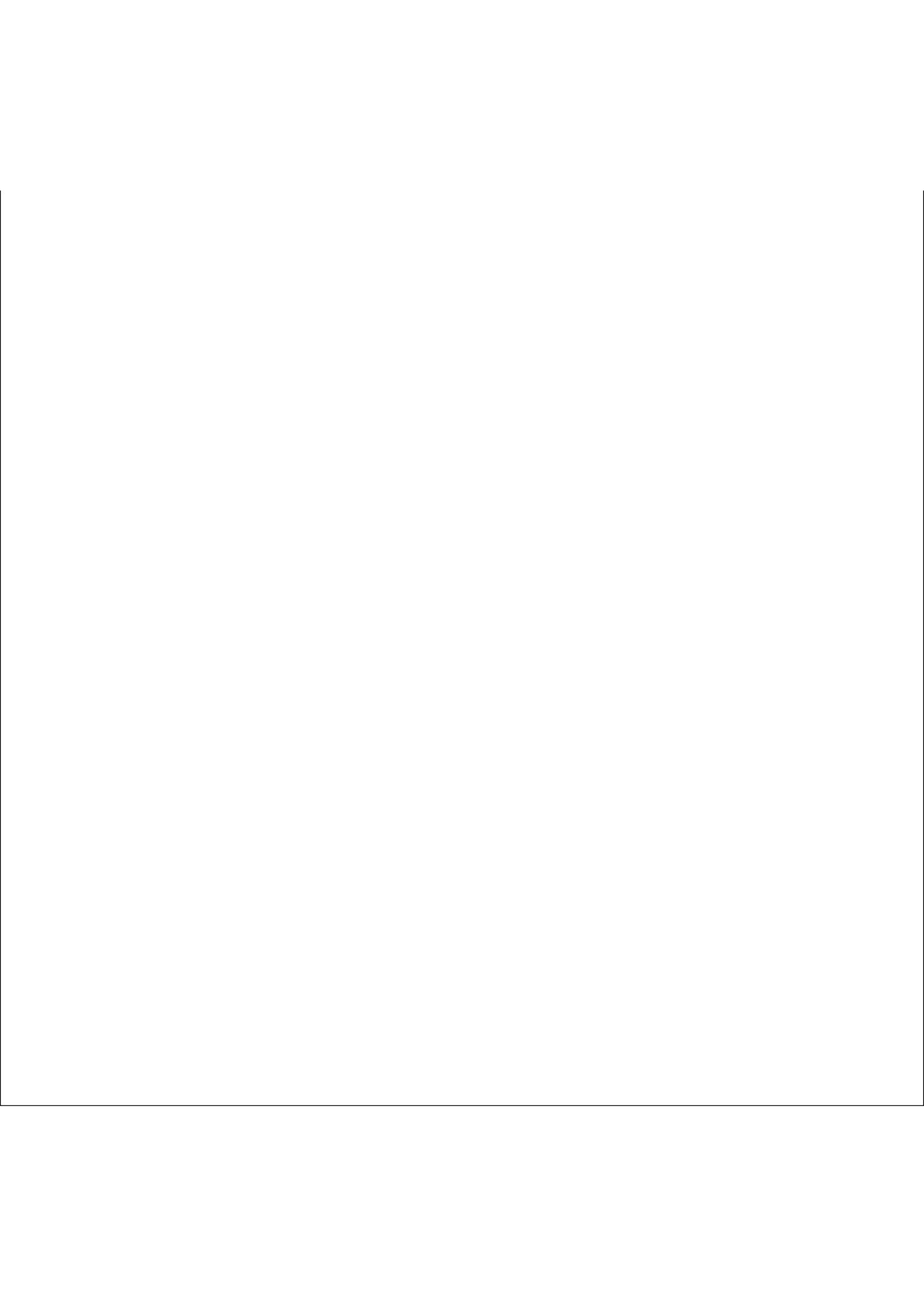




Nick Miller Truckscapes



Nick Miller Truckscapes

Paintings from a mobile studio

Essay by David Cohen

NEW YORK STUDIO SCHOOL
OF DRAWING, PAINTING & SCULPTURE

8 West 8th Street New York, NY 10011 Tel 212 673 6466



Truckscapes

By David Cohen

There is something almost greedy about Nick Miller's lyricism. He paints and draws County Sligo, the north west part of Ireland where he lives, with voracious, engrossing intensity. The way he captures a sense of "presentness" marshals opposing tendencies of detail and urgency, minute observation and nervous darting around. It is as if the painstakingly accumulated data encrusting his surface is constantly being swept by some invisible brush from one corner to another. The mood in his work swings from rootedness to agitation.

Miller calls his landscapes "truckscapes" because for the most part they are painted or drawn inside a specially modified electrician's truck that serves as his studio on the move. Documentary photographs show this vehicle, formerly a telecommunications company's mobile workshop, parked in the landscape or with the artist at work under its opaque roof, the rear door swung fully open.

The Emerald Isle would not be able to boast its legendary verdure without its equally notorious rain, so the converted truck is understandably essential to his project. The mobile studio enables a devotion to the motif as dogged as Cézanne, who had only the Provençal sun and an occasional mistral with which to contend when working "sur le motif."

The truck, therefore, is eminently practical, and yet use of the term "truckscapes" signals at some level unease with the tradition-laden genre of landscape. A first-time viewer of these landscapes could be forgiven for suspecting gimmickry as well as anxiety in the term. After all, one would not call frescoes painted on a ceiling "scaffoldscares." The more these images are contemplated on the artist's own terms, however, the pertinence of his terminology becomes clear:

The aspect of them being "truckscapes" that interests me is that, although similarly focused on the subject, they are not plein air and could not be made without the physical, psychological and cultural protection of the "mobile studio." *

Another point about “truckscapes” is that the word balances a sense of what is seen with awareness of the act of seeing (and making). The truck’s back door is a “seeing, framing device.” “Truckscape,” as opposed to “landscape,” shifts focus from what is perceived to perception itself.

This emphasis is conceptually important to the context of Miller’s artistic origins. The London-born artist, who is primarily self-taught, majored in Development Studies—politics and economics from the perspective of developing countries—at the University of East Anglia, where, during his college days, he also took evening classes at the nearby Norwich School of Art. Teachers at that establishment included John Wonnacott and John Lessore, who ran one of the most committed life rooms then active in the British Isles. Miller, who took early inspiration from Francis Bacon and R.B. Kitaj, came very much under the sway of a “School of London” expressive realism, rooted in intense personal experience of the subject, found in such artists as Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff and Lucian Freud.

The Sainsbury Centre at UEA, the gift of Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, houses a major collection that includes several of these artists and also the work of Alberto Giacometti, himself a touchstone to School of London artists for the value he set on emotionally exacting fidelity to his subject. It was an exhibition of Giacometti drawings at the Sainsbury Centre that triggered Miller’s decision to commit to a life of painting. To Giacometti and School of London painters alike, the studio had almost mythic value as the locus of existential struggles for authenticity. A cult of the studio was boosted by the Tate Gallery when it placed a photograph on the catalog cover for its 1984 exhibition “The Hard-won Image: Traditional Method and Subject in Recent British Art,” of a painting on the easel of Auerbach’s studio, where every visible surface other than the canvas itself was coated

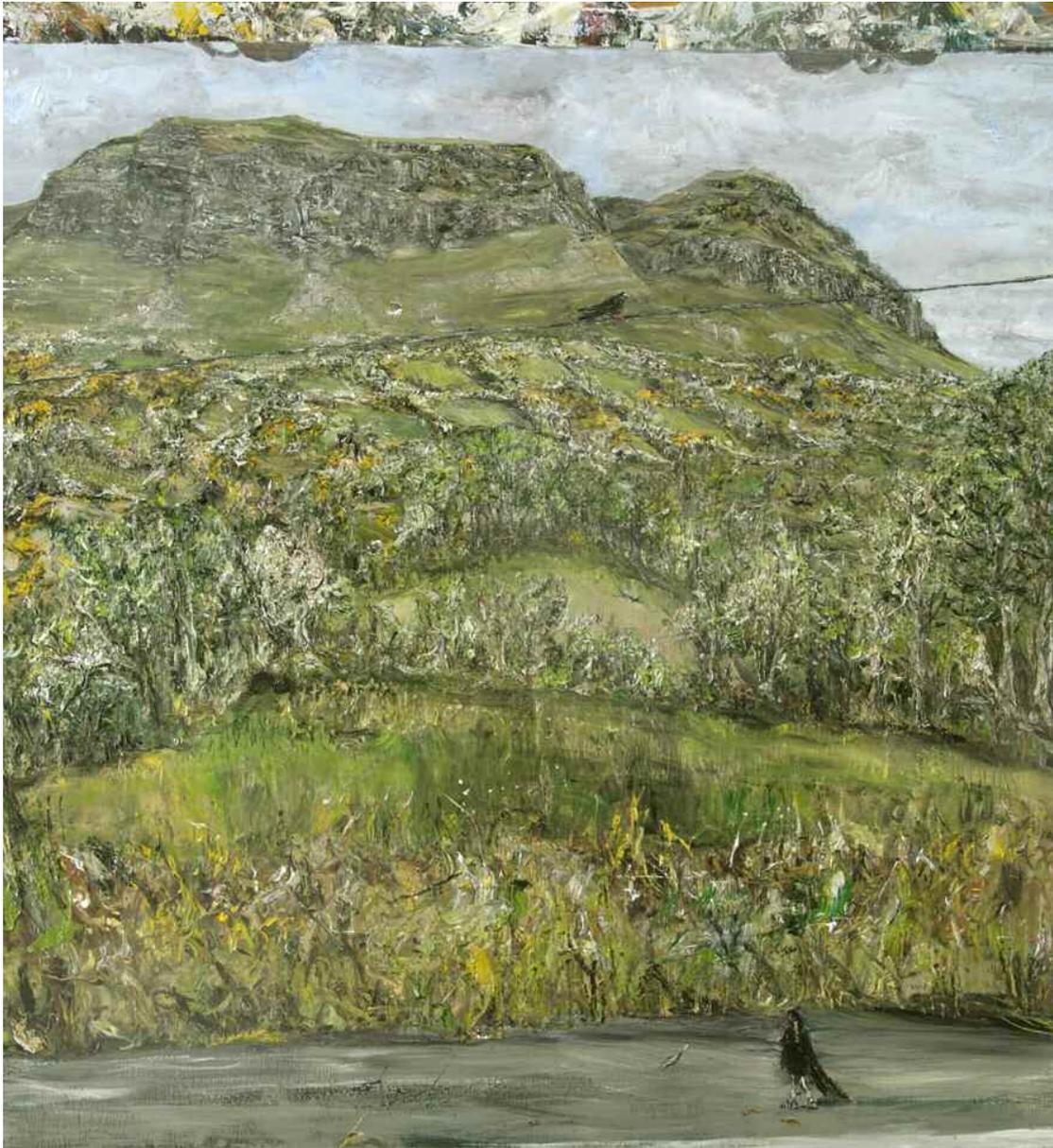


From Cogan's shed, 2004. Oil on linen, 72 x 84 in. (183 x 214 cm)

in paint scrapings—evidence of an heroic struggle to secure the image.

Miller comes from this aesthetic—or perhaps ethic—of painting. At the same time, he follows a trajectory of working in the landscape, continued by Cézanne (whose need for multiple attempts before being satisfied with a canvas was stressed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his classic 1945 essay “Cézanne’s Doubt”) and Soutine, that traces back to the early 19th Century and beyond (to Poussin and his circle for instance). East Anglia played a significant role in the English landscape tradition. The Norwich School of artists, such as John Crome and John Sell Cotman, offered an unaffected, unidealized response to their environment through a directness that some think anticipated the Impressionists. Norfolk is also John Constable Country, the experience of which made a deep impression on Kossoff who was evacuated to those parts as a teenager during the Second World War. Miller’s landscapes have a particular reference to Kossoff’s, and the artist similarly feels an intense affinity with Constable, “so easy to mistake for chocolate box—yet so absolutely not.”

Such a rich set of influences might have pointed the budding artist to his native city, if not to join the ranks of the School of London, then at least to study with its acolytes and set himself loose in the National Gallery. But Miller was instead infected by a sense of needing to escape the weight and work out how to be an artist alone—taking solitude, rather than community, to be the imperative of the artists he admired. Miller’s move to Ireland went against the traffic, as the 1980s witnessed large-scale economic migration out of the Republic. After several years of the lively Dublin scene, he sought out greater isolation—and discovered an exquisite subject matter—in the sparsely populated, romantically beautiful County Sligo. Until moving last year to the coast, near to Sligo town, Miller and his family lived in rural isolation.



Ben Bulbin crags with birds, 2008. Oil on linen, 72 x 66 in. (183 x 168 cm)

Always interested in working from observation, Miller has practised in several “traditional” genres—portrait, still-life, anatomical drawing, landscape—though almost always in such a way as to avoid augmenting the motif with imaginative embellishments or symbolic transformations. His portraiture, for instance, which continues to be an important activity for him in his (fixed) studio, eschews clues of social status. Rather than deal with psychological truths, the artist instead deals with physical facts, locating individual likeness in these, as they present themselves almost without discrimination. His portraits have a robust, dynamic “all overness,” close to the democratic spread across the canvas of his landscapes.

The mobile studio is about more than mere creature comfort for the artist, or the symbolic quality of extending the cult of the studio into the landscape. His van enables Miller to work on landscapes at a “studio” scale: a big canvas set up outside, apart from getting very wet, would blow around. And while Miller is spared the worst of what the elements might have to offer, he in turn reciprocates by seeing through the immediate weather conditions and atmospheric to offer, instead, a continuum of the landscape as it presents itself that day. This is not to say that he is painting an ideal, an essence of the landscape as opposed to its “reality,” but instead to say, as it were, that he picks his quarrels, engaging with fixed entities, albeit in a state of flux, rather than transient ones: ignoring the weather is the equivalent, in portraiture, of discounting the sitter’s twitching and fidgeting.

There is no shortage of sumptuous, spectacular terrain for Miller to choose from, which is as well because the actual, final choice of motif has a practical, unpoetic aspect to it: it is determined by where he can park his truck. There is little wiggle room or space for fine tuning, nor inclination to “cheat” in how he positions the canvas or peers out the back door. How the landscape is cropped is determined by the 40 inches of the door’s frame. He takes an unsentimental view of



Interior truck-view, Lough Key, 2006. Oil on linen 122 x 153 cm/ 48 x 60 in. (183 x 168 cm)

the edge, simply painting what he sees. This will include, if it pans out that way, the sides of the truck's interior. A mirror, set inside the van, assists his view of the painting as work proceeds, and this in turn often leads him to include a self-portrait—albeit minute and skewed, as the mirror is convex—within the final composition. Invariably, therefore, these literally are trucksapes, as what he paints, like “Las Meninas” by Velazquez, is as much of as on the canvas: as much a portrait of the artist as of his subject, and as much the space of the maker and, implicitly, the viewer as of the view.

Miller's crossing took him from Constable country to Yeats country: there are many local landmarks, like the “Lake Isle of Innisfree,” associated with W.B. Yeats, who is buried in Drumcliff graveyard (within sight as he wished of Ben Bulbin, the mountain whose Mont Sainte Victoire-like summit is now painted by Miller from his current, main studio situated at its base). County Sligo is equally the country of the poet's painter brother, Jack B. Yeats, with whose glorious late paintings Miller shares a rich impasto, a fearless painterly bravura and a neo-romantic sense of fractured connectedness with the land. But there are significant ways in which Miller is different from Yeats. His earth colors are closely keyed to the sensed, observed terrain whereas Yeats' are studio concocted and fantastical; Miller's agitations of the hand generate textures that are always correlates of things seen, in contrast to the theatrical expressionism of Yeats' flicks of the brush.

Where Yeats is so often about memory, Miller is more about being in the moment, and this in turn relates to the other major influence on Miller's artistic evolution, one that is as significant in its way as his painting influences. For a period of several years, Miller was a fanatical student of Tai Ch'i. In the course of his explorations and travels in connection with this martial arts-derived meditation practice, Miller encountered the work of Chen ZhongSen, whose astounding micro-



Lane, Blackthorn, 2007. Oil on linen, 48 x 40 in. (122 x 102 cm)

scopic calligraphy forms include the inscription of Tang dynasty poems on strands of hair taken from his wife's head, a staggering feat of controlled energy-channeling that has provided a role model for Miller:

His work opened a window of possibility for me in western art, that when you open your eyes to the impossible wealth of information provided by a subject—the millions of leaves and blades of grass when I open the truck door, or the hairs of a human head of a sitter—that this does not need to be simplified or abstracted, as has been one course of western art, but can be absorbed and channeled with a different sort of precision. I tried in a sort of way to open myself as best I could to that principle to see what would happen.

His own immersion in landscape, his balancing of detail and whole, the sustained attentiveness that his painterly all-overness entails, is something Miller relates to a similar mind-set.

The mobile studio provides a potent metaphor of Miller's relationship to his subject in its mix of transience and groundedness, of presence and flux. As an English-born son of South African Jews (as a friend joked to Miller, as "Woody Allen lost in the countryside and painting his way out"), his painting makes a connection between himself and a place where he will always be something of an outsider, but whose identity, through his own practice, he helps to fix. The truck also relates to the caravans of the Travelers, Ireland's Roma—something that roams the land and is at the same time an integral aspect of it. For these landscapes of a transitory nature, "truckscape" is just the right name.

* all quotes by the artist are from correspondence with the author



Ben Bulben craggs, 2008. Oil on linen, 20 x 24 in. (51 x 62 cm)



To Arrow with painting & reflection, 2005. Oil on linen, 16 x 20 in. (41 x 51 cm)



Garden, swing and birds, 2004. Oil on linen, 16 x18 in. (41 x 46 cm)

Nick Miller

Born London, 1962

B.A. from the University of East Anglia, UK in 1984.

Moved to Ireland in 1984 and now lives in Co Sligo.

Elected to Aosdána in 2001. Represented by Rubicon Gallery, Dublin.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2008

Truckscapes—Paintings from a mobile studio. New York Studio School. New York, NY. Catalogue with essay by David Cohen

Truckscapes—Drawings from a mobile studio. Limerick City Gallery, Limerick, Ireland & Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, Ireland.

Catalogue published by Rubicon Gallery with essay by Peter Plagens

2007

Truckscapes—Drawings from a mobile studio. Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris, France

2006

Standing Sitting Lying—Watercolours.

Rubicon Gallery, Dublin. Catalogue with text by artist

2004

Genre—Paintings by Nick Miller. Butler Gallery, Kilkenny Castle, Ireland.

Catalogue with text by Patrick Hall

2003

Figure to Ground. Royal Hibernian Academy, Gallagher Gallery, Dublin, Ireland.

Catalogue with essay by Catherine Marshall, interview & foreword by Patrick T. Murphy

2002

chen + miller: east-west. Model Arts &

Niland Gallery, Sligo, Ireland. Catalogue with foreword by Suzanne Woods & text by the artist

2000

Closer—Drawings. Rubicon Gallery, Dublin; Art Space Gallery, London, UK; Kilkenny Arts Festival, Ireland. Catalogue published by Rubicon Gallery with text by the artist

1999

Paintings. Art Space Gallery, London, UK

1998

Paintings & Drawings. Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, Ireland. Catalogue interview with Hughie O'Donoghue

1996

Figure: Works on Paper, 1992-96. The Lowe Gallery, Atlanta, GA

Paintings. Fenderesky Gallery, Belfast, N. Ireland

1994

South African Works 1991-92. Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland

1992

Paintings & Drawings. Galerie D'Eendt, Amsterdam, Holland

1991

The Shadow Line. City Arts Centre, Dublin, Ireland. Catalogue with essay by Aidan

Dunne, text by Michael Harding

1989

Zoo Work. Eve Linders, Dublin, Ireland

1988

Paintings. Project Arts Centre, Dublin, Ireland



To Kilronan, 2005. Chinese and Indian ink on paper, marouflaged to canvas, 77.5 x 93 in. (200 x 240 cm)

Selected Group Exhibitions

2008

Pulse, New York. Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, Ireland

RHA Annual Exhibition: Invited Artist.

Gallagher Gallery, RHA, Dublin, Ireland

The Green Fuse. Catherine Hammond Gallery, Glengarriff, Ireland

2007

RHA annual exhibition: Invited Artist.

Gallagher Gallery, RHA, Dublin, Ireland

Into Landscape—Drawings. Curated by Jim Savage. Touring exhibition, Ireland

2006

Other Visions—Contemporary Irish Art. Purdy Hicks Gallery, London, UK

Art Cologne. Cologne, Germany

From Landscape: Large-scale Landscape

Drawing. Curated by Jim Savage.

Touring exhibition, Ireland

2005

Art Cologne. Cologne, Germany

Landscapes Nick Miller. The Dock, Carrick on Shannon, Ireland

2004

Art Cologne. Cologne, Germany

Take Away. Galerie Eugen Lendl, Graz, Austria

In a Time of Shaking: Artists for Amnesty.

Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland

Barrie Cooke, Dorothy Cross & Nick Miller.

Fenton Gallery, Cork, Ireland

2003

Heavenly Bodies: Figure Drawing through the Ages. National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland

2001

Above: Weir, Miller & Walker & Walker. Fenton Gallery, Cork, Ireland

Passages From Ballinglen. List Gallery, Swathmore College, PA

Three Artists from Ireland. West Wales Arts Centre, Fishguard, UK

Eigse Carlow Festival of Visual Art. Carlow, Ireland

The Garden. Model Arts & Niland Gallery, Sligo, Ireland

RHA Annual Exhibition: Invited Artist.

Gallagher Gallery, RHA Dublin, Ireland

1999

Thinking Drawing. RHA Gallery, Dublin

1998–99

When Time Began to Rant and Rage. Touring exhibition: Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, UK; Berkeley Art Museum, CA; Grey Art Gallery, New York, NY

1998

EV+A. Limerick City Gallery, Limerick, Ireland

1998

Drawings. Boundary Gallery, London, UK

1997

Skin Deep. Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, Ireland

Ballinglen Experience. RHA, Dublin, Ireland

The Beautiful Junk Shop. Fenderesky, Belfast, N. Ireland

1996

Landscape. Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, Ireland

Drawing. The Fine Arts Society, London, UK

1995

Portraits. Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland

1994

Celebrating Difference. Touring exhibition, Ireland

1993

The Naked Formed. Rubicon, Dublin, Ireland

1992

Transmission. Irish Life Centre, Dublin, Ireland



Hazel catkins, 2006. Chinese and Indian ink on paper, 60 x 48 in. (154 x 122 cm)

Selected Awards

2008
Culture Ireland Grant
2000
Elected to Aosdána Arts Council: Travel Award
Fergus O’Ryan RHA Memorial Award
1999
Dept. of Foreign Affairs, CRC Grant
1998
Arts Council: Major Bursary
1996
Arts Council: Travel Award & Artflight
Dept. of Foreign Affairs, CRC Grant
1994
Arts Council: Artist in Schools Program
1993/92/88
Arts Council: Visual Arts Bursary/Materials Grant
1991
National Portraits Awards Exhibition (Ireland): Open Award
Dublin Corporation: Visual Arts Grant
1989
National Portrait Awards Exhibition (Ireland): Award

Collections

Irish Museum of Modern Art
Irish Life PLC; RTE
The Arts Council (Ireland)
Independent Newspapers
The National Drawing Collection (Limerick Municipal Collection)
The Niland Collection
Ballinglen Arts Foundation
Boyle Civic Collection
Dublin Institute of Technology
Allied Irish Bank; Bank of Ireland
The Irish Permanent
Ulster Bank
Fujian Teachers College (China)
Anglo Irish Bank (Dublin)
Fundación Privada Sorigüe, (Lleida, Spain)
European Investment Bank (Luxembourg)

Selected Bibliography

2008
Kelly, John (host) and others. “Nick Miller: ‘Truckscape’.” The View, RTE Television, January 22
Woods, Vincent (host) and others. “‘Truckscape’.” The Arts Show, RTE Radio 1, January 22
Tipton, Gemma. “Nick Miller, Truckscape,” Image Magazine, January 23
Dunne, Aidan. “Wild Views from a Truck,” Irish Times, January 28
O’Connell, Helen. “Nick Miller,” Image Interiors, January issue
2006
Gleeson, Regina. “The Difficulty with Desire,” Irish Arts Review, autumn issue
Tipton, Gemma. “Nowhere to hide,” Irish Time Magazine, September 19
2004
Coulter, Riann. “A life less ordinary,” Irish Arts Review, autumn issue
Boland, Rosita. “The Sligo Studios,” Irish Times, October 23
Dunne, Aidan. “New Genres,” Irish Times, November 10
McDonagh, Marese. “A Moveable Feast,” Sunday Independent Magazine December 18
2003
Dunne, Aidan. “Art from the back of a lorry,” Irish Times, January 18
Hartigan, Marianne. “Closing the Gaps,” Sunday Tribune, January 19
Kelly, John (host) and others. “Nick Miller: Figure to Ground,” The View, RTE television, January 28
2002
Donohoe, Miriam. “Making Art without Breathing, East West,” Irish Times, April 13
Hartigan, Marianne. “Hair-raising Crossover,” Sunday Tribune, April 28
2000
Dunne, Aidan. “Portraits worth lying for,” Irish Times, January 26
Guner, Fisun. “Nick Miller at Art Space,” What’s On, March 3
Ingleby, Richard. “Private View,” The Independent (UK), April 8
1999
Ingleby, Richard. “Private View,” The Independent (UK), March 20

1998
Dunne, Aidan. “Caught in the Nick of Time,” Sunday Tribune, April
Dunne, Aidan. “Exploring the artist’s studio,” Irish Times, May
1997
Walker, Dorothy. The Life of Painting: Modern Art in Ireland, Lilliput Press, Dublin
1996
Locke, Donald. “Nick Miller at Lowe,” Creative Loafing, Atlanta, GA
1994
Dunne, Aidan. “Nick Miller at IMMA,” CIRCA, summer issue
1993
Cassidy, J. “Naked Formed,” CIRCA, autumn issue
Dunne, Aidan. “How to look at the naked body,” Sunday Tribune
1991
Gallagher, Patrick. “Study in Blue,” Sunday Independent, May
Dunne, Aidan. “Coming to Ireland for a sense of Jewish identity,” Sunday Tribune, May
Dunne, Aidan. “Letting an Artist Loose,” Sunday Tribune
1988
Fallon, Brian. “Two Dublin exhibitions,” Irish Times, July

Cover: Ben Bulben, snow, 2008
Oil on linen, 16 x 20 in. (41 x 51 cm)

This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition, Nick Miller: Trucks, Paintings from a Mobile Studio, at the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture, September 18 to October 25, 2008.

The exhibition was organized by David Cohen. The New York Studio School and Nick Miller would like to thank Bill Maynes, Peter Plagens, Charlotte Priddle, Hadley Nunes, Rubicon Gallery (Josephine Kelliher, Iseult Dunne and Cate Kelliher), Culture Ireland, Victor & Rachel Treacy, Noreen Cassidy, The Arts Council of Ireland/Aosdána for their support in various ways of this project.

Nick Miller is represented by Rubicon Gallery, Dublin www.rubicongallery.ie



www.nyss.org/nickmiller includes a film about the artist by Bill Maynes

Publication © 2008 New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture
Essay © David Cohen
Images © Nick Miller
Catalogue design by Lawrence Sunden, Inc.
Printed by The Studley Press

NEW YORK STUDIO SCHOOL OF DRAWING, PAINTING & SCULPTURE