

Critique Supplement

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Nick Miller

'Yard'

Rubicon Gallery, Dublin

08 September – 06 October 2012

NICK Miller's new exhibition, 'Yard', is a set of works from 2009 to the present day based on the yard of his studio at the foot of Benbulbin in Co Sligo. The work focuses on the meeting between the landscape and the traces of human activity visible in the yard. The paintings show girders and building materials piled up along with equipment, such as a cement mixer and a trailer. They also show the iconic Benbulbin Mountain and the ruggedly beautiful countryside that surrounds it. These new works were painted from Miller's now static mobile studio truck,

the deceptive adventurousness of the show.

Around the room you see a sequence of smaller variations on the same theme. The use of the same motif over and over again – sometimes with only marginally different compositional structures – links these works to oeuvres as diverse as Cezanne with his *Mont St Victoire* and Hokusai with his *36 Views of Mount Fuji*. And as with both of these artists there is nothing scenic or restful about Miller's rendering and re-rendering of Benbulbin and the yard. Each painting has a specific character, a personality, and, by limiting compositional variation, Miller brings to the fore the range of pictorial invention needed to render what he sees with complete honesty.

Miller's work is about obsessive looking, about recording what is in front of him with great accuracy. In his work a lack of editing is not a flaw but a strength. In order to accommodate an avalanche of information and sensation, Miller uses material in a complex and audacious way: heavy impasto with spare scumbles alongside turps stained drips, detailed drawing and swooshes of semi-liquid paint. However, the complexity of the paintings' construction is never allowed to take over from their function as images.

The framing device of the walls and roof of the truck are a constant in most of the pictures. The idea of recording them, along with the landscape, reasserts the fact that we are looking at a painting. It also evokes the idea of the studio as a proxy for the artist's mind. Looking out through Miller's truck view is rather like peering into the Hugh Lane Gallery's Francis Bacon studio: you are aware of the significance of the space in the artist's world view. These frames contain some of the most adventurous painting in the show and, like Bacon, Miller has used his walls as a palette and, in recording this, he has used huge blobs, agglomerations and splashes of paint.

In side-stepping the reductive vortex of Modernism, the paintings have on the surface much in common with nineteenth century art. Yet they are anything but old fashioned. Miller nails his colours to the mast by using a truck as his studio. Its inclusion as a contextual and formal device situates the work directly in twenty-first century reality.

In each painting in 'Yard', the jumble of abandoned building materials has significant metaphorical power. In the context of post-crash Ireland, pictures of cement mixers and unused RSJs can take on various meanings. The works could be said to explore the idea of the landscape being bigger than the ups and downs of human fortune. They could be about man's impact on the environment. What makes the works in this show so powerful is that Miller doesn't labour the point. By painting exactly what he can see Miller is doing something less rhetorical and far more poignant.

Andy Parsons is an artist based in Sligo and the Co-founder of Floating World Artist Books.



Nick Miller, *Steel Yard, Mountain and Trailer*, 2012, oil on linen, 56 x 61 cm, all images courtesy of the artist



Nick Miller, *Steel Yard, Mountain and Trailer*, 2012, oil on linen



Nick Miller, *Mixer*, 2012, oil on linen, 183 x 214 cm

which is parked in the yard. As the truck is no longer on the road, Miller's options for what he could paint were limited and the yard took centre stage.

When you first walk into the gallery, the work that dominates the space is *Steel Yard, Mountain and Trailer* (2012). It's a large picture which feels even larger because of the precise and compact composition it employs. The painting depicts a view of Benbulbin with a trailer dividing the middle ground of the picture. Thrusting forward into the foreground are two steel girders that look like the feet of a fallen giant. The picture has an uncanny pathos and sadness. The objects – scattered and discarded – are like the chaos left behind after the gold rush has moved on to another town.

This painting is flanked by two small paintings on paper, one featuring a cement mixer and one of a trailer used to transport the steel girders. *Mixer* (2012) is painted with the kind of bravura that Picasso would have brought to painting a bull. The idea of painting something as humble as a cement mixer with such verve is a deeply subversive gesture, in keeping with