

NICK MILLER: DRAWING FROM LIFE

Peter Plagens

By his own admission, Nick Miller is a very traditional artist. He works in the time-honoured painter's genres of portraits, still-lives and landscapes. But his is not a surly, across-the-board anti-contemporary stance. Miller—who is a very witty fellow—is not reflexively dismissive of installation art, conceptual art or, indeed, of post modernism's pervasive irony. They're just not, in the phrase common to the city of his birth (London, in 1962), his cup of tea. Miller's quite un-conservative art has much more to do with what the painter R. B. Kitaj calls "painting-drawing modernism." Miller's work—especially the remarkable landscape drawings—is quite unlike anything else being done today. Aesthetically wonderful in and of themselves, Miller's landscape drawings point to a path for the revitalization of painting, and are among the best contemporary art around.

Miller pushes the limits of Irish landscape painting, which, through such historical practitioners as Paul Henry and Jack B. Yeats, brother of the poet William Butler Yeats, is arguably the country's main contribution to modern art. The Irish have had a more intense, intimate and, yes, romantic connection to their land than other European peoples—in no small part because Ireland, as nations go, is a smallish island. This applies in particular to "The West of Ireland"—a concept touted by Henry and Yeats, although they, unlike Miller, didn't actually live there. Fuelled by a feeling of landscape-endangerment (environmental and commercial), Irish landscape painting continues to be a vigorous contemporary practice. But, Miller warns himself, it's an "easy" kind of painting to fall into and, if an artist wants to make something significant of it, he has to "rise to it."*

Having left England for Ireland in 1984 ("In the economy of the time, everyone was leaving Ireland," he recalls, "and I was like ballast on the boat arriving"), Miller forsook the loft/pub/gallery/museum Dublin art world for sparsely populated County Sligo in the northwest in 1992. Living in the country meant, of course, living more closely with nature. And nature, Miller says, "is about time." Its own kind of time, Miller means. In the city, time is speed and blur punctuated by startling instants; in the country, time is the murmured arc of dawn-to-dusk, rain relinquishing the clouds to sun, and the slow poignancy of seasonal shift. As lackadaisical as nature can be, it presents to the attuned artist what Miller calls "an inconvenient amount of visual information."

Amidst that feast of data for the eye, Miller detects-when he's "awake to the landscape"-a "connection between portraiture (a person sitting on a chair facing me in the studio) and the parallel growing energy of a bush or tree" that greets him in the landscape. As a result, Miller's landscape paintings are thickly expressive and visually aggressive. He flattens perspective and when he shoves a grey sky forward it can seem as threatening as a toppling bookcase. He coils brush strokes and flicks gobs of oil paint on the canvas as indulgently as an abstract expressionist, but tempers everything with the discipline of observation. To Miller, the landscape is both an exhilarating accelerator and a cautionary brake.

Which brings us to the truck. In 1997, Miller was talking to the Irish painter and County Sligo neighbour Barrie Cooke about his fantasy of living and working in an American-style "18-wheeler"-constantly on the move and painting the constantly new landscape from a capacious but mobile observation platform. Cooke knew of a truck dealer who was-quelle coincidence! - also interested in art, and suggested that Miller should go and see him. Miller and the dealer made a handshake agreement for the truck's required yearly maintenance, paid for with a bit of art and an annual restaurant dinner, and the pair subsequently became firm friends. Miller immediately narrowed the choice down to an ambulance and a six-wheel, 13-foot, box truck previously used to repair telephone lines. He chose the telephone truck, already blessed with slide-out shelving that would nicely serve as a palette. A few modifications (such as a translucent roof and a swing-out easel mounted near the box's loading door) and he was ready to roll. In the beginning, not very far: when his two sons were still babes, Miller would move the truck only around his own property, the open door facing only different parts of the garden. Even later, when his kids were older, the slow old vehicle, which was hardly suitable for long distance travel, restricted Miller to a painting-site range of about 15 miles.

For three years, Miller was satisfied with "panoramas"-views the truck provided, but painted as though the artist were mysteriously cantilevered out into space to view them, as though the truck didn't exist. Then, in 2000, Miller had "a massive epiphany" about including the framing edges of the truck's interior in his paintings. This type of compositional device-as common as street corner crowds in photography, and a staple of Sunday painters looking out through the windows of their summer homes-might have turned into a gimmick in the hands of an inferior artist. But it gave Miller, who deposits scraped-off paint from reworked sections of canvases on the walls around the door (a kind of road version of Francis Bacon's London studio, now

reconstructed in Dublin's municipal museum, The Hugh Lane Gallery), an opportunity both to ratchet up his Cézannesque manipulations of the picture plane toward near-vertigo, and to construct a succinct and arresting metaphor for seeing (the landscape, outside the truck) versus thinking and feeling (the artist's mind and heart, inside the truck). Miller's frames-within-the-painting also gently allude to the studio comforts (the familiarity of the floor and the smell of oil paint) and protection-psychological as well as physical-the truck affords him. "It's my tortoise shell," he says.

About the same time as he acquired his vehicular shield, Miller had started making large landscape drawings, the first of which was Benwee Head (1998). Their genesis owes to Miller's restless movement among genres and the fact that it requires "energy and emotional preparation" for him to gear up for each. "I also always have another project in the background," he says-a series of watercolours in mind while making oil paintings ("oil gets weighty"), a series of portraits while drawing from the landscape, and so on. The landscape drawings are, however, his slowest-moving series up to now. He'll do one or two, then take a long break. In addition to his usual need to adjust his psyche, Miller fears repeating himself. So, over the past ten years, he's made fewer than thirty of them.

The rich, damp vistas of County Sligo exude vegetative hues; they practically beg to be captured in the chromatic visceralness of oil paint. Miller obliges, as noted above, with a poetic inventiveness. But drawing-which, according to Miller involves a lot of "the eyes just looking, hands just doing"-is quite a different task, especially drawing the landscape. Miller needed to find a way to make the landscape work on paper in black and white because, he says, "I'm an adjustive colourist, I'm not Matisse."

Over the years, Miller had gotten himself "addicted" to a brand of 4-foot-by-5-foot sheets of paper that he had shipped to him from a certain art supply house in London. He used it in the 1996-99 charcoal-and-conté Closer drawings in which he attempted, in portraits, to find an end-point for Western perspective by straddling his supine subjects and getting his eyes as physically near to them as possible. Miller also employed the paper in the 1998-2000 Innocence watercolours of barely discernible human figures inspired by his devotion to the Chinese meditation-cum-exercise discipline of t'ai-chi, and his consequent "obsession" with the idea of "energy emanating from a [human] subject."

In the landscape drawings, Miller marshals Chinese and Indian ink to create densely frontal but also pictorially aerated views of hills, roads, rivers, trees, rocks and, occasionally, man-made structures in northwest Ireland. A few of the more recent drawings are tinged with faint colour; these works have been reclaimed from what Miller considers unsuccessful entries in the Innocence series, where he's re-dissolved the watercolour with sponges and spread it into a faint background spectrum. Except on the truck's framing edges-which are "culture" rather than "nature"-Miller allows himself no corrective opaque white. Instead, if he needs to, he reclaims white by grinding delicately into the durable (yea, punishable) paper with a wire brush disc or a burr spinning at the end of a power drill. The luminous and tactile effects that Miller gets from the technique-particularly in skies or on tree-trunks-are subtly astonishing, and snap some of the drawings back into life from what might otherwise have been a too-relentless rectangle of grey. Still, the artist says, "If I can get away without any scraping, I do."

Overall, however, Miller won't let himself get away with anything. The landscape drawings are absolutely uncompromised, almost animist evocations of place. They're like van Gogh's incomparable ink renditions of French fields enlarged and beefed up. Or compare them with the South African William Kentridge's drawings (animation cells, really) for his films, but relieved of narrative necessity and the expedience required by sheer quantity. *Take To Lough Key* (2005) for instance, with its bilious sky and anxious isles sliced at an angle by a lonesome, but somehow still arrogant, telephone pole. The drawing is as Old-Masterishly good as meanderings from the brush of Constable but as courageously modern (most artists today wax sentimental in front of the landscape) as anything on the pristine white walls of a major art museum. Or the big drawing (154 x 244 cm) of *Kilmastranny National School* (2005): the school building, surrounded by a deftly rendered fence and with adroitly sketched children playing outside, slides on a triangle of land buffered by two roads, headlong toward the truck. But it's held back, as it were, by the loving landscape on either side and Miller's transparent screen of "protection." The school will stay where it was meant to be.

Ballindoon Abbey (2005) is, by contrast, halfway hidden in middle of the six horizontal strata constituting, along with elegantly thin and angled vertical framing edges from the truck, the drawing's composition. It takes a moment to see the buildings, tucked in among the trees, below the soft dark hills and billowing sky, and across the field on the other side of the road where the

truck-our truck, Miller makes us feel-is parked. The marvel of the drawing is how Miller devises a different technique for rendering each iconographical element and yet manages to get them all-as active and agitated as each one is-to hang together so smoothly.

Symbolically, it's about the artist as outsider. "When you live in a rural community like this," Miller says, "you think, 'What does it take to be buried here?'" Miller is the son of South African Jews who emigrated to England and who is himself an adult arrival in Ireland, with less than twenty years in a countryside where the children of children of children can still be considered relative newcomers. The larger question implied by the drawing is, "What does it take for an artist to be fully in the world while still preserving the vision-noticing what others overlook, valuing what others find worthless, labouring over what others deem highly impractical-that gives him his reason for being?"

Nick Miller himself is a tick under six feet tall, very sociable and quite articulate. (Elsewhere, he's written eloquently about his own art.) He graduated from the University of East Anglia in Norwich with a degree in the eminently careerable field of "Development Studies," and didn't go to art school. Miller's education in painting was conducted by trial-and-error in front of an easel, and in museums. Early on, he went through "a Caravaggio binge, which made me humble," and understandably developed a strong connection with the disparate group of figurative painters known as "The School of London" (Kitaj, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kosoff and, in a bit of a stretch, Francis Bacon.) In fact, his native Irish wife Noreen, a language teacher at the local school, very much resembles one of those high-cheekboned, big-eyed beauties in early Freud paintings.

The other pervasive influence on Miller's art has been t'ai-chi, with which Miller became intensely enamoured for about a decade, starting in 1993. He studied with, among others, Chungliang Ai Huang, a friend of Alan Watts, and freighted himself to Oregon and then all the way to the middle of U.S.A., to the middle of Illinois, to be taught. "When I was doing the Innocence watercolours, at the same time as the peak of the large landscape oils" Miller says, "I was getting up at four a.m. to do hours of t'ai-chi." He learned from his "Chinese thing" to get out of his "claustrophobic" attitude toward nature and really open up to it. Right now, while the current t'ai-chi practice is much less intense, Miller's perspective is "outward," and in the

landscape drawings under way, he's inclining more toward big, open vistas. In addition, he's found that he "can be in the worst possible mood while drawing and still get a beautiful result." How does this sit, then, with Miller's remark that the landscape drawings are, for him personally, "a kind of defence, an armour plate"? First, Miller doesn't mean they're a defence against nature itself, to which-as he has said and has proven with his art-he's almost painfully receptive. The "armour plate" is, rather a buffer against the ill consequences of the tensions that might debilitate the work of a lesser artist. Miller struggles with the nativist charm of Ireland versus his own irrevocable status as an outsider; with the romantic tradition of Irish landscape painting and his own unquenchable Modernism; and with his undeniable metropolitan sensibilities versus life in the country. Miller has said that his art "is an offering-first, to myself, then to others." Which means that, in the first instance, it helps him come to terms with the contradictions of the highest possibilities of art as opposed to the necessities of living in the material, economic and political world. After his art leaves the studio, it's a balm to the hurried urbanites that, Miller realises, are almost unanimously the audience for contemporary art. But Miller's ultimate audience is the cultural situation of painting. And though these landscape drawings might not be "painting" per se, they are at the moment one of current painting's most enriching and revivifying ingredients. Miller's prickly, symphonic rectangles of line, tone and surface are startlingly, visually alive. And the soulful resonance of his portraits of place arises ever so naturally from them.

*All quotations of the artist from the author's conversations with Nick Miller in County Sligo, Ireland, March, 2007.

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