

Portraits worth lying for

Reviewed:

Closer, drawings by Nick Miller, at the Rubicon Gallery until February 12th

TO MAKE the extraordinary drawings that comprise his exhibition *Closer* at the Rubicon Gallery, Nick Miller devised an unusual way of working. Each drawing is a portrait, but not one made in deference to the usual conventions: artist bobbing around like Muhammad Ali behind the easel, and, a few yards away, sitter dutifully posed in a comfy chair. If the subjects thought that was what Miller had in mind when they were invited to pose, they soon discovered otherwise.

The actual working method involved them lying down on an enormous sheet of paper while the artist all but lay on top of them, his face just a few inches from theirs, his right hand inscribing an image in charcoal immediately adjacent to artist and model. The resultant images are oddly proportioned, rough, scuffed, smudged and raw. An outline drawn briskly around the figure provides a ghostly framework for each huge, densely-

worked head, each product of urgent vision and revision. They are very much heads rather than faces: dark, heavy masses.

They are all, as well, wary, living presences, not entirely comfortable with this process, and perhaps unsure what exactly they are giving of themselves. They are giving what Miller, more than most other artists you can think of, is always after, and that is what might be termed a sense of naked presence. Sometimes this has taken the form of a literally naked presence, of individuals stripped of their shells of clothing, undressed and vulnerable.

One of the drawings in the present show, for example, is essentially a portrait of a person in terms of his genitalia. But Miller's abiding interest is in engineering a connection with and an openness to the Other, which takes the form of a kind of desperate honesty on the part of the artist. For him, it seems that the process of making art is about achieving a reciprocal openness that allows vivid, authentic images to emerge as documentary records of the exchange.

This is clear enough when he is dealing with other, living people. Each work is a real-time report of



Eoin, by Nick Miller, whose rough, scuffed, smudged and raw close-up faces give a sense of naked presence

a lived encounter with someone whose visage not only incorporates an accumulated personal history, a sense of who and why they are, but also a purely animal vitality. They might be foxes, with their eyes alert, ready to run. That applies to all of his figurative work, although the drawings in *Closer* are a particularly heightened example.

They possess remarkable qualities, starting with the fact that they are quite happy to be artless. They allow us unfettered access to the imperfections and uncertainties of process. What counts is not the manufacture of a certain category of artwork, which we can then assess according to familiar criteria, but the drawings' fidelity to the circumstances of their making, to the artist closely observing and physically impinging on another living person — as often as not, one to whom he is intimately related. Family and friends form his main subjects.

A number of much smaller drawings of dead bodies, some in the process of dissection, made at the College of Surgeons some time ago (1993), are in an antechamber to the main set of portraits. They serve the function,

whether by design or not, of illustrating what Miller's art is not about. He is not an anatomist like da Vinci, taking things apart to see how they work. Perhaps the time he spent in the dissection room clarified that in his own mind. "These small drawings," he writes, "make a big black hole in my mind; art is sucked in and lost."

This is not to say that Miller is against death and for life. And it is not to cast da Vinci as the villain, to suggest that his imagination is somehow morbid, reductionist, anti-life. That would be entirely spurious. On the contrary, it is hard to imagine drawings more attuned to the living pulse of nature than his. But his drawings exemplify another way of knowing. Miller's perspective is unavoidably different.

His drawings of dead bodies he calls simply *Anatomy Drawings*. Those of living, breathing individuals have the collective, ambiguous title *Before the End: Drawings 1996-1999*. Obviously, we can take this to mean before the end of the last century. And in a wider sense it might also be before the end of life. Perhaps coincidentally, it could also refer to the end of an era characterised

by a certain kind of critical theory.

In its intent pursuit of the real, Miller's work has always implied an unease with aspects of deconstructionist and postmodern theory. In the face of the various projects that sought to deconstruct the human subject, and those that have imposed an ironic distance between artist and subject matter, he has consistently reasserted the primacy of the exchange between artist and subject, the actual over the virtual. That, he seems to say, is what viewers should look for when they go to a work of art.

Which means that his work is also about breaking down what has been described as the "habitual sense of superiority" we feel towards what we are looking at, a superiority bred through our familiarity with conventions, or through complicity with the artist's authoritative position. So it's not incidental that there is an element of discomfort to the drawings, in their naked and their reception. They touch a nerve. They are intensely personal. They avoid being neat, assimilable objects and are, instead, as messy and uncertain as life.

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