

A Movable Feast

Nick Miller the artist
in Kilmastranny, Co
Sligo and (left)
neighbour John Hogan.
Picture: Brian Farrell.



IN OUR parish John Hogan is more famous than Nick Miller. Both of them know it. John is of the parish; Nick after 11 years still a newcomer. He's just one of many artists who have in recent years gravitated to this secluded but beautiful part of the country.

The arts pages in the national media have regularly saluted the self-taught London-born painter and member of Aosdana who says he cut his artistic teeth after moving to this country in 1984. His exhibition 'Figure to Ground' in the RHA last year won rave reviews. The central pieces of this show were the stunning landscapes painted from the back of his truck, a mobile studio which seems programmed to circulate within a few miles of his home in Kilmactranny, County Sligo. John Hogan is his next door neighbour. "I am surrounded on three sides by John. I cannot avoid him," said Miller wryly. His portraits tend to be of people he "cannot avoid," family, neighbours and friends, he jokes.

Because of the artist's tendency to use his adapted truck, not to travel but to get in close and personal to the rugged terrain all around him, the property of

Even in the depths of December his mobile studio allows the artist to work in his beloved, wild Sligo landscape. Marese McDonagh meets Nick Miller.

his closest neighbour is featured in many of the landscapes. A field, a bush, part of a stone wall, they are all there. In his most recent exhibition he went a step further. This time his neighbour, rather than his neighbour's property, got pride of place with the "Portrait of John Hogan" acting as the lynchpin of the project. "I wanted to paint him for 10

"Now he and his family live in the only occupied house up a quiet country lane, a field away from a man who says he cannot sleep if forced to spend a night in Dublin."

years," explained the artist, who is clearly amused at the amount of merriment he has caused in the small rural community which has tended to regard his artistic endeavours up to now with respectful indifference. The portrait is a talking point not least as Miller acknowledges because John is what is widely known and liked in the area. "John is very well known in the community but I did not want to paint him as 'a character' because that is just one aspect of him. I wanted to paint him as I encounter him, in the fields or over the fence or through the usual neighbourly interaction."

The first time they met Nick was staying at the home of his artist friend Barrie Cooke in Highwood, a few miles from Kilmactranny. "I pulled into a garage 20 miles away and John was there

delivering coal in his overalls and somehow through some rural intelligence system he

knew that I was interested in the house beside him and he was very welcoming and helpful," explained Miller.

From that first encounter he wanted to paint his future neighbour. "He has a very strong visual face, an interesting face to look at. There is something Spanish there. It is not a typical west of Ireland face. People who see him think he looks like a French revolutionary," he said.

There were six sittings in Miller's studio which adjoins his home, most of them lasting

around three hours. "We drank gallons of tea", recalls the subject with a laugh. There was nothing regimental or taxing about the sessions as he recalls them. "If there was a cow calving I'd go home and have a look and just come back when I knew everything was okay".

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MILLER's journey to his less-than-two-acre holding in Kilmactranny was ➤



Nick Miller and John Hogan. Miller finds all the inspiration he needs close to home.

► inspired by one of the most conservative Tories of them all. After getting a degree in Development Studies in London - Margaret Thatcher later scrapped the course - he was spurred into action by one of her closest allies. "When Norman Tebbit told everyone to get on their bikes and get a job I sold my bike and got a one way ticket to Limerick". He spent a sunny summer working on a farm in Co Clare, living in a caravan and painting in his spare time. Somehow when he attempted to go home events intervened and he found himself "living in Dublin on 15 quid a week" revelling in the luxury of having an entire factory floor in Temple Lane to work from. "It was a bleak time in Dublin but lively in an artistic sense. I arrived as most people were leaving."

He spent 10 years in the then relatively under-developed Temple Bar area but abandoned it for County Sligo when officialdom defined it as a cultural quarter. "I hit the ground running in Ireland and found a sense of place I did not feel I had in London."

Rootlessness has never been an issue for him. His parents arrived in London in the 1950's and they in turn were the children of East European exiles who had fled to South Africa a generation earlier.

Now he and his family live in the only occupied house up a quiet country lane, a field away from a man who says he cannot sleep if forced to spend a night in Dublin. While John Hogan finds the noise of the city unsettling Nick Miller still marvels that he cannot see a single light when he stands at his front door at night. "There is no sign of human habitation, no other light to be seen". He loves the setting. "I find it very

beautiful. It is an unkempt rough landscape and that is what I like. It is out of human control even though we try to farm it to a limited degree. Trees can grow out of anywhere, on the middle of a road, out of a building . . . that's what makes it fascinating."

When the truck moves . . .

HIS mobile studio, sponsored by anonymous admirers, was originally intended as a mode of transport, a way of getting to north Mayo to paint the rugged landscape there. As it happens, most of the landscapes were done within two miles of his home and on many occasions he has parked the truck in the driveway rotating it to get another take on local terrain. "Every time I move it, even an inch, I get a new subject. It is amazing that it hasn't been done before."

"Originally I did want to travel but life intervened, having to pick the boys up from school . . ." I also realised it doesn't matter how far you go. It is how you look at what you see". A practical benefit of the truck is that allows him to work in the rain and the snow and the howling wind while it also allows him to return to a particular scene a season later or even a year later to chart the changes or just continue a work in progress.

He believes that landscapes, like portraits should be real, not in a photographic sense but in a way which appeals to all the senses so that the audience feels almost able smell or touch the subject. **W**