

Beginnings

"If the Angel deigns to come, it will be because you have convinced her, not by your tears, but by your humble resolve to be always beginning: to be a beginner. "

Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet

Angels often find themselves in Patrick Hall's work.

Over more than thirty years as a friend and fellow painter, I have come to recognise in Patrick a real embodiment of Rilke's "humble resolve to be always beginning", it manifests both in life and in the strange alchemy of painting in the studio. When I first encountered his work in Dublin of the mid 1980s, I was in my twenties with my own dreams of painting. I had very little understanding of what drew me to the awkwardness and difficulty of his work, all I could really intuit was that they somehow transcended the constraint of 'pictures' and entered a realm of 'art'.

Patrick's work arises from a life lived with what he describes as a 'certain unknowingness' and from a metaphysical journeying, mostly made in uncommon solitude. In a world that celebrates the outward achievement and the spectacular, he turns away to dwell with beginning intent, always re-entering the studio with a temperament that waits silently with work, allowing it to emerge without force or grasping, into the world.

Patrick Hall
Bullfighter, 1973
ink on paper, 34 x 25 cm



Hall draws energy both literally and metaphorically from the deep well of 'nothing' that can be understood to reside at the heart of the self. Some years ago he described this in an interview with the art critic Hans Ulrich Obrist: "Energy itself is non-linear; you're going in every direction and more at the same time. Also you're going more inward than outward, and there are no paths, there are no lines, it's a circling in to the heart of things. It's being, just being, outside of space and time". Maybe, this understanding has become a little more tangible for us all, after nearly two years of dealing with a pandemic, sitting more alone with our own energetic realities and facing the strangeness of the fragile illusions we construct in the lives we inhabit.

At eighty-six, Patrick has been largely confined to his house and studio in rural Co Sligo for a number of years, only made more absolute during Covid 19. I have observed his response to the realities of ageing and health – rebuilding against the odds his capacity in body and mind – he inhabits the difficulties of his time, engaging with work to see what is at

play. The relationship to art changes as the journey to the adjacent studio is something of a herculean physical task, as the awkward boulder of self is levered inch by inch towards moments of sanctuary that can be found in creative practice. Sitting at the drawing table, that boulder is transformed and weightless. Brush in hand, life is absorbed into work and back into life without expectation, as beginnings and endings can become one.

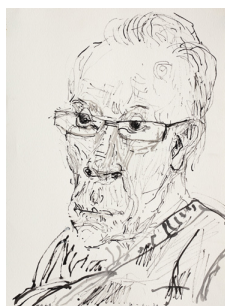
My visits in normal times are social, but as early Covid 19 restrictions took hold, it also became a task to deliver food. In hindsight, it was a gift; to break lockdown each week and drive the 35 km across deserted roads and police checkpoints, to spend Sundays in company and to focus elsewhere. The silver lining of unplanned time working in his studio evolved as an adventure in the possibilities of now – in his work, and in my own. The regularity of the visits allowed me the sustained opportunity over nearly two years to engage more deeply with him through portraiture, as I have frequently attempted over thirty years.

As the impetus grew to present this show for The Model, the unfamiliar rhythms and contexts of this particular time allowed me freedom to root in dusty folders and drawing books in his studio, finding works that somehow survived a lifetime. I found myself curious and touched by elements in his early work: In London, drawings of his first studio on the Kings Road in the late 1950s. In Spain, landscapes from his solitary excursions in rural Malaga and the interiors in Madrid as he began to more clearly inhabit art for himself in late 60's and early 1970s. And then settling back in Dublin from the late Seventies as he established himself again at home in Ireland.

In curating this show, I am pulling a loose thread of energy between his more literal beginnings as a painter, to the more metaphorical possibilities of now – found in some new and ongoing 'working drawings' – neither finished nor unfinished, but just taken from this time. I have also included some documentary photographs of a short-lived commission for the community hall of Terenure Synagogue in Dublin, based on "The Tree of Life" (1976-77) catching my eye in part due to my own background, but also recognising his early affinity with biblical and spiritual sources. The show includes just one large painting; "Two Stones" re-working a piece that somehow epitomises the strange freedom, process and courage at the heart of his life's work.

It is 15 years since his retrospective exhibition also presented by The Model "50 Years Painting" beautifully curated by the artist Isobel Nolan. This current exhibition has a more modest intent, bringing into light a small selection of mostly unseen drawings and other works, many made without the intent to exhibit, just moments, feeling a way into art, life and spirit - They are the beginnings that are held equally in his work today as then, and in the internal energetic dance between life and death.

Nick Miller
October 2021



Nick Miller
Patrick Hall, 6-10-20
ink on paper, 39 x 39 cm