

Nick Miller

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There was some level of coincidence in the simultaneous showing at IMMA of works by Antony Gormley and Nick Miller. The agenda that Gormley has set himself is the reaffirmation of the self, a kind of *fin de siècle* reconciliation of the steamroller Western intellectual tradition with the notion of individual consciousness (once its kingpin) from which, in many quarters, it now finds itself painfully estranged.

As it happens, Miller has a similar interest in the status of selfhood. At the time of his exhibition *The Shadow Line*, largely composed of portraits and portrait-allegories, he was gratified to discover, in George Steiner's *Real Presences* a bold affirmation of presence, based chiefly on the appeal to the 'other' implicit in works of art. Art, Steiner suggests, addresses a real other. It is an act of faith which is not in vain, although he does acknowledge that, on its own terms, Derrida's critique of western metaphysics is unanswerable.

Miller was pleased because Steiner articulated something of what he felt about the work he was making. More and more he has come to concentrate on the charged encounter between artist and subject. It seems to me that, for him, the difficulties, awkwardnesses, complexities and singularities of this encounter, recorded and perhaps more than recorded, actually lent correlative substance in the drawing or painting, are a confirmation of self and other.

In his quest for naked presence, the sitter is often naked, something that raises the stakes (as does his treatment of disability and difference), involving particular trust, and entailing openness, exposure, vulnerability, and Miller has thought it appropriate that he should be naked in some of his own work as well. More recently, he curated a



group show devoted to the nude at the Rubicon, a show that can be seen in the context of his efforts to restore the figure, without protective or distancing layerings of irony, to the centre of the painting.

That's something of the framework in which he operates, but what of the paintings and drawings themselves? They are informal,

Nick Miller
MK JB: Chris Hanf Pen
monotype
1992

IRCA

fast, based on natural observation à la Kokoschka. They don't aspire to high finish, seeing rawness as an asset. But equally they are thoroughly naturalistic, eschewing a Cubist reconstruction, for example, allowing a modest degree of expressive distortion.

The work at IMMA is different in a couple of respects. It is not recent work, but was made after a trip to South Africa in 1991. Also, it was made after the fact. At the time, he notes "I found it impossible to make work while travelling." Instead, "I have tried to record the after-images of a powerful and personal journey." In this work, then, he stands back a step or two from the rawness of the immediate encounter. He was also sounding the depths of his own family identity and history.

Miller's parents moved to London from South Africa in the 1950s, and his grandmother still lives there. Until this trip, he had never met her. He also had an invaluable entrée in the form of the parents of his travelling companion, Rafiq Asmal, son of Kader and Louise, who have moved back to Cape Town from Ireland to work on the new constitution. "Through these connections I was able to meet people in many communities and races which would have been hard to do as a complete outsider."

Specifically, he seems to have gained access to the worlds of the black townships and rural reserves. On the spot, "too much was happening in and around me; art seemed a poor response to the conflicts and passionate energies of the peoples in continuous political and social transformation." The watercolour drawings, like a series of postcards, are 'after-images', and led to the monotypes.

There is little of Miller's characteristic one-on-one approach here. While the exhibition does include a pretty good series of individual portraits, the general impression is one of crowded, frenetic activity, of the hectic atmosphere of the shebeen with its press of people, its noise, its sensory overload - all vividly conveyed.

He is constantly drawing, hatching in broad, curvilinear modelling in an almost caricaturish way. He fills up the spaces of his images with faces, bodies, textures and words. There is something feverish about it, and he does speak of being in a state of heightened response, of tapping into the atmosphere of fear, precariousness and above all a fierce vitality, a dignity in the face of terrible odds.

Nevertheless, there is nothing patronising about the images. His treatment of the townships is never sentimental or picaresque: the abrasiveness of it all, the rawness, the messiness and the uncertainty all come through loud and clear. Onto this rumbustious naturalism he has grafted one overt symbol: an anatomical diagram of a heart, which appears repeatedly in the midst of the sound and fury of the monotypes. It underlines that what is going on in South Africa depends on a series of exchanges between individuals, that people whether they like it or not must wear their hearts on their sleeves and, more, that they are constantly vulnerable, in the front line of calamitous change. It's a bit of a gamble, but it does pay off.

Aidan Dunne

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