

ON THE ROAD

Artist Nick Miller has found an unusual way to paint the Irish landscape without catching cold – a mobile studio. Friend and model GEMMA TIPTON flags him down.

It's always risky meeting an artist whose work you admire. Sometimes the reality can ruin the magic, wreck your love of their art. Meeting Nick Miller is different. I could talk to him for hours about art, and about pretty much anything. In fact, there's not much I wouldn't do for him, I even took my clothes off for him once, but more of that later.

A painter of those ought-to-be-old-fashioned subjects of portraits and landscapes, Miller is one of our best artists and has exhibitions this month in Limerick and Dublin. He was actually born in England, moving to Ireland in 1984, at a time, as he wryly points out, when everyone else was leaving. But while his upbringing took place in another country, and his parents come from yet another (South Africa), his paintings and drawings of the landscape come from a sense and sensibility that, to my eye, can only be Irish, and more specifically, could only be from the North West.

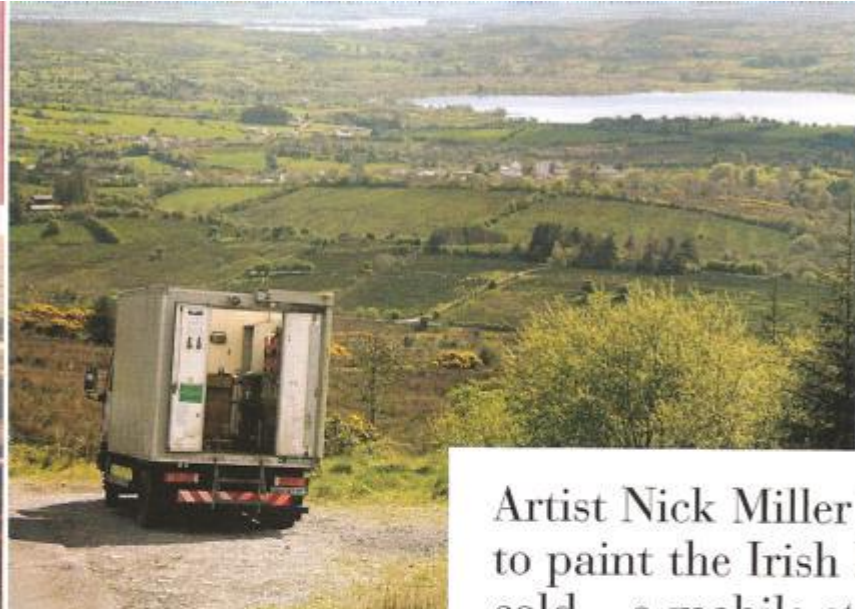
Would Miller see the countryside differently if he had been born to it? Living here, you get used to the way the land falls and mountains rise, but a sure-fire way to appreciate the Irish countryside is to bring a visitor to see it. Through their eyes you get to grips again with the wildness, the drama, the harshness of some of it, and the undeniable beauty. Miller's landscapes catch all this, and hold it breathless in time. There are the rolling hills, the crags, the twisted thickets of undergrowth, the wind-blown trees. Sometimes they are in black and white, and sometimes subtly added paint colours the scene.

He made the move from Dublin, where he shared a studio with artist Grace Weir, to Kilmactranny, Co Sligo in 1992. He and his wife Noreen had fallen in love with the place when painter Barrie Cooke lent them his own house there for their honeymoon. "When you live in a rural community like this," Miller has said, "you think, 'what does it take to be buried here?'"

Trying to get to grips with the landscape around Co Sligo like this might have involved

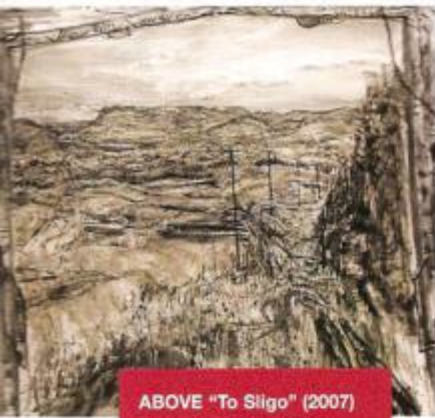
exposure to pneumonia for Miller, and would definitely have run the risk of plenty of wind- and rain-battered sheets of paper and canvas. Instead, he came up with a brilliant innovation – a mobile studio. Acquiring a truck in one of those lovely artistic trades that involves barter, artworks, dinner, drinks and everyone ending up with what they want, Miller installed a translucent roof, a swing-out easel and, with that, turned a former telephone repair truck into something entirely unique. In fact, Miller is the only artist I've ever heard say that his studio is "off being NCT-ed". That was when I went to Sligo to sit for a nude portrait, for a series that would later be exhibited at Dublin's Rubicon Gallery.

At that time, Nick Miller was living in a beautiful old stone house (he has now moved to the coast of Sligo), with a sunny lounge, terrace and a garden he had built himself. He and Noreen had installed a guest cottage for both the friends and models who came to stay for the duration of their portraits. My memory of that time is of lovely long dinners, lots of wine, and the intriguingly intense experience of being painted naked. There's a certain strangeness to the first moment you take your clothes off. I remember feeling that something momentous would happen – in the way it sometimes does when you step forward into doing something that makes you nervous. But nothing did. The birds sang outside, and Bob Dylan played inside, and Miller set about painting, paying (or so it seemed to me) as much attention to the shapes of the drapes behind me as he did to getting me "right". At one point, one of his children banged on the door of the studio (no, the nudes are *not* painted inside the truck) wanting us to come and play. Miller told him to go away. He, about nine years old I think, was insistent. "Gemma's in here naked," his dad told him. "Yuck," he declared, and ran off to kick a football about. It was funny, oddly prosaic, and made me wonder about all those similar interruptions that must have punctuated some of art history's greatest paintings. (Not,

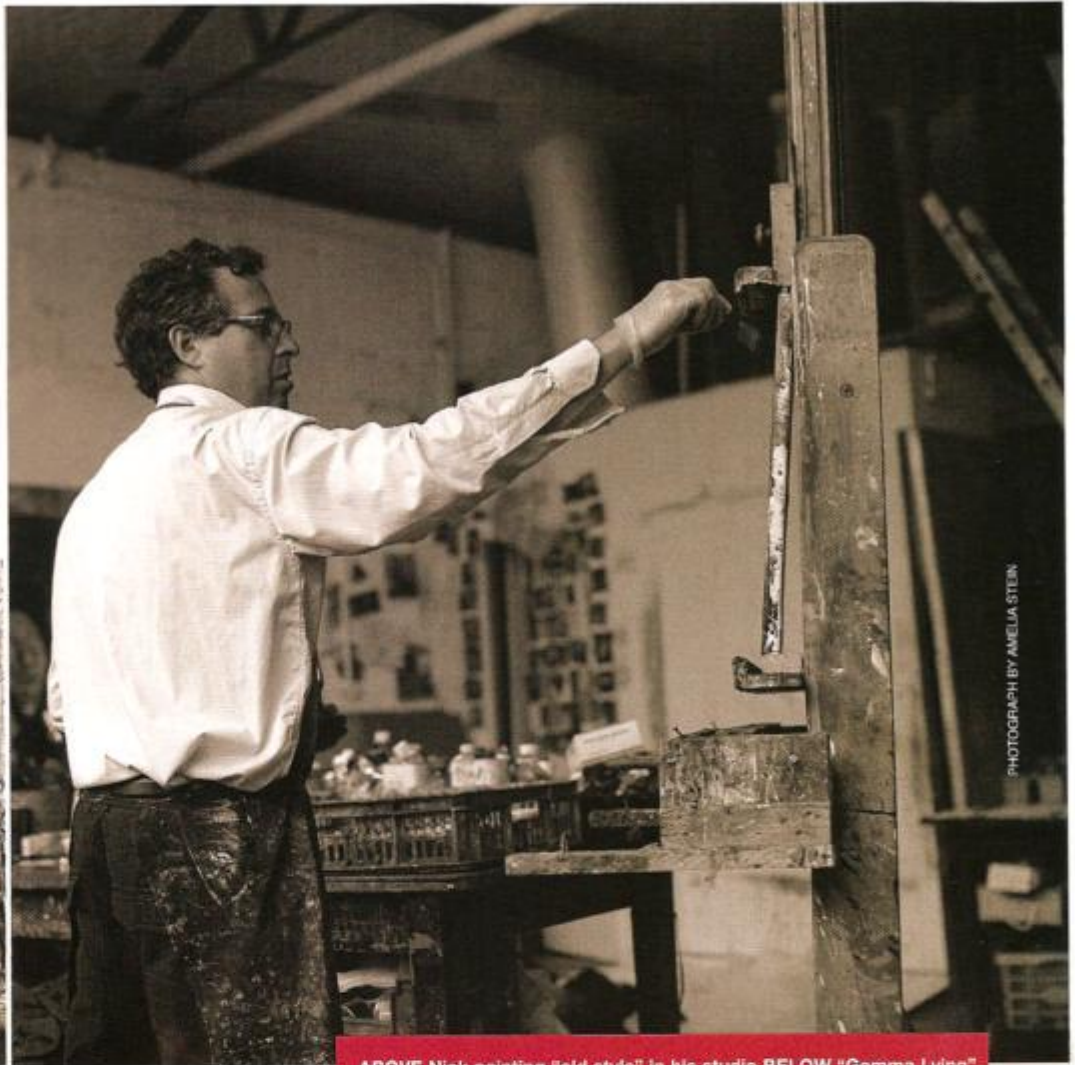


THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Nick Miller's telephone repair truck-turned-studio on Kilronan Mountain, Roscommon; "Whitethorn and Birds, Truck View" (2007); the artist at work; "Hazel Catkins" (2006)





ABOVE "To Sligo" (2007)
from Miller's Rubicon
Gallery show BELOW
"Ballindoon Abbey" (2005)



PHOTOGRAPH BY AMELIA STEIN

ABOVE Nick painting "old style" in his studio BELOW "Gemma Lying",
portrait of Gemma Tipton, photographed by the artist himself

however, before the 16th century – those amazing Renaissance female nudes were modelled on male bodies. It wasn't considered "proper" for women to pose, even in the name of art ...) I remember, too, being anxious at perhaps not being inspiring enough, and later, at the exhibition, being smugly gratified at the praise "my" portraits garnered. It was as if it were *my* achievement, although of course it wasn't.

Miller likes to have different works on the go at the same time. He thinks about landscapes while working on portraits and vice versa. Does it feel different to be confronted by a living person, than to stare out at fields and trees from the back of a truck? Apparently not. "I feel like the landscape is a person, as if I can reach out and shake its hand. Sometimes I want to sit down with it, put off starting and have a cup of tea with it."

Tackling portraiture and landscape, two subjects that stretch back through the entire history of art, and bringing something new to them is an incredible challenge, but one that Miller carries off. He takes them both on in a similar way too, advancing and retreating on his subject, checking perspectives, looking back in a mirror to check the look of what he is doing, and all the while creating a new magic reality from what he sees. You can see for yourselves in Limerick and Dublin this month, where exhibitions of his unforgettable landscapes are on show. You won't see "me", though. I sold out at the Rubicon opening, over a year ago. Sketches and all. ■

Nick Miller, *Trucksapes*, runs at the Limerick City Gallery of Art until February 24, and at the Rubicon Gallery, 10 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2 until February 15.



PHOTOGRAPH BY NICK