

Life less ordinary

RIANN COULTER considers the qualities of immediacy and energy in Nick Miller's work that transform his chosen genres of portraiture, still life and landscape into vital works of art

The duality of the title *Genre*, meaning both the traditional categories of art, from still life and landscape to portraiture, and more specifically art that represents scenes from everyday life, deftly captures the essence of Nick Miller's forthcoming exhibition at the Butler Gallery, Kilkenny. There, for the first time, the full range of Miller's versatile talent will be displayed through the juxtaposition of his portraits and still-life compositions, with the engaging landscapes that enchanted viewers of his recent show at the RHA. Previously, best known as a figurative and portrait painter, celebrated for his intense scrutiny of the human form

his immediate environment: the scenes and subjects from everyday life traditionally associated with genre painting.

From the bright, plastic slide in *Snow Garden & Birds* (Fig 2), a domestic landscape that reappears in the monumental portrait of his neighbour, *John Hogan* (Fig 3), to the polaroids, post-cards and home grown flowers that populate his paintings, Miller's realm centres on his County Sligo home and the people that he encounters there. Despite their diverse subject matter, these works are just as concerned with presence and the relationship between the individual consciousness and the external world as Miller's *Closer* drawings of 1999.

Those remarkable images resulted from Miller's development of an innovative mode of portraiture that involved leaning over his reclining subject and creating vital drawings that captured the immediacy of that confrontation. While the intense scrutiny of those portraits revealed the artist's proximity to his subject, in these recent works, ubiquitous references to the studio both imply Miller's presence and further support their categorisation as essentially genre paintings. Featuring in every portrait and still-life composition staged within its walls, Miller's studio is both an omnipresent presence that seems to mediate between artist and subject, and an essential element in his artistic process. Remarkably, not even the land-



scapes lie outside this sphere, for as the RHA exhibition revealed, Miller's direct engagement with landscape was only possible through his mobile studio, constructed in the back of the truck whose doors frame *Snow Garden & Birds*.

and ability to capture the physical and psychological presence of his subjects, Miller here displays the depth and breadth of his practice and convincingly confirms his place among our most significant contemporary painters (Fig 1). While the historical hierarchy that valued portraiture over landscape and still life was challenged long ago, this exhibition suggests that Miller, not only considers landscape and still life worthy genres, but also approaches all his subjects with that intense search for essential likeness usually reserved for portraiture. Miller's insistence on painting from life and his resulting tendency to move between subjects depending on accessibility, undoubtedly contributes to this sense of genre equality, but the single factor that unites these works is Miller's concentration on

Miller's desire to engage with landscape painting can be partly attributed to his admiration for Constable, to whom he pays homage in *Self Reflected with Constable* (Fig 4). A self-portrait that presents the artist surrounded by aspects from both the natural and cultural realms that inspire him, this image is one of many that include reproductions of Miller's artistic heroes. A self-taught artist, Miller is an avid student of art history: from Bruegel and Titian whose work features in these paintings, via Rembrandt and Goya, to Constable and Ingres, whose formidable portrait of



1 Nick Miller
Crucifixion with nature, 2002 oil on linen 97 x 97 cm

2 *Snow garden & birds*, 2004 oil on linen 183 x 214cm

3 John Hogan, 2004 oil on Linen 183 x 168 cm

4 *Self reflected with Constable* 2003 oil on linen 61 x 82cm

Louis-Francois Bertin (1832) is both referenced and included in Miller's similarly imposing portrait of John Hogan.

Of less obvious and yet formative influence, were the works of the sculptor Alberto Giacometti that Miller encountered at the University of East Anglia where he studied developmental studies in the early 80s. While other artists, including Louis le Brocqy, have been influenced by Giacometti's haunting figurative sculptures, it is his intense portraits of figures enclosed in space, such as *Diego seated in the studio* (1949) and the vivid drawings of the *Hotel Room* series (1963) that resonate with Miller's work. Giacometti's aim to give the nearest possible sensation to that felt at the sight of the subject, seems particularly relevant to Miller's preoccupation with presence and echoes his early assertion that he is 'concerned with recording the poetic image of moments, what I see and believe I see.'

In 2003 Miller suggested that all his artistic heroes have contributed to a 'sort of secret history of energy in painting'.

Undoubtedly, the desire to continue this secret history is a spur to Miller's artistic quest, but as a Londoner raised in an urban setting antithetical to the rural periphery where he now finds himself, Miller is also provoked to paint by the need to locate himself in relation to the people, the landscape and the objects that he encounters on a daily basis. Fortunately, Miller's fundamental concern with presence and eloquent ability to communicate his fascination with the microcosm in which he finds himself, allows these genre paintings to transcend their immediate context and present compelling local images of universal relevance. ■

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Genre – Paintings by Nick Miller is at the Butler Gallery, the Castle, Kilkenny 23 October –5 December 2004

