

Wild views from a truck

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The Arts



A series of Nick Miller paintings, created in and around Sligo from the back of a truck, depicts landscape and nature in all its 'mouldy and messy' glory, the artist tells Aidan Dunne

In the mid-1990s, having lived in rural Sligo for a few years, Nick Miller had a dream. "In fact, for a long time I'd had this fantasy of heading across America in a 16-wheel truck big enough to contain a mobile studio and living space. I'd drive and stop and paint." One night he was chatting to his neighbour, the painter Barrie Cooke, and mentioned the idea to him. "That's what made it happen, but made it happen in an entirely different way." Cooke put him in touch with Victor Treacy, a businessman involved in trucking and with a lively interest in contemporary art.

"Victor fixed me up with a truck." With a big brute of a truck, in fact, a Ford Iveco with a hard top and enough space to work in. As he familiarised himself with his new mobile studio, something strange happened. Miller found that he was getting closer and closer to home rather than farther away, as he'd originally envisaged. He began at Benwee Head in north Mayo and soon found himself parked in his own driveway. "So I really ended up painting from the truck in a few square miles of Sligo rather than across thousands of miles in the US."

Truckscape at the Limerick City Gallery (and shown last year at the Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris) marshals the mostly large-scale drawings made from the vantage point of his truck-studio over a 10-year period. Not that the truck is only a vantage point: the inner frame of the doorway from which Miller surveyed the landscape became a recurrent feature in the drawings and paintings. "That just happened," he observes. "I think because that's the way it was. I mean it's different from plein-air painting, where you're out in the open. The truck really is a studio. I was in this in-between position, inside but outside." So the paint-splattered interior of the truck became part of the view.

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WHAT'S IMMEDIATELY STRIKING about the drawings is their incredible liveliness of surface. There's nothing delicate about that liveliness. On the contrary it's positively agitated and abrasive.

That, mind you, is a feature of Miller's work in general, which depends on the intensity of the lived encounter between artist and subject. It's as if he is rawly receptive to whatever he is drawing and painting, to an almost painful degree. "It still seems to happen like that," he acknowledges. "It's always been a characteristic of the work, but also a kind of limit, in a good sense, because limits are useful, things happen within them. I see it as a positive act to connect with the world, with being in the world."

The fact that the world he was in was rural and fairly wild was also a factor. He grew up in London, and moving not only to the country, but to the northwest of Ireland, was something of a revelation. "Living in it made me aware of it, absolutely. It's a long way from north London."

His awareness of the landscape, and his approach to it, was far removed, however, from the conventional idea of Irish landscape as a genre, not least because it's not that kind of

landscape. It's rough and agricultural, with scrubby trees and ragged hedgerows, muddy and utilitarian.

"It may sound odd to say this, but I wasn't very interested in landscape per se as a subject. It still doesn't interest me in that sense. So in approaching it I had to turn it into something more interesting to me, and what happened was that suddenly I could see this energy in the landscape, this sense of absolutely unstoppable physical activity, which has nothing to do with our own, human feelings about nature or anything like that. And in fact it's not particularly affirmative or nice. It's remote from cosy ideas of natural harmony. Because it's mouldy and messy and prodigious, and liveliness is always mixed with decay, growth with death. There's something shocking about it, which hits you when you live in the middle of it, and you can see yourself merging with its inevitability."

The drawings powerfully embody this sense of relentless and complex vitality. They are forceful, physical presences in themselves, substantial objects. "They go against the idea of a drawing being a sketch made in preparation for a painting," Miller says. Their surfaces are incredibly worked, churned up and ploughed like earth.



'The way it sat in the centre of the opening, I thought: well, I'm making a portrait of that tree, not a landscape' - Nick Miller (right)

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"That's possible because of the heavy paper I use. I remembered making a drawing of a chicken on scraperboard when I was a child. You scrape through a surface of dried Indian ink. As it happened I was using Indian ink. You reach a point where you've built it up so much that it goes dead, you can't add anything more." Instead, remembering the scraperboard, he started attacking the ink surface. In time, he acquired a formidable arsenal with which to make marks: "Wire brushes - they seem to be made for clouds - Stanley knife blades, various drill attachments, anything I could find. I became an ha-



bitué of hardware stores. I found a great one in Paris that had an unrivalled range of wire brushes. I felt like Cool Hand Luke, I had two electric guns with all these attachments. But as soon as I found an attachment was good at describing some particular thing, I had to avoid using it because I didn't want to become too conscious, too calculated in achieving certain effects. I wanted to be in that state where accidents can happen. Technique can be a trap."

THAT WAS, LITERALLY enough, one breakthrough. Another was seeing a whitethorn tree, adjacent to his own land, framed through the door of the truck. "The way it sat in the centre of the opening, I thought: well, I'm making a portrait of that tree, not a landscape. And I think all the drawings and paintings I made in the truck are portraits." The new gallery in Limerick, a beautiful, plain,

square space added to the original building, features nine large drawings. "I really felt, walking into it, that it is a room of portraits."

Because it is so extraordinarily lively, so busy, so engaged with its subject matter, while being unconcerned with photographic veracity, his work invites the tag Expressionist. It's noticeable, though, that Miller tends to shift uncomfortably at the mention of the word. "That's a difficult one. People often think of the work - and of me - as Expressionist and I tend not to say anything because... well, it's difficult because of course the drawings, the paintings, they do express something. But it's not to do with my feelings, I'm fairly sure. I know for example that, looking back, I could find no correlation between the mood of a particular drawing and my own mood when I made it. In fact, some of the darkest, more ominous-looking pieces were made when I was feeling positively chirpy."

WHILE HE HAS no intention at the moment of giving up his mobile studio, in a way *Trucks* does mark the end of a particular phase of work. Late last year he and his family moved house, and he is now based at Rosses Point. It's not a great distance away, but it is a fact that during the time he lived next to Lough Arrow, it was the immediate, local landscape that featured predominantly in his work. "I suppose I did want to bring that body of work to a conclusion," he says.

In his solo show at the Rubicon Gallery, we can already get a glimpse of his new surroundings, again from the vantage point of the truck. Benbulbin features prominently. At the mention of this he raises his eyebrows. "I've been in Sligo for the last 15 years and I've pretty much avoided Benbulbin because it's so iconic. Now, though, I'm close to Yeats's grave, I can't avoid the mountain, it's there every time I look up. Because I live and work there, it feels right to draw it."

He's happy that *Trucks* is being shown in Limerick because Limerick was his introduction to Ireland back in the mid-1980s. He arrived, lived in Co Clare in a caravan for eight months ("until a tree fell on it") and moved on to Dublin and has been in Ireland ever since.

What does he mean when he speaks of his mode of work as being a limitation? "I mean I don't end up with grand, designed masterpieces. I can't. Mine is a much simpler kind of work. It has to happen while I'm making it. When I look at something I've done, I'm asking myself what energises it, what reason has it to be there. And for me it has to have an energy of necessity about it. That you're looking at something real. Just that sense you have when you look at something in the world. When a painting has that I know I'm not being too much of a charlatan, and if I can get that far I feel I'm doing okay. The ambition lies not in fulfilling any grand design, but in trying to keep to that, to keep it true."

◆ *Trucks* is at the Limerick City Gallery of Art until Feb 24 and at the Rubicon Gallery, Dublin, until Feb 15



Clockwise from above: *Highwood, truck view with birds*; Miller at work; *Truck View Lough Skean*; *To Ben Bulbin with Ladder and Lake Trees*. Images from the exhibition *Trucks* by Nick Miller

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