



The large painting in Nick Miller's "Tree House 360°" at the Concord Art Association comprises 27 panels of paint on paper.

Waking up, then seeing the forest for the trees

By Cate McQuaid
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"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could learn what it had to teach," wrote Henry David Thoreau in "Walden." A few miles from Walden Pond, the Concord Art Association has mounted an exhibit of paintings undertaken in the same spirit.

Irish painter Nick Miller spent several weeks in fall 2009 in residence at the Josef & Anni Albers Foundation on acres of woodland in Bethany, Conn. His first evening there, Miller explored the forest and found a platform built between two white pines 23 feet in the air. He climbed up and, jet-lagged, fell asleep. When he awoke, startled by the surroundings, he knew what he had to paint.

The resulting exhibit, "Tree House 360°," revolves around one large piece — 91 inches by 202 inches — that flattens Miller's spherical perspective from land to sky and in all lateral directions into two dimensions. The artist is known for a previous body of work painted from inside his mobile studio, a truck with a rear door that framed the view in those pieces. That scope

was narrow; this one is limitless.

Having read about the show, I had developed an expectation that the "Tree House 360°" installation would be like a mural at a cyclorama, in the round. When I entered the gallery and saw the big painting on one wall, with several smaller sketches on surrounding walls, I was momentarily deflated.

Then I started looking, and found Miller's detail so refined that even gazing at a little depiction of the canopy of leaves, I got tugged into the work as if it were much larger. Miller is not a realist; his gestures are loose and easy. His woods are airier, brighter, snappier than what a photo would portray.

But he does attempt to capture exactly what he sees. His work is an exercise in looking. The large painting comprises 27 panels, each a lens onto its own fraction of forest. It rises to two peaks at the top to accommodate the looming branches of the pines upon which the platform braces. Some reach comfortably over the viewer; others simply climb.

In the middle ground, a riot of daubs conjures autumn leaves, and dozens of tree trunks reach upward, near and far. The foreground shows the zigzag of the platform railing, a flattened

NICK MILLER: Tree House 360°
At: Concord Art Association, 37 Lexington Road, Concord, through Aug. 18. 978-369-2578, www.concordart.org
2011 BOSTON YOUNG CONTEMPORARIES EXHIBITION
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version of the octagon or decagon that rings the tree house. This is our only clue that Miller has taken a circular perspective — woods are woods no matter what direction you look — but it's all we need to recognize that the artist has wrestled three dimensions to two. Embraced by nature, Miller gives it its due with the simple act of paying close attention and describing what he sees.

Seen here: promise

Every summer, grad students at local art schools stage "Boston Young Contemporaries," a sprawling juried show at Boston University's 808 Gallery. It's always a hash of things, some bright, shiny, and promising, others easily forgettable. Joel Brown's "Untitled, Untitled"

caught my eye partly because, at the size of a postcard, it runs headlong away from the large-scale canvases that many of his cohorts at BU specialize in (they have bigger studios than at most art schools). It's tense narrative at a wee scale (a captivating combination), a loosely painted scene of three men in blue with goggles perhaps interrogating a naked man.

Cathy McLaurin's weirdly fascinating color photo "Sawry Head Application" depicts a woman with stuff — a teacup, an antler — affixed to her head with packing tape, which pulls up her nose and twists her skin. She looks monstrous and reined in. Alexander Harding's photo "Oil Spill" is delicious because it's gorgeous and ugly at once, shimmering, reminiscent of the rough texture of an impastoed abstract painting, and all about the mess oil makes. Claudia Mastrobuono's sculpture "Weight" appears to be a stone in a net strapped to a large egg, seeming to pull at it — a picture of stress, tension, and relationship.

Aris Moore's droll drawings such as "Red Flannel Robe" capture people who are defiant, vulnerable, and somehow unformed, with well-defined features but misshapen or un-

contoured heads. Painter Anne Buckwalter plays with expectations of space and scale in works such as "Backyard," which features tiny houses in tubs beneath a clothesline upon which clothes are hung with hangers, and a patterned blanket is tacked to the sky as if the sky were a wall.

Chelsey Wood's disturbing "Small Spaces" paintings each jam two naked women (they all look the same) into open wooden crates. It's a picture of trapped negotiation, but what struck me more than the pained subject matter was Wood's wonderful facility painting skin tone.

On the more abstract side, Michael Pflieghaar's mixed-media painting "Rock 2" grabs with its hints at representation. He captivatingly depicts a flattened, stretched wooden chair. He paints the wood grain in places, but also uses wood laminate, shuffling planes like playing cards against a flat pink ground.

"BYC" is always sketchy and too big, but what a satisfaction, down the road, to come across an artist you saw here first.

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