



Meetings in the studio

Christina Kennedy previews a fascinating encounter between two artists separated by time and temperament in a winter exhibition, hosted by IMMA, featuring Edward McGuire and Nick Miller

Edward McGuire (1932-1986) is best known for his minutely detailed portraits of writers and poets and still-life studies of dead birds, stylized leaves and other studio props. Intensely still, the portraits might be images for what thought is like. Their quiet mystery is often enhanced by the presence of a symbolic bird or object.

The sensibility shared by the artist and his literary colleagues is reflected by the many poems and memoirs included in Brian Fallon's 1991 biography of Edward McGuire.¹

In 2009 Sally McGuire, the artist's wife, donated 130 key items from the studio contents of Edward McGuire to the National Collection at IMMA. Reminiscent of a Renaissance *Wunderkammer* or cabinet of curiosities, McGuire's studio objects reflect an esoteric interest in natural history such as the glass-cased and mounted specimens of taxidermied birds, shells, a sheep's skull, a mummified cat. His method was organized and scientific: sitters recall a sense of the laboratory as the artist regarded them from beneath his green visor. McGuire spent years creating a 'Colour Dictionary' that rigorously recorded the range of tones within a given colour in the largely subdued palette he employed for each portrait he executed. To assist his painstaking process, McGuire constructed a 'colour cabinet',

devised to keep colours moist during the extended sitting process and whose individual trays the artist could remove and attach, palette-like, to his arm. He re-purposed bric-a-brac to make painting tools such as brush stands, scrapers, fine tools, quills, turpentine sprayers and attached casters to his easel chair to enable him to view the canvas from a distance without changing his sightline. The poet Michael Longley, recalls: 'the trundle of castors under a skylight/His gambler's eye-shield, the colours of the rainbow/Me turning into a still life.'²

In considering how to curate these biographical objects and what it might mean to exhibit them alongside McGuire's paintings and to avoid a detached, museological approach, IMMA invited Nick Miller to be the eyes and sensibility that respond to the older artist's studio and practice, to create a sort of 'portrait' of McGuire *in absentia*.

Occasionally IMMA invites contemporary artists to respond to the Modern Collection. Miller has always held the older artist in high esteem and in recent times the latter's work has become a source of fascination to a number of younger generation artists.³

As part of the process, earlier this year Miller spent some weeks in residency in an IMMA studio, amid a selection of McGuire's studio items. A number of McGuire's former sitters were invited to sit for a 'meeting' as Miller terms it, with 'their recollections of McGuire as a starting point for a connection' and with strains of McGuire's jazz collection playing in the background. Miller's understanding of portraiture (whether people, landscape or still-life), is as 'an encounter... the assertion of real presence and time in material form ... working to the clock with their life force' – qualities viscerally evoked in his paintings of Garech de Brún and Tresa Browne, for example (Figs 1&3). Other sitters included Wanda Ryan who sat for McGuire when she was child, his first official portrait and Paul Durcan who memorialized McGuire in a poem *Portrait of the Painter as a creature of Paintstaking Courtesy*.⁴

Miller's process is rapid and spontaneous – the antithesis of McGuire's assiduous method. While McGuire's sittings

sometimes took years, Miller's are perhaps completed in an afternoon, perhaps in an hour. McGuire produced no more than four paintings a year, amounting to 160 or so (finished) works in his lifetime.

His portrait of Garech de Brún took seven years. The sitter recalls how he had to surrender the Aran and tweeds he wore to the artist for the duration of the portrait's making.



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Aside from his amusing comment that his hairline had changed considerably by the time the portrait was finished, he describes McGuire's unique method when it finally came to realizing the head. The artist calculated its scale and position by casting its silhouette onto the canvas by means of a piece of glass and magic lantern or torch. When finally exhibited in 1970, this was the painting regarded as a tour de force, that launched McGuire as an original presence in Irish art.

Miller has also made paintings in response to certain studio objects including various stuffed birds, and in particular, the mounted white Barn owl, a subject in its own right in many of McGuire's paintings. Miller's resulting watercolour and oil sketches will be included in the exhibition. ■

'Meetings: Into the Studio of Edward McGuire' Garden Galleries, IMMA, Dublin 19 November 2015 until May 2016. All images ©The Artists.

Christina Kennedy is Senior Curator: Head of Collections at IMMA.

1 Edward McGuire, *RHA* by Brian Fallon with a catalogue of the paintings by Sally McGuire and Poems and Memoirs by Antony Cranin, Paul Durcan, Michael Hartnett, Seamus Heaney, Pearse Hutchinson, Michael Longley, John Montague and Francis Stuart. Foreword by James White. Irish Academic Press, 1991.

2 *Sitting for Eddie – in memory of Edward McGuire* by Michael Longley. As note 1 p.102.

3 In 2014 IMMA facilitated graduating students of the BA (Hons.) in Visual Arts Practice from IADT to film material from McGuire's studio and to record poet Paul Durcan reciting a dedication to McGuire: *Portrait of the Painter as a creature of*

paintstaking courtesy. ['Feast of the Epiphany', January 6, 1991]. This recording is available on Vimeo [https://vimeo.com/90118099]. Further research projects on studio practice and contemporary painting are planned with NCAD 'Art in the Contemporary World' MFA students.

4 As note 1 p99.

1 NICK MILLER
GARECH DE BRUN 2015
watercolour on paper 30x30cm
Courtesy of the artist/Rubicon Gallery

2 EDWARD MCGUIRE
TRESA BROWNE 1932-1986
PORTRAIT OF GARECH DE BRUN 1968
oil on canvas 129x93 cm
Private Collection

3 NICK MILLER
TRESA BROWNE 2015 oil on linen 48x41cm
Courtesy of the artist/Rubicon Gallery

4 EDWARD MCGUIRE
TRESA BROWNE 1932-1986
PORTRAIT OF TRESA 1978/8
oil on canvas 76x63.5cm
Private Collection