



When you sit for an hour at a time with no clothes on, and without moving, there's nowhere to hide the bits of you that you don't like, writes Gemma Tipton

Is it narcissistic to love a picture of yourself? A smiling photograph? A portrait? A painting? What if that painting is a nude? We're used to nudes, either from art history – voluptuous and sensual (the women), athletic and heroic (the men) – or from top-shelf magazines, those impossibly endowed two-dimensional figures of banal eroticism. I had my portrait painted recently in Sligo and, narcissistic or not, I do love it. It began,

during a conversation in Dublin, with a remark that the artist Nick Miller was looking for sitters for a series of paintings for his next exhibition, and it ended with a trip northwest, a series of studies and sketches, and a portrait that is both intriguingly me and not me. Although our streets seem to have more flesh on display than ever, there's still something very hidden about the body. Cleavage, stomach, legs and expanses of back are all on view, but, like the waft of fabric that covers the private parts of a Victorian Venus, mini-skirts and bra tops are there to hint at what they conceal as much as to mask it. As striptease artists know well, it is the extras – the scarves, pieces of material, shoes and bangles – that make nakedness all the more provocative.

There is something vulnerable, and therefore not so erotic, about a nude. It is also one of those subjects that is endlessly fascinating yet rarely talked about. Western art history is full of nudes, yet they seldom appear in contemporary art unless "dressed up" in a postmodern, ironic or provocative way.

Perhaps that's why I said yes, interested to see what it would be like. But the more likely reason is the longing we all seem to have to get to grips with what we look like, to try to form a fuller idea of who we are. As individuals we have a sense of ourselves from mirrors – although here the image is in reverse and, therefore, not exactly "us" – and from photographs. Snapshots show us smiling for the camera, caught for a millisecond so that we can check back later to see if we were enjoying ourselves.

But photographs are not accurate, either. A genuine smile scrunches up the face, makes you look tired. Practised posers drop their mouths open, making smiles that don't reach the eyes – excellent images for the pages of *Hello!* You can't hold a smile, genuine or otherwise, for a painting. You can't keep the expression long enough, so you have to leave it up to the artist to try to capture a sense of you.

When you sit, stand or lie down for an hour or so at a time, with no clothes on and without moving, there's nowhere to hide the bits of you that you don't like. Just as you can't grin for even a minute without hurting your face, you can't hold your stomach in for very long, and it seems a little foolish to put lots of make-up on when you are going to be taking everything else off. After a while you even stop disliking those parts you are always hiding: stomach, thighs, hips... Perhaps getting naked is good for you.

Thinking about it on the drive to Sligo, I decide that if I could be painted by anyone from art history it would be Whistler (with clothes on) and Manet (without). I love the way Whistler makes his subjects soft, the way he doesn't seem to be trying to hurt them with paint (as Picasso does). As for Manet, his nudes are pretty

cool chicks, sure of themselves, challenging you to look them in the eye. And that seemed quite interesting; dressed, I wanted to be seen as soft and vulnerable, but, naked, I felt the need to toughen up.

Miller's portraits are different again, all brush strokes of paint conveying the idea of the sitter, that sense of them. The whole one wall of his studio when I arrive is covered with watercolor sketches – "holiday snaps", he calls them – from the family's trip to France. There are the two children, Reuben and Aaron, playing and reading. There's Miller's wife, Noreen, sunbathing on a beach. There is also a wall of postcards, pictures from art history: Matisse, Ingres, Velázquez. And then we got down to work, although, after the initial oddness of taking clothes off, it does not really seem like work. Sitting is harder than lying down; the arm that casually hooks over the back of the chair starts to ache and, the actual hurt after less than 10 minutes. I begin to feel for the subjects of some of the paintings I have admired in art museums around the world. There's a Courbet *Woman with White Stock* that must have been agony. We are used to people staring at us because they want to get to know us or sleep with us, because we look like our jacket or think we're odd-looking, but this was different. Artists look at their subjects to work out how they will look on paper or canvas in front of them. Miller starts by blocking in the spaces that aren't me with swathes of green and yellow, and as idle questions, chatting in the sort of idle-but-focused way you do in the car, when the practical part of the mind is occupied, and when you're not looking directly at the person you're talking to. We talk about all sorts of things: about whether Bob Dylan could have happy relationships when he sang about such utter despair (he was playing on the CD) and about how it might be hard to





the sense of space to paint in Temple Bar (Miller used to have a studio in the area). I think about whether I too would have found it difficult to do this in a place in the thick of the city instead of in the peace and open quiet of this studio.

We talk about how painting nudes refreshes and gives energy to the landscapes Miller paints from the back of his mobile studio, a truck that is away, having its NCT. We talk about whether a blank sheet of paper is intimidating. He finds them exciting (an opportunity to make something); I hate them (a threat of inspiration-failure). Miller recently painted the Venerable Panchen Ötrul Rinpoche, the Tibetan lama, in his saffron robes. It was a completely different experience, he says, painting someone whose lifelong Buddhist practice has been about letting go of ego and desire. I start to think about what I might be bringing to the picture beyond arms, legs, head and body. And to worry about whether I might prove less than inspirational, until I hear Miller say to himself "This is lovely" and begin to feel better.

From outside I can hear the sounds of birds and of the children playing football. Inside I lie still (it turns out I'm a better liar than a sitter) while Miller is all movement, going up to the painting to see the marks he is making, then running back to get a sense of the overall shape. He seems to pay as much attention to the lines and colours of the drapes behind as he does to me. Occasionally, he looks in a mirror to see both me and the painting reflected, to get a sense of how things are coming along.

From time to time he asks if I'm okay, but I seem to have

discovered a talent for staying still. And I realise how seldom I get to indulge such a thing. I think it is my stomach rumbling, however, that stops us for lunch. It's strange to be behind the painting, to have to wait to see what you look like, and, completely honestly, there are two of the quick sketches that I don't like at all. But there are also two that I love - love so much I really hope they are the real me.

Before we start the next day we go for a walk down to the lake (useful to clear my head from all the wine the night before). The area is astonishingly beautiful, and the sun is bright, both of which seem to infuse the finished painting with lightness and a sense of summer. It is a large watercolour - one I have to walk up to, back off from and approach again before I realise that this, too, I love. Returning to the studio the next day, things have changed a little; it is starting to seem less a picture of me and more a piece of art.

My mother, when I told her what I was doing, said she thought I was very brave. But I don't think so. Bravery is for when there's physical danger: facing down bullies, riding a mad horse, parachuting. This is a chance to understand more about paintings I have loved all my life, to be part of making something that didn't exist before, to feel like a muse and to get a sense of who I am. It didn't feel as if it required bravery. Although when the portrait goes on show, in an exhibition at the Rubicon Gallery, in Dublin, in October, I may feel altogether differently. ♦

Standing Sitting Lying by Nick Miller opens on October 5th

Above: Nick Miller's painting of Gemma Tipton, in his studio. **Left:** the artist, whose new exhibition is at the Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, in October. **Photographs:** Nick Miller