

Nick Miller

Rootless
new paintings

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Essay by
Martin Gayford

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ROOTLESS

We live our lives inscrutably included within the streaming mutual life of the universe

Martin Buber "I and Thou" (1923)

For the last thirty years I have used painting with particular intent, as a way to meet the world, in real time, working from life. It is my door into the world of art and the arena in which I can best practice being here.

The contrast between an increasingly disturbed external world that we all face, and my own internal drift towards a quieter realm in the studio gave rise to a contradictory urge for dialogue that could not be easily be sated.

In the absence of people, and with an ambiguity about what needed to be expressed, that urge for dialogue entered the paintings. I began to work on a much larger scale, with more chaotic, evolving compositions. Silent conversations between multiple plants and vases, painted sometimes in one sitting, but sometimes months apart. I was trying to open up to elements of disorder and then focus on practicalities of integration. In the studio they are placed at different levels on the armature of a warehouse step ladder, beginning to unsettle the singular 'portrait' structure that had been central to an earlier series of still lives – "Vessels: Nature Morte", from which these works started to evolve.

From a rootless self and rootless nature, new paintings emerged.

Nick Miller





Whitethorn turning 2017, Oil on linen, 183 x 168 cm
Courtesy of Oliver Sears Gallery, Dublin



Three vessels interior II 2018, Oil on linen, 214 x 168 cm



Three for the Jewish Bride 2018, Oil on linen, 183 x 168 cm



Flowering and seeding 2018, Oil on linen, 214 x 184 cm



Three vessels interior I 2018, Oil on linen, 214 x 184 cm





What you are looking at is leaving

by Martin Gayford

People feel that it is very important for artists to have an aim, Bridget Riley once said, but – she went on – “Actually, what’s vital is to have **a beginning**. You find your aim in the process of working. You discover it”. In a way, that is what happened to the painter Nick Miller.

He is, as he puts it, an escapee. Miller is by origin a Londoner, and in so far as he has he has artistic roots or starting points they are in the so called School of London, with painters such as Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff. That world, he recalls is what he knew and respected – but also “legged it from”.

In the 1980s he left Britain and moved to Ireland with the idea of beginning a life as a painter. Ireland, he explains, “is a different world, an island off the edge of Europe. It’s been very good for me. A place to disappear to, but also a place you could enter into more easily – that gave me a sense of the *possibility* of being an artist”.

There he found a fertile spot in which to develop in his own way. Miller is, as he puts it, “an encounter painter”. By that, Miller means he works entirely “from life”: in front of the model, be it a person a landscape or a plant. “The engine is to do with how I meet what I meet”.



Emerging: Chestnut buds 2018, Oil on linen, 112 x 97 cm

He has painted many portraits, partly because he discovered that doing so forced a crisis – out of which a painting might emerge. “I started painting portraits because that meant I had to paint. Inviting someone to sit meant a contract was set up. You put yourself in a situation and have to paint yourself out of it”. He also spent fifteen years, working from “the back of a truck”, painting large landscapes, en plein air like Monet or Pissarro.

Miller has continued to work in the west of Ireland, but is not really an Irish painter any more than Vincent van Gogh in Provence was a Dutch artist – or for that matter a French one. Rather Van Gogh was isolated (the first article about him, published in January 1890, was entitled *Les Isolés*). – Also like Van Gogh, Miller is not so much self-taught, though that too, as self-invented. “I just wanted to disappear somewhere to paint – to learn to paint really. Ireland was the accidental landing spot. And I’ve been lucky in Ireland, I’ve created a career for myself out of a fantasy of being a painter.”

Miller notes that if he feels an affinity with Jack Yeats, the great figure in 20th century Irish painting: “it’s not so much with the work itself as being a maverick, a fellow on his own out off the edge of European painting, out of a context”. Over the last 30 odd years, Miller has found a way of working that is adapted to his own temperament, and perhaps his alone. And the remarkable series of large-scale pictures of flowers and vegetation which he produced at a rapid rate in 2018 have, appropriately enough, grown out of what he was doing before.



Mountain Ash, berries 2017, Oil on linen, 102 x 92 cm

His original starting-point was, for a flower-piece, thoroughly traditional. Miller recalls: "I returned to painting still life at a very particular time". Between 2011 and 2014, he had been working in a hospice in County Sligo.

"I'd bring flowers into the wards where I'd set up a temporary studio, which became a sort of focus to distract people from more serious events going on in their lives." After all, bouquets are a gift often brought to the sick. Subsequently, Miller might paint portraits of the patients, but "the flowers were the initial connection".

Traditionally, of course plants and flowers spoke a language, of which Ophelia quotes some of the meanings in a celebrated speech from Act 4 of Hamlet. "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray, love, remember; and there is pansies, that's for thoughts." And flowers still have serious implication. They are presented on the occasions of births, marriages and deaths. Most of all, perhaps, the last, which is perhaps why in the 17th century the genre of flower painting was inextricably associated with the *memento mori*, the reminder of death, which might take the form of a humble snail crawling on a perfect floral specimen, the harbinger of decay.

Of course, the process of organic dissolution is an unavoidable part of the process of painting a bunch of flowers in water. That is one of the reasons Miller prefers the French term "nature morte" to the English "still life" (this was the title of his last exhibition).



Two together 2018, Oil on linen, 112 x 97 cm

He points out that “once you’ve cut a flower it’s over”. For the artist, a clock has started ticking. This model will only be able to pose for a limited amount of time – which is, as it happens, just how Miller likes to work. “Painting with a gun to your head: that pressure appeals to me. It’s a bit like watching the flowers wilt. There’s an urgency, they’re going away. What you are looking at is leaving”.

While Miller was working in the hospice, both his parents fell gravely ill in London. “I used to visit my mother over a period of about 18 months. She collected the vases that feature in the paintings, I’d remove them when I visited her, saying ‘I’m taking my inheritance now!’ I’d go and paint flowers in them, or a bit of nature – seaweed – and go back to her with a photograph of the painting.”

These paintings were, he reflects, *Memento mori*, in a way “more real than you might wish to have”. But they grew, organically, into something else. One of the first of the series in this exhibition, depicting two vases of flowers, side by side, was he says, “the goodbye to my parents”. He left the theme of death behind, stopped working on flowers and for a while turned to other kinds of painting.

Then one day he woke up with an urge to work on a bigger scale. There were some large canvases in the studio, left over from work he was doing a decade before, and as he puts it “The engine turned on”. So he began to paint on these.

Miller’s studio is in a small rural industrial zone in the middle of a wide landscape and underneath a mountain. From a nearby warehouse he acquired a ladder, and this too created interestingly complicated visual possibilities.



Fallen 2018, Oil on linen, 127 x 107 cm

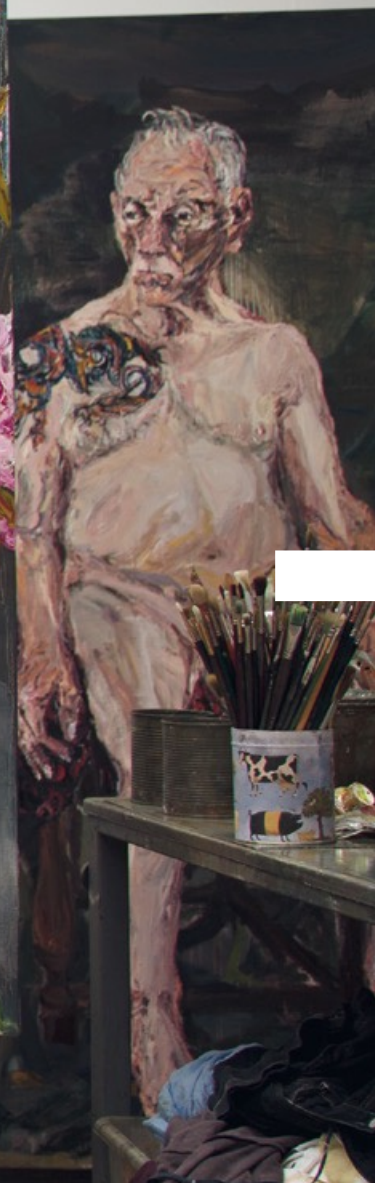
The classic flower-piece consist of blooms in a bowl or a vase on a table. Miller's scavenged steps allow variations on that format: simultaneously providing a kind of "space-frame", like those of which Francis Bacon was fond, and also an opportunity to place blossoms and foliage at different levels. As a result of the latter tactic, several of these paintings have an all-over texture closer to a Jackson Pollock than 17th Dutch flower study.

These large, ambitious paintings have altered the way he works. All painters have a natural speed. Lucian Freud for instance was famously slow, each painting taking months if not years. Miller is temperamentally fast. "Normally the work either lives or dies on the day that I do it. But these larger ones are done over a period, actually covering different seasons." But Miller found that introducing multiple focuses of attention like this changed the visual algebra of what he was looking at. "As soon as you introduce more than one element you introduce a problem. Not that I've solved them, I'm just trying to have the problems."

The problems, you could say, became his subject, and the implied message – far from being a reminder of mortality – seems to be about complexity, interdependence and burgeoning vitality. They are among other things, a demonstration in the 21st century that painting – even in this time honoured way, *sur le motif*, as the French say – remains capable of bursting into vigorous, ebullient life.

Cambridge, November 2018





Pink Cherry Blossom 2017, Oil on linen, 152 x 122cm
Private collection, Ireland. Courtesy of Oliver Sears Gallery, Dublin



Two rising: Buddelia and Rose 2018, Oil on linen, 142 x 122 cm



Gorse framed 2018, Oil on linen, 142 x 122 cm



White Cherry Blossom 2017, Oil on linen, 142 x 122 cm
Courtesy of Oliver Sears Gallery, Dublin





Flowering currant 2018, Oil on linen, 76 x 71 cm



Chestnut blossoms 2018, Oil on linen, 76 x 71 cm



Last Olives II 2017, Oil on linen, 46 x 41 cm



Bluebells 2018, Oil on linen, 71 x 64 cm



Lilac bloom 2018, Oil on linen, 61 x 51 cm



Spring buds 2018, Oil on linen, 61 x 51 cm



Nick Miller, studio, Co Sligo 2105

Overleaf: Whitethorn turning 2107 (detail, p. 9)

Nick Miller (b 1962, London). Graduating in Development Studies from the University of East Anglia, he moved to Ireland in 1984, working first in Co Clare, then in Dublin. Since 1992, he has been largely based in Co Sligo. Elected as a member of Aosdána in 2001 in recognition of his contribution to Arts in Ireland, he is the recipient of the inaugural 2014 Hennessy Portrait Award at the National Gallery of Ireland. Miller has exhibited widely including solo shows at The Irish Museum of Modern Art, the RHA and the New York Studio School. In 2017 he was guest curator of the RDS Visual Arts Awards exhibition in Dublin. His work is held in many private, institutional and public collections nationally and internationally including The National Gallery of Ireland; Irish Museum of Modern Art; Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane; The Arts Council (Ireland); The Niland Collection, The European Investment Bank, Luxembourg.

Selected exhibitions:

Rootless: New Paintings, **Arts Space Gallery**, London (2019) *Rootless*, **Oliver Sears Gallery**, Dublin (2018); *Vessels: Nature Morte*, **Arts Space Gallery**, London (2016); *Nick Miller and the studio of Edward McGuire*, **Irish Museum of Modern Art** (Nov 2015–May 2016); *Vessels: Nature Morte*, **RHA**, Dublin (2015); *Sitting*, **Laois Arthouse**, Stradbally, Co Laois (2014); *YARD*, **Rubicon Gallery**, Dublin (2012); *Tree House 360°*, **OH Projects**, **Boston/Concord Arts Association**, MA, USA (2011); **Rubicon Gallery**, Dublin (2010); *Painting Patrick: after Venus and Olympia*, **Kilkenny Arts Festival**, Kilkenny (2011); *Truckscapes—Paintings from a mobile studio*, **New York Studio School**, New York (2008); *Truckscapes—Drawings from a Mobile Studio*, **Centre Culturel Irlandais**, Paris (2007); **Limerick City Gallery of Art**, Limerick (2008); **Rubicon Gallery**, Dublin (2008); *Genre*, **The Butler Gallery**, The Castle, Kilkenny (2004); *Figure to Ground*, **RHA**, Dublin (2003); *Chen & Miller—East + West*, curating the visit of artist Chen ZhongSen to Ireland at **The Model**, Sligo, **Rubicon Gallery** and **Chester Beatty Library**, Dublin (2002); *Closer*, **Rubicon Gallery**, Dublin; **Art Space Gallery**, London (2000); **Kilkenny Arts Festival**, Kilkenny (2001); *New Paintings*, **Art Space Gallery**, London (1999); *South African Works*, **Irish Museum of Modern Art** (1994); *Paintings & Drawings*, **Galerie D’Eendt**, Amsterdam (1992); *The Shadow Line*, **The City Arts Centre**, Dublin (1991); *Twilights Raw*, **Project Arts Centre**, Dublin (1988).

www.nickmiller.ie





Published on the occasion of the exhibition

Rootless | New Paintings | Art Space Gallery | 22nd February – 29th March 2019

With sincere thanks to :

Martin Gayford, Michael & Oya Richardson, Brian O'Connor,
Oliver Sears Gallery, Gemma Tipton and Noreen Cassidy

The artist and gallery wishes to gratefully acknowledge
the support of Aosdána in making this work, and Culture
Ireland for helping to make the exhibition possible.



Design: Nick Miller & Brian O'Connor

Printing: Wilco Art Books, Netherlands

Photography: Nick Miller

Published by: Art Space Gallery, 2019

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ISBN: 978-0-9957524-8-1

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