

Sunday Times: CULTURE
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Space is the place to be as barriers melt away

The visual work in a new exhibition in Kilkenny challenges conventional definitions of art. By Cristin Leach

When the artist Nick Miller took part in the TV documentary *Naked*, which aired on RTE 1 in June, there was an elephant in the room – and it wasn't the nude model, the columnist John Waters, to whom he had just been introduced. It was the fact that the painter never really entered the zone he needed to enter into in order to make his best work. To his credit, Miller hid it well, but it showed in the painting: the truth always comes out in the art.

Obviously, both filmmakers and artist were after the same thing – an insight into the painting of a nude portrait – but, ultimately, their aims were at odds. The camera favoured the naked model's feelings over the artist's process because the editors were looking for entertaining television, what Miller really wanted to

make was a portrait of a portrait. And now he has done just that.

Miller's own film, *Painting Patrick: After Olympia and Venus*, is showing at the Kilkenny Arts Festival as part of the visual arts strand curated by Josephine Kelliher of the Rubicon Gallery in Dublin. "I did think of a festival as being about sharing a contemporary art experience," she says, referring to the inherent generosity of a film like Miller's, but mindful of ensuring that the art in the festival would have a wide appeal. "It's also about being able to share that experience with your child or your contemporary-art sceptical father," she adds.

She hasn't shied away from sound art or rigorously conceptual installation work, but all of it is art with which most viewers will be able to find a connection or, a way "in". Kelliher's first choice was the Dutch artist Jacco

Olivier, whose projections *Revolution* and *Landscape* are in the lobby of Kilkenny city courthouse. Depending on your view, they are either animated paintings or painted animations.

Revolution (2010) is a 24-minute layered space-scene in which painted spheres rotate like planets and splattered pigment mimics the Milky Way. The projection is enormous. "Jacco's use of this technology came out of a frustration with the physical limitations of painting," says Kelliher, "a frustration with scale, with the fact that work has to fit in and out of doorways, and with the limitations of canvas size."

There are no limitations here: pulsating auras and smoke-like creatures contract and expand their way across the scene, random blebs of paint zoom by like shooting stars and small white spears of light appear and disappear in a split second. As larger brush strokes begin to appear, *Revolution* becomes more about the physicality of painting, colours seep and the surface swirls like marbled pigment. Both *Revolution* and *Landscape* (2010) –

the smaller projection that accompanies it – are so slow moving, so silent and so visually absorbing they become almost meditative. They are enjoyable as pure entertainment for the eyes, but they also offer a bang-up-to-date musing on the nature and role of contemporary painting.

That question, "what is painting?", also drives the work of the American artist Ann Craven, who is showing in Inland for the first time as part of the festival. Six large paintings, all made last year, fill a long, low room in the Castle Yard Studio. They come in pairs, each with a mirror image and although they are essentially paintings of flowers in vases, they are about much more than that.

Craven likes to explore repetition. She once made 400 paintings of the moon from her studio, over a period of 10 months; a few months later she painted 400 more images, only this time they were paintings of her paintings.

In Kilkenny, the paintings are of generous bunches of white roses in glass vases. What appear at first to be grey-tinted monochrome images actually contain

careful hints of colour: green and yellowish shadows in *Roses* (Black and White) and *Roses* (Black and White mirrored), and fleshy pink reflections in the vase in *Roses* (Picabia Bird #2) and its twin. Each painting features a small, unassuming brown stool.

Deliberate brush strokes soften the background to produce ghostly, half-seen patterns and blurred presences that imply a domestic room behind the flowers, although they don't give much away. That the mirror images are not precise copies only adds to the mystery.

Fine, wide strokes of black paint form leaves on stems and lend these large-scale canvases an inherent dynamism that counters their momentary still feel. They are wonderful paintings; the more you look the more they give. If anyone is still asking what we want of the still life genre in the 21st century, this is certainly among the answers.

Kelliher quotes Van Gogh in her introduction to her selection: "Great things are done by a series of small things brought together." It's a truism that applies not just

to the work of a painter such as Craven but to Kelliher's decision to place art in small, seldom seen spaces in the city.

The Irish artists David Boame, Maria McKinney, Michael Thomas Murphy and Liam O'Callaghan are all showing in rooms that resonate with an implied history, which adds to the

experience. Beattie is in the Memorials Room at St Mary's Hall, a hidden city centre space with peeling paint and a 10-metre ceiling that is filled with ancient memorials. Cherubs gaze down on his highly conceptual sound installation, *Transmitter* (2010).

O'Callaghan's *Bit Symphony* (2009) operates like a mechanical

choir made from old record players in the Memorials Room, a former private chapel at Kilkenny Castle, while McKinney's sculptural works make use of old shopping trolleys at Roche House and Michael Thomas Murphy's "what's the matter with you" (2011) installation in Kenealy's old Art Shop on Lower Patrick's Street evokes the more recent history of a closed commercial premises. "What the artists are working with here are very specific spaces with histories, local folklore, fond associations, maybe even a ghost or two," says Kelliher.

Miller's installation is a case in point. He has moved a couch, a lamp and two easels from his studio into a large reception room in the former Bishop's Palace, now the Heritage Council headquarters. With its big black fireplace and sash windows, it hosts both the film and the finished painting. As you sit on the couch to consider the portrait and the film, you realise it's the same couch on which the painting's naked subject is lounging. There are several reasons why Miller's film is an

improvement on the RTE version: that is just one of them.

Because Miller chose Patrick Perring, whom he has been painting for almost 30 years, as his model, there is no need for us to cavestrap on silly getting-to-know-you banter. In fact, there is no talking in Miller's film, instead Kevin Volans's Trumpet Vibe Cello Piano, provides a musical soundtrack that lets the images speak for themselves.

The concept behind the painting is also more convincing. Waters's portrait took some inspiration from the observation that he bears a striking resemblance to the naked figure of Adam in Van Eyck's 15th-century Ghent Altarpiece. Patrick: *After Olympia and Venus* strikes up a more layered conversation with Manet's *Olympia* and Titian's *Venus*. Where Waters grasps an awkward bunch of daffodils, Perring holds a camera to protect his modesty. The implication is his contest being that we, the watchers, are watching the watched potentially watching the watcher.

Most importantly in Miller's film, he clearly enters the zone,

"Visually absorbing": above, Jacco Olivier's *Landscape*, 2010; left, Maria McKinney's sculpture *Harry Grids*, 2008

the zone he couldn't quite get into with a crew hiding behind him. Alone with his sitter, he forgets the camera and simply paints. The result is a better painting, and a more insightful film. We see how a tiny dot of yellow can change the face of the subject entirely, we witness the almost reckless bravery of applying a big fat brush to an image so fragile one move might destroy it, and we see that Miller does not stretch his canvases very tightly; that the surface shakes, wobbles and bounces back at him as he paints.

The film ends with the artist stepping back towards the camera, right up to the lens. There is a freeze frame. Miller's figure fades out to leave us with the sitter and the canvas. For anyone who really wants to know, this is how Nick Miller paints a naked portrait. ☐

Kilkenny Arts Festival runs until August 14; kilkennyarts.ie



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