

ARTS

Art from the back of a lorry



When Nick Miller wanted to paint the rugged landscapes around his home in Co Sligo, he got a truck to use as his mobile studio. Aidan Dunne meets an artist on the move

THE core of Nick Miller's exhibition at the RHA, *Figure to Ground*, is a group of landscape paintings of varying sizes. They depict fragments and expanses of the Irish rural landscape in and around the artist's home in Co Sligo.

It is a recognisable, not particularly unusual terrain: hedgerows and power lines, boggy fields and narrow roads. The paintings, though, are not conventionally picturesque or romantic. Direct and factual, they are almost indecent in their greedy vitality, remarkable for their sustained intensity of observation, for the runaway proliferation of their physical detail, and for their palpable, fizzing energy.

Miller and his family have lived in Sligo for the past ten years. "I wasn't a landscape painter. You could say that I had dabbled in landscape, but the figure was always the main thing for me. Certainly the people who knew my work knew me for my figurative work. But living there in the middle of it, I found that I had to deal with the landscape in some way. The problem is that I have to have whatever I'm painting there in front of me. What excites me is being there with the subject.

"I need that immediate, physical stimulus. And practically speaking if you go and paint out of doors in Ireland you're going to be blown away by the wind and drenched by the rain."

Over time, he came up with a possible means of getting the landscape right there in front of the canvas. "I had this daydream of

getting an articulated truck in which one side of the trailer was completely transparent. So you just park it and you're looking out directly at the landscape." This dream was pretty much fulfilled when he met a private sponsor, a businessman who is involved in trucking, who agreed to provide a truck, taxed and insured, for use as a mobile studio. "It was a really generous gesture." As ever, things did not work out quite as planned.

"Originally I wanted a truck because I wanted to paint the landscape in north Mayo, which is quite a distance from where I live. In the event I only made one painting in north Mayo. The vast majority of the work was made within a few miles of home. A lot of it was made from my own driveway by rotating the truck around different points of the garden."

Not only did he find himself exploring an extremely local landscape from the vantage point of the truck, but his notion of the truck as a kind of invisible platform, just a means of getting into the landscape, did not survive the reality of the experience.

Working from a relatively small, confined studio, one that is predictably freezing in winter and uncomfortably hot in summer, imposed its own logic on the process. In many of the pictures we can see the proscenium arch of the open back of the truck, a matter-of-fact frame, chipped and paint-spattered, that seems to jokingly evoke the heavy gilt frames that usually adorn classical landscape paintings. One painting foregrounds the interior of the truck itself.

Still, while it didn't work out quite as planned, it succeeded beyond his wildest expectations. He had dreamed of being there "in the middle of the bush itself, face to face with all that nature", and that is where he found himself. It is also, in many of the paintings, where we find ourselves. "I didn't want to abstract it, or to treat it in any kind of analytical, pictorial way, I just wanted to respond to it. I mean, I'm sure I made judgements to simplify and so on as I went along, but not consciously, not in a calculated way. Having the truck meant I could go back to exactly the same place a year later to continue a painting.

"I'd look at a mark, look at the landscape and see that the mark came directly from the landscape. It wasn't an expressionist flourish. I was very pleased about that." That kind of freedom, of being able to return again and again to the subject, was new. "I was used to working with people, which imposes its own pressures and limitations, but in the landscape

you don't have those pressures." This freedom has to do with the feeling that the landscapes were made with the benefit of an insatiable, omnivorous eye, accumulating masses of information. "I wanted more and more, layer after layer. But there is a limit.

I keep thinking that in the future I might just start a picture and go on and on. Of course," he notes wryly of his thick accumulations of oil pigment, "I'd have to paint more thinly."

Although he clearly relishes lushness and

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Snowscape, Whitethorn (2001). Although Miller relishes lush growth, his preferred seasons are winter and spring

growth, his preferred seasons are winter and spring. "In high summer things can become a bit overwhelming, with a sort of sameness. I work with line a lot – I keep drawing into the surface. So that winter is good." In a sense, the winter landscapes are dense masses of linear

detail. It is as if every square centimetre of the surface is equally worked, equally alive.

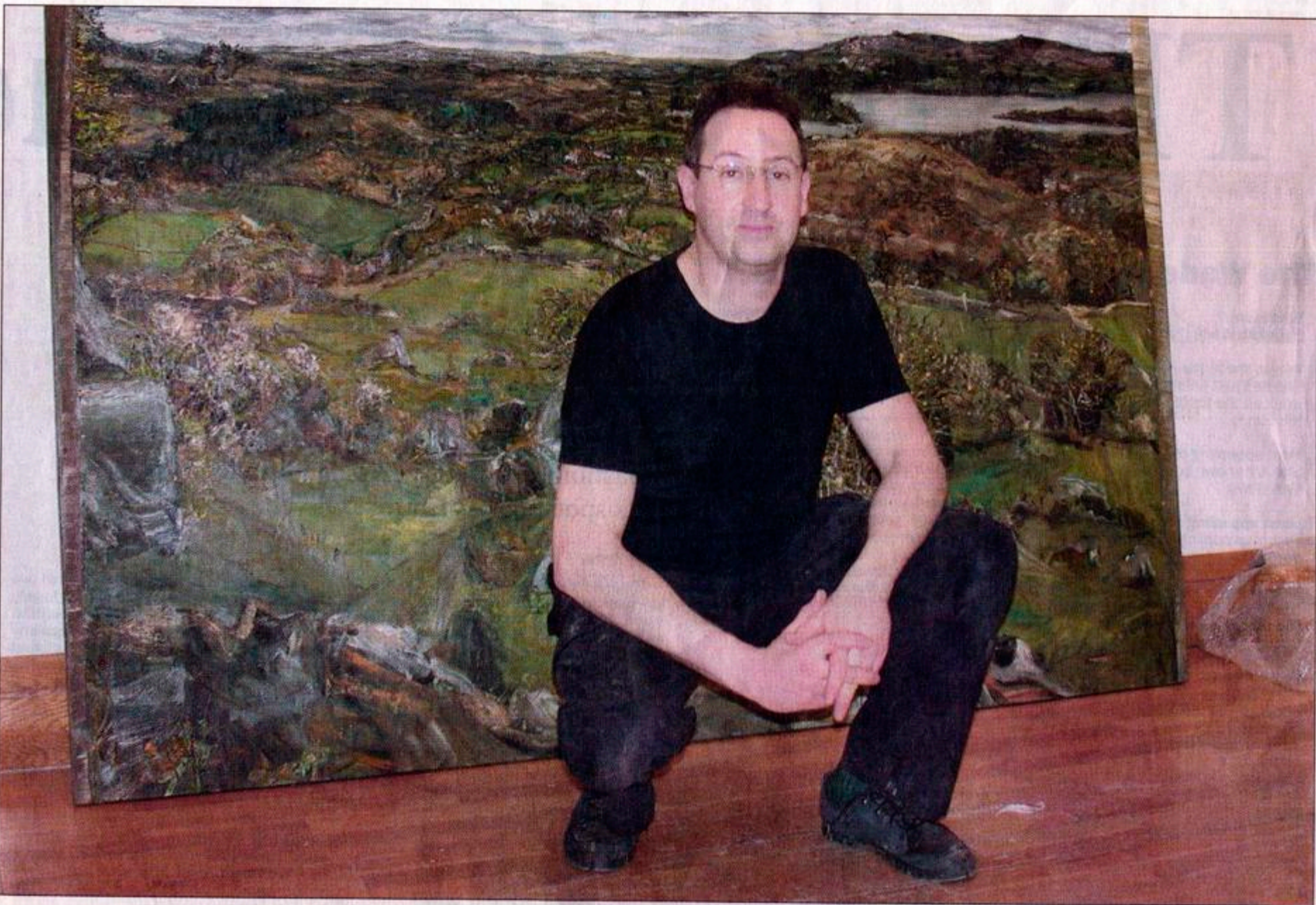
"That is true in the sense that that's the way they were painted. They were right in front of my nose. I couldn't stand back. I couldn't really see a painting until I had it back in the

studio." Miller first started using the truck in 1997, but he has been wary about exhibiting the paintings made in it. He was very excited by the way they were going, but he also felt that many of them "were not quite there". He had to return to them again and again – not invariably, mind you. Some of the smaller pieces were each made in a day of sustained, exhausting activity. "I found that I could take something I wasn't happy with, scrape it off and sand it down a bit, go back to where it was painted, and try again."

While the paintings are certainly beautiful, they are so in a distinctively forceful, unruly way, not unlike the landscape itself, which is lived in, domestic and agricultural rather than aestheticised. "I know it's not everyone's idea of an idyllic rural world, but I do love it. It's hard and tough and bleak and very wet. Yet it's lovely." Even the bare limbs of winter trees, he points out, are embellished with layers of subtle growth, with lichens and mosses and who knows what else. This quality of unstoppable, burgeoning growth, particularly with the generosity of the spring blossom, the fresh greens and bright pinks and whites, comes across vividly.

Whatever is in the landscape finds its way into the paintings, which includes many phone and power lines, the sort of detail that can upset some landscape purists. "I like them. I like them visually and I like the idea of all this energy and information whizzing invisibly across the landscape." This kind of energy is a direct counterpart to the patterns of energy embodied in the landscape itself, and the idea of landscape as energy is at the heart of Miller's vision.

● *Nick Miller: Figure to Ground* is at the RHA, 15 Ely Place until February 26th. Telephone: 01-6612558



Nick Miller with one of his landscape paintings. "I wasn't a landscape painter. You could say that I had dabbled in landscape, but the figure was always the main thing for me. Certainly the people who knew my work knew me for my figurative work. But living there in the middle of it, I found that I had to deal with the landscape in some way." Photograph: Elaine Fallon