



The Difficulty with Desire

Nick Miller's forthcoming exhibition at the Rubicon Gallery considers the dynamics of our contemporary society, writes REGINA GLEESON

With a nod to tradition, an indifference towards post-modernity and a question about the pursuit of desire, Nick Miller's latest exhibition 'Standing, Sitting, Lying: Watercolours' is a consideration of the lives we occupy - or are occupied by - in the artist's perspective of Celtic Tiger Ireland. The artist proposes that the four main large-scale watercolour paintings, of a seated and clothed Buddhist monk, a standing male nude plus a reclining and a standing female nude, are society portraits of contemporary Ireland.

Nick Miller began this body of work after a long engagement with landscape painting. His attentions have always oscillated between the landscape and the figure and he says that this is an effective way to use one subject to reenergise the other. 'I couldn't see the landscape that was in front of me any more so I needed to refresh the way I see'. The palettes for these four paintings align themselves seasonally where the reclining female nude, *Gemma Lying* (Fig 3), uses the fresh bright tones of spring, *Rinpoche Sitting's* (Fig 4) large blocks of berry tones burst with summer's exuberance and both *Patricia Standing* (Fig 2) and

Derval Standing (Fig 1) share the subdued earthy tones of the autumn-winter landscape.

The impetus for this work, Miller suggests, springs from both awareness of the dwindling opportunities for rich human interaction as the pace of life quickens as well as his profound need to paint. With an interest in Eastern philosophy, he observes the counteraction of stillness to the busy pursuits that occupies our active lives. Where time was once plentiful and enabled a high quality of human communication, it is now a precious commodity in which there is little spare time to share with others. Therefore it seems fitting that the models for this exhibition were strangers to the artist.

As three professionals - journalist, lawyer, and art collector - and a spiritual leader in the extended world of the Celtic Tiger, none of the models had any previous experience of life modelling; they are simply people who are passionate about art and who were willing participants. The artist proposes that the image of the seated monk, *Rinpoche Sitting*, is the central point of stillness around which the other images spin. The association of an image



1 Nick Miller
Derval Standing
2006 watercolour
on paper
154 x 122cm

2 Patricia Standing
2005 watercolour
on paper
154 x 122cm

3 Gemma Lying
2006 watercolour
on paper
154 x 122cm

4 Venerable
Panchen Ötrul
Rinpoche 2006
watercolour on
paper 154 x 122cm

of composed, still life amidst those of encircling busyness provides an underlying observation of the dynamic of contemporary Ireland and indeed, contemporary globalised society. And so in *Standing, Sitting, Lying*, the focus veers towards the pressures of the pursuit of desire in an age of consumerism and the paradox of the inverse relationship between desire and fulfilment.

There is something beautifully old-fashioned about these carefully expressive portraits. Perhaps what seems foreign to our present day manner of representation is that these images are far removed from the idealised, air-brushed bodies that surround us in print and screen-based media. One of the most remarkable elements of this exhibition is the lack of judgement of subjects. The models are represented and recorded with acceptance of all that they are at that moment instead of charting a map of all that they are not. As an artist of great integrity, Miller is not concerned about keeping pace with shifting art trends but prefers that his work operates outside specific genres or styles. And that they do. From a man who declares: 'my life has been about painting', his portraits exist outside of the contemporary penchant for images of callous exposure of austere truths.

The fallout of the insatiable desires of consumerism is a strong thread in contemporary figurative representation. Recent practice in nudes and portraits tend towards viciously judgemental figurative painting wherein perceived blemishes, flaws and inadequacies are morbidly exaggerated and ascetically exposed. For many years, Lucian Freud's watercolour nudes have painstakingly depicted grotesque effigies in mottled flesh and, taking her lead

from his style, Jenny Saville's late-nineties paintings depicted post-operative obese nudes baring the scars of their devastating insecurities. The polar reaction to this obsession of plenty is the denial of everything which is evident in skeletal, elongated bodies of Margherita Manzelli's portraits.

Beauty, which used to be the object of nudes, has become the subject by way of its bitterly berated deficiency as considered against the calibration of airbrushed lives and the shortfall of the fulfilment of desire in a climate of abundance. In the voracious pursuit of desires as portrayed in recent nudes, it would appear that, instead of fulfilment, we find little other than the neuroses of inadequacies and flaws of the unfashionable flesh. However, Nick Miller's nudes and portraits offer the possibility of seeing a reflection of beauty in his suite of images and of finding hope in his allusions to possible connections between stillness and motion with fulfilment and desire. Miller's images function as a balance in chaos but they require from the viewer an element of the stillness and acceptance with which they were painted in order to yield something of the appreciation for human interaction from which they were inspired. ■

REGINA GLEESON is a critic of contemporary art.

Nick Miller: *Standing, Sitting, Lying*: Watercolours at Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, 5 October – 11 November 2006

