

HAIR-RAISING CROSSOVER

Expect to be bowled over by the works on show at 'East meets West' by Sligo-based artist Nick Miller and Chinese micro-engraver Chen Zhongen

A NUMBER of people have been bowled over by work on show in Sligo, part of which includes micro-carving where poems are carved down the length of a single strand of hair. 'East meets West' in the Model Arts and Niland Gallery, Sligo is an intriguing exhibition showing the work of Sligo-based artist Nick Miller and Chinese artist Chen Zhongen. And while the cultures are very different, to the extent that even the foundations of thought stem from different bases, this exhibition is an interesting meeting of both traditions.

As Nick Miller has said: "While there are gaps between Chen and I in our respective worlds and intentions; our strongest link is in the primacy of our concerns with human energy - painting, carving, or drawing with a brush or simple tool as a direct extension of the body and mind."

Chen's tiny micro-carvings are executed using a steel engraver, with the eyes closed, and in a state of what could be described as deep meditation. Using ancient Chinese breathing and energy cultivation exercises known as Qigong, Chen deliberately radically slows his heart rate and breathing and directs his energies to the tip of the steel engraver. This meditative state apparently gives him the control required to create these minuscule art works on hair and stone.

He carves important Taoist, Buddhist texts and classical poems so small as to be almost invisible to the naked eye. And the calligraphy used is very much a visual art because the written language is not based on an alphabet like ours but is originally derived from symbolic depictions of the ideas the words represent. Chen Zhongen also produces atmospheric watercolour and ink landscapes which draw strongly on the traditional Chinese approach.

Nick Miller is a Sligo-based painter well known and respected for his expressive portraits and landscapes created in his very personal style. His latest paintings



'Jacob's Dream' 2002, by Patrick Hall, showing at the Green on Red Gallery

reflect his great interest in Eastern philosophy and ways of life, and the Oriental influence on his work - and this does not as you might expect result in meticulous, controlled, precise works, but rather in free-flowing, intuitive, spontaneous, figurative-based watercolours.

He describes his own reaction to these paintings: "... these watercolours took me by surprise as radically different oblique progressions of earlier work concerned with drawing in close physical proximity to the human figure. While following my normal observational dynamic, these attempt a crossing East to an openness and natural response achieved through

ent as you awaken and to sustain this from rising in the morning to starting to work in his studio - is painter Patrick Hall. Hall who is exhibiting in the Green on Red Gallery Dublin, lives in rural west of Ireland as does Nick Miller and his family, and indeed readers who attended the recent 'En Visage' exhibition at IMMA may recall Miller's memorable insightful portrait of Hall which was included in the show.

While his earlier work may have been identified with the urgency and vigour of New Expressionism (though this developed from an abiding interest in Spanish art rather than German which is the more traditional root), his latest work is very different.

The collection of very small works and a number of larger ones on show in the Green on Red (some of which were on view in the Vanguard Cork, and the Butler Gallery Kilkenny recently) is comparatively serene. The work deals with big issues such as the human condition, life and death, and the possibility of an after-life. In some instances, this takes the form

A painter who likes to try to hold on to the meditative, semi-dream like state present as you awaken and to sustain this while working is painter Patrick Hall

of nature such as tiny still lives of fresh picked flowers from his garden or a little dead bird, at other times in more biblical imagery such as the Crucifixion, or Christ Walking on the Water, or Angels Ascending and Descending into Heaven (where tiny primitive figures are suspended on slender threads in front of a strange spectral presence).

The legacy of those Spanish old masters who originally inspired him is still obliquely in evidence, for instance in the contrasts of brooding shadows and obscure areas with the light, creating tension and ambiguity in what is not revealed as well as what is, and the probing, reflective religious or personal introspection.

Some years back Hall said he wished to simplify his work, and this he has achieved. These are much less complex, much less dramatic, much less raw, than earlier work. While there is tension and

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