paper, 153.5 x 121.9cm



Enclosed form, 1999 Watercolour on paper, 153.5 x 121.9cm

# INTERVIEW

Nick Miller in conversation with Patrick T Murphy



Whitethorn, fading blossom, 1999-2001 Oil on Linen, 122 x 152.5 cm

**Patrick T Murphy:** One of the abiding qualities of your paintings or drawings is their performative aspect, they return one to the act of making, to what has happened between you, your subject and your materials.

**Nick Miller:** Painting like everything is perched between being and doing. For me, the most important quality is my 'awakeness' to the moment of painting. So a painting is something left over from that act. The sense of performance comes from working only while in the presence of what I'm painting; I need that physical charge. It's like the difference between sitting in the front row seeing the spit of an actor on a stage compared to his coloured shadow fixed on film.

So the painting is not made for viewing but is a record of time and action. I am thinking of Pollock. You look at Pollock and as you experience this retinal gymnastic of viewing you can't but visualise his doing it. From Namuth's film we know that the canvas was on the floor, he walked around it, dribbling, smudging, creating a full, enlivened, dense surface. Qualities we can find in your work.

There are parallels; trying not to think about the surface or composition, to just be in the act of painting. The difference is the link to a physical subject while working, trying to keep that connection live.

Previously you have made an elegant distinction between eye, mind and gesture. And in a way there is precedent for this. To return to mid-fifties American with the Abstract Expressionists they intended to make raw paintings, to short circuit the critical and intellectual, and to have nothing between them and the material. Like Burroughs, a lot of alcohol or chemicals were used to gain this rawness. So your use of T'ai Chi to obtain a more open perception is not eccentric within the history of art.

No. It is nothing new. Art is not just a technical exercise to render a subject - it connects experience, on all levels. T'ai Chi has become one way for me to study energy and practice opening my perceptions. Getting loaded, loosens inhibitions too - releases energy, but can dull you in the long run. In one of the first Closer drawings (Eoin I, 1996 [see p20]) you can still see the stains of a wine glass - Dutch courage for when I began that intimate way of making drawings. What I want is to be at an apex where you are extremely aware of seeing, and at the same time you are not constricted by too much thinking. At the moment of applying paint you are receiving into your synapses through your eyes, and expressing that through your body onto the canvas. I have to be completely in that moment to make paintings, I know when they have that clarity and when I am kidding myself. Buddhists talk about being present in every moment, through awareness of breath; painting for me is a messy, flawed version of that.

I recall some critical debate in the eighties about De Kooning's late paintings, asking whether they really should be considered as he had Alzheimer's when he made them. Having seen them I find them completely convincing as paintings and I can't understand how the loss of short-term memory would affect skill developed over decades.

They work for me too, Alzheimer's is awful because there is no choice, but I find thinking of the past or the future often just gets in the way of painting, so I have an empathy with their validity.

To go back to your beginnings, you didn't train as a painter, what led you to paint?

I have always painted. I was lucky to have grown up with some awareness of art. My father paints, we took it up at the same time. But I never considered art college until I was finishing university and I realised that this is what I had to do. Then I came to Ireland and did it.

But that was quite a critical moment. You read Developmental Studies - economics, politics, etc. and then you decided to be painter. There must have been much doubt and conflict within you at that moment. Were there any historical figures that led you to this way of living?

It was a traumatic time. I think I was saved just before I left for Ireland in 1984 by a show of late Giacometti at The

Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts at UEA where I studied ... and by life drawing classes at The Norwich School of Art. What makes a painter paint? It's usually some dysfunction or dissatisfaction with our connection to the world. From very young I found that painting offered me a way to feel more complete. I always spent time in museums, even before I committed to the life. I was attracted to the silence - to being with paintings, when I travelled, it was mostly to see collections in Europe.

Do you have two ways of looking at painting? Is there a technical eye, the how of the painting and an aesthetic/emotional eye, the affect of the painting.

Not really, if I find a painting that speaks to me I can spend a long time looking, drawing and absorbing it tangentially. I cannot analytically deconstruct how it has been achieved. For paint to be alive across decades or centuries, the artist has achieved some sort of alchemy to hold and charge it with energy. That is what interests me - a sort of secret history of energy in painting. Academically it is meaningless, but experientially it is true and not as mystical as one might think.

Being a Londoner, how aware were you of the School of London when you were growing up, I mean someone like Freud is such a great observer, searing in his depiction whether his subject is a person or a rooftop. It is work of acute reportage, I find the work a-emotional. I would prefer the flesh of Spencer to Freud?

Certainly from my early-teens I was aware of Bacon Auerbach, Kosoff and Freud. I have gained a great deal of sustenance from looking at their work, from a distance..from Ireland. I am not interested in arguments about Freud's status or his subjects, that is his affair, but I am impressed by his ability to still grow as a painter, at eighty. I admire both the innocence and relentless seeking of the work. It is open, you can see everything in the paint, good and bad, nothing is concealed and I think that goes for the others too in different ways. I think however, I was lucky to avoid painting in London under the weight of that world, or the later waves of British art.

But another, earlier great English tradition is landscape painting, did you escape that as well?

I didn't think much about it until I got the mobile studio in 1997, giving me the opportunity to work with landscape as I had with the figure, up close. I never want to escape good painting, someone like Constable is wonderful. He achieved the alchemy I was talking about, resolving the density and energy of nature in paint.

You have been living in the countryside now for ten years, what, difference does that make to your art?

I needed the difficulty of Ireland and Dublin in the eighties to allow me to grow as a painter and the distance of a rural life for the last ten years to test my need to continue. Everything became clearer to me since I moved to the country. You can grow vegetables and live without trace, and that is a fine choice too. It has helped to define and gestate what really interests me, what we spoke about earlier- the alchemy of energy as subject. That could only have distilled in me in this type of quiet, with less distraction. I find that I paint less hours but my concentration is vastly more intense than it was in the city.

Is it like an athlete, do you need to work your way into a zone before you enter the arena of the studio?

One of the reasons I responded well to T'ai Chi was the understanding it brings to the nature of change in oneself and the universe. I found the moving to and from family to studio, difficult. The practice helped me to move from one to the other with less loss of attention and energy, also with less wasteful angst. My relationship between the new landscapes and training in T'ai Chi did become very intense and athletic in nature, particularly during 2000-2001 in relation to the large canvases in which need a lot of energy to bring off.

But T'ai Chi also offers a philosophical system, a cosmology.

I am slowly absorbing that, but essentially I am a practical person; ideas don't make paintings or life. The fact that I get up in the morning, meditate and go through my T'ai Chi routine and then go to the studio and it works for me is what is pertinent, not sitting down and analysing the philosophical tenets behind it. I am not being anti-intellectual but for me one of the central problems in western thinking is the separation of the intellect from the body. If we compartmentalise our constituent parts it creates dissolution not totality...I suppose this is something I am learning from Taoism and from life. I am interested in eastern thought because I need it to attain whatever balance I can get -

to survive and live. The same with painting landscape, I do it to be awake to Nature, to overcome my sense of separation.

The effort to put art into life seems to be a re-occurring struggle within art. The Constructivists citing geometry as the great Esperanto of the visual - an art for the people. Eighty years later it looks hermetic and exclusive. In the sixties, Fluxus, attempting to break down the barriers between art and life through performance, material from the everyday, again now looks as a failure in its ability to connect.

I think that the problem with those two examples is that few ideas are truly sustainable in reality. That is why I like painting because it is material, very humbling because it is the muck that always puts ideas in perspective. For me T'ai Chi is more the kind of activity that can really put art into life. In terms of painting, my interest is to put life into art.

When I look at one of the new landscape works I am retinally excited. The surface that you have created I can only describe as dances with my eye.

When I first got the mobile studio, I struggled to develop a language to deal with landscape. I said to myself, like a mantra, that a tree has to be as real to me as having a naked person standing one foot away. That may sound weird, but I need to tap into that visceral energy to make paintings. I remember the first time in early 2000, I got a tree to do that for me, the Whitethorn in my neighbour's field [see p28 & p35]. Only then could I begin to find a way to work the paint to a level of intensity to see landscape as a subject.

Catherine Marshall mentions in her excellent essay that when you go to make an alternation in a painting you rework the whole surface again.

Once I found a way to begin to see landscape, I had to re-work paintings from 1997 onwards. Returning to paintings - whether it is a day, a week, annually or years later, means I have to reconsider the totality in order to a change a part, because I am re-entering the experience from all perspectives. But I do leave things alone if I can. I try not to be doctrinaire about my own approach, but without that fresh engagement with the actual subject, it is meaningless activity to me. I can't change a painting away from its subject.

Here you are living in these wonderful vistas of the Sligo countryside and you seemed to have successfully avoided the picturesque, do you sense Nature as malevolent?

No, I see Nature as disinterested in human matters. It is a relentless continuum of energy that I am only beginning to appreciate. When you have lived in this landscape for sometime, you see a beauty that is not picturesque. In part because of the social reality, you are aware why people have left. It's a challenging, tough but beautiful landscape that is cultivated now even less than it was in the past. You are aware of the weeds and rain all the time, but they are not malevolent. In the paintings, there is little eye rest. Even the sky can be obsessively busy- it scares me sometimes because you do like to have a rest in a painting as in life. I am slowly working out this relationship between my nature and Nature.

Is it an ambition for your work to wake people up to this relationship?

Well it is first an intention to wake me up to it! After that it is out of my hands.

Well it certainly doesn't allow the viewer to get off the hook. Thank you.

Thank you.

**4th November 2002, Co Sligo.**

**TO GROUND**  
P A I N T I N G S  
L A N D S C A P E S 1 9 9 7 - 2 0 0 3



Highwood to home, 1999-2001 Oil on Linen, 167.5 x 213.5 cm



Whitethorn, truck view, 2001 Oil on Linen, 167.5 x 213.5 cm



March catkins, 2001 Oil on Linen, 167.5 x 213.5 cm



Swing, truck view, 2002 Oil on Linen, 167.5 x 213.5 cm



Carran Hill: To Sligo, 2001-2002 Oil on Linen, 167.5 x 213.5 cm



To Meelagh, Skean & Arrow, 1999 - 2002 Oil on Linen, 167.5 x 213.5 cm



Lake turn, summer 2002 Oil on Linen, 122 x 152.5 cm



Lough Key, 2000 Oil on Linen, 91.5 x 101.5cm



Blackthorn blossom, 2001 Oil on Linen, 91.5 x 101.5 cm



Winter Lane, 2001 Oil on Linen, 91.5 x 101.5 cm



Winter Lake, 2000 Oil on Linen, 91.5 x 101.5cm



Snowscape, Whitethorn, 2001 Oil on Linen, 91.5 x 101.5 cm  
Private collection, Ireland.



Kilronan to home, 2001 Oil on Linen, 56 x 61 cm



Snow, slide, 2001 Oil on Linen, 56 x 61 cm



Winter garden, 2001 Oil on Linen, 56 x 61 cm



Garden, swing, 2002 Oil on Linen, 56 x 61 cm



Bluebells, Beechwood, 2001 Oil on Linen, 101.5 x 101.5 cm



Summer garden, 2001 Oil on Linen, 101.5 x 101.5 cm



Lane, gate view, 2001 Oil on Linen, 41.5 x 56 cm



Kilronan view, raining, 2001 Oil on Linen, 41.5 x 56 cm



Maple, Autumn rain, 2000 Oil on Linen, 41.5 x 51 cm



Kilronan vie, 2000 Oil on Linen, 41.5 x 51 cm



Path, Autumn rain, 2000 Oil on Linen, 41.5 x 51 cm



Fields, winter, 2000-02 Oil on Linen, 41.5 x 51 cm



Ash, spring, 2002 Oil on Linen, 41.5 x 51 cm



Autumn rain, 2001 Oil on Linen, 41.5 x 51 cm



Autumn Hazel, 2001 Oil on Linen, 41.5 x 51 cm



Snowing, 2000 Oil on Linen, 41.5 x 51 cm  
Private collection, Ireland.

## N I C K M I L L E R

Born in 1962. He Graduated in Development Studies from the University of East Anglia, Norwich in 1984. He moved to Dublin in 1984 and now lives in Co Sligo. He was elected to Aosdána in 2001.

### Selected Exhibitions:

2003	Figure to Ground: RHA, Gallagher Gallery, Dublin
2002	Chen + Miller: East - West, Model Arts & Niland Gallery, Sligo
2000	Closer, Drawings, Kilkenny Arts Festival, Ireland Closer: Drawings, Art Space Gallery, London, UK. Closer; Drawings, Rubicon Gallery Dublin, Ireland
1999	Paintings, Art Space Gallery, London, UK.
1998	Paintings & Drawings, 1994-97, Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, Ireland.
1996	Figure: Works on Paper, 1992-96, The Lowe Gallery, Atlanta, USA. Paintings, Fenderesky Gallery, Belfast, N.Ireland.
1994	South African Works 1991-92, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Irl
1992	Paintings & Drawings, Galerie D'Eendt, Amsterdam, Holland.
1991	The Shadow line, City Arts Centre, Dublin, Ireland.
1989	Zoo Work, Eve Linders, Dublin, Ireland.
1988	Paintings, Project Arts Centre, Dublin Ireland.

### Selected Group Exhibitions:

2001	Above: Weir, Miller & Walker & Walker; Fenton Gallery, Cork Passages From Ballinglen, List Gallery, Swathmore College, PA, USA. Three Artists from Ireland, West Wales Arts Centre, Fishguard, UK. Eigse Carlow Festival of Visual Art, Carlow.Irl. The Garden, Model Arts & Niland Gallery, Sligo
2000	Works on Paper, LeMoyné Art Foundation, Tallahassee, Florida, USA. RHA, Gallagher Gallery, Dublin, Irl.
1999	Thinking Drawing, RHA gallery, Dublin.
1998-99	when time began to rant and rage. Touring Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. Berkeley Art Museum, California, Grey Art Gallery, New York.
1998	EV+A, Limerick City Gallery, Limerick, Irl.
1998	Drawings, Boundary Gallery, London.U.K.
1997	Skin Deep, Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, Irl. Ballinglen Experience, RHA, Dublin, Irl. The Beautiful Junk Shop, Fenderesky, Belfast.
1996	Landscape, Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, Irl. Drawing, The Fine Arts Society, London, U.K.
1995	Portraits, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Irl.
1994	Celebrating Difference, City Arts Centre, Touring, Irl.
1993	The Naked Formed, curated, Rubicon, Dublin, Irl.
1992	Transmission, Irish Life Centre, Dublin, Irl. Editions One, Graphic Studio Gallery, Dublin.
1990	R.O.S.O.L., A view of the New, Salsbury, U.K. Group Show, Boundary Gallery, London. Drawings; emerging artists, Rubicon, Dublin, Irl.
1988-89	Celtic Vision, Guest artist, Bank of Ireland, Dublin, Irl.
1988-96	National Portrait Awards Exhibition, Arnotts, Dublin.
1987	S.A.D.E, Crawford Municipal Gallery, Ireland.
1985 & 87	Irish Exhibition of Living Art, Dublin, Irl.
1985-87	Independent Artists, Dublin, Irl.

### Selected Awards:

2000	Arts Council: Travel Award,
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2000	Fergus O'Ryan RHA memorial Award,
1999	Dept of Foreign Affairs, CRC grant.
1998	Arts Council: Major Bursary
1996	Arts Council: Travel Award & Artflight Dept of Foreign Affairs, CRC Grant.
1994	Arts Council: Artist in Schools Programme.
1993/92/88	Arts Council: Visual Arts Bursary/materials grants.
1991	National Portraits Awards Exhibition (Irl): Open Award. Dublin Corporation: Visual Arts Grant
1989	National Portrait Awards Exhibition (Irl): Award.

### Residencies and Commissions:

1998	The Ark, Children's Centre, Commission: Of land & Sky.
1996	Ballinglen Arts Foundation, Mayo, 1996 Fellowship.
1994-95	IMMA/CBS Francis St, Dublin: Encounters project II. Aer Rianta: Miniatures Commission.
1993-94	M.A.C./Mercy Primary School, Sligo: Encounters Project I.
1991 & 89	City Arts Centre/City Quay NS: City Visions, Dublin.
1990	RTE/Kenny Live; The Five Senses, Set commission.
1988	The City Arts Centre, Dublin: Soviet Mural Project.
1988-89	Dublin Zoo/Arts Council: Artist in Residence.
1987 & 90	Tyrone Guthrie Centre: Co Monaghan, Irl; Residencies.

### Selected Bibliography:

2002	Making Art without Breathing, East meets West: Miriam Donohoe, Irish Times, 13 April
2002	Hair raising crossover, Marianne Hartigan, Sunday Tribune, 28 April
2000	Private View, R Ingleby, The Independent, UK, The Information , 8th April
2000	Nick Miller at Art Space, Fisun Guner, 'Whats on', London, 3rd May
2000	Portraits worth lying for, Aidan Dunne, The Irish Times, Jan 26th.
1999	Private View, R Ingleby, The Independent, UK, The Information March 20,
1998	Remains & Intents, Catalogue interview by H. O'Donoghue, Rubicon Press.
1998	Caught in the Nick of time, Aidan Dunne, Sunday Tribune, April 1998.
1998	Exploring the artist's studio, Aidan Dunne, Irish Times, May 1998
1997	The Life of Painting, Modern Art in Ireland, Dorothy Walker Lilliput Press
1996	Nick Miller: Figure, Brenda McParland, Catalogue, The Lowe Gallery. Nick Miller at Lowe, Donald Locke, Creative Loafing, Atlanta, USA.
1994	Nick Miller at IMMA, Aidan Dunne, CIRCA, Summer 1994, No 68.
1993	Naked Formed, J. Cassidy, CIRCA, Autumn, 1994. How to look at the naked body, A.Dunne, The Sunday Tribune.
1991	Study in Blue, Patrick Gallagher, Sunday Independent, May . Coming to Ireland for a sense of Jewish identity, A.Dunne Sunday Tribune, May 1991.
1991	The Shadow Line, Aidan Dunne, Catalogue, City Arts Centre, Dublin
1989	Letting an Artist loose, Aidan Dunne, The Sunday Tribune.
1988	Two Dublin exhibitions, Brian Fallon, Irish Times, July 1988.

### Collections:

Irish Museum of Modern Art, Irish Life PLC, RTE, The Arts Council (Irl), Independent Newspapers, The National Drawing Collection Limerick Municipal Collection, The Niland Collection, Ballinglen Arts Foundation, Boyle Civic Collection, Dublin Institute of Technology, Allied Irish Bank, The Irish Permanent and Ulster Bank, Fujian Teachers College, China.

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