

Miller's crossing

'I like painting with a gun to my head,' Nick Miller tells

Brian McAvera about techniques he's adopted in order to capture immediacy in his art



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Brian McAvera: Take us through the process of making a work from inception to completion.

Nick Miller: I suppose my portrait of Barrie Cooke which won the Hennessy award is a good example (Fig 9). I'd known Barrie for a long time and I've painted him three times since 1997. By 2013, he was no longer able to live alone, and wasn't in great shape leaving his Sligo studio after 27 years to be near one of his daughters. I rang to see if he would be fit to sit for me. He came on his last day in Sligo. It was poignant, as we both knew there was a finality to it, on many levels. But he perked up being in the studio, and we joked as I painted very quickly. I filmed bits of it, for my own interest, and recently noticed the actual painting took just 45 minutes. It is charged by his being there, by our history, by the human situation. But the bottom line is that, that is not what I focus on, it is just part of the stimulation that charges the encounter, as I try and hold in paint what I can of his presence.

Technically, I work directly with no underdrawing. I am usually well prepared. I have a system of pre-mixing paints to a consistency that I like, and making minor adjustments later.

When I started painting landscapes, I began using very long-haired watercolour brushes with oil paint. I got a brushmaker in England to put long handles on them for oil painting. They are very hard to control in a traditional way because oil paint is heavy so you have to apply the paint with almost a flick and drag, and they account for the sense of impasto in areas of my work. They introduce another element of risk, as it makes it nearly impossible to neatly render, so I can only respond in a very physical way to the stimulation in front of me. I started using those brushes around the time I was studying with the Chinese-American, Chungliang Al Huang in the USA, who taught Tai Chi as an almost moving form of human calligraphy. In Chinese there are no separate words to differentiate painting from drawing – I kind of relate to that.

When I finished, Cooke looked at it and was complimentary. He had no vanity, and was only interested in it as a painting. As always, he teased me that it could be a lot better if I fixed a bit in the background. I never change a piece once the sitter has left; very different to Barrie's process. So, I gave him a pleasurable shock by offering the paintbrushes to him and he gleefully painted out a drip or two in the background. It was a sort of painter's farewell.

B McA: In the 'Closer' series you developed the highly invasive technique of straddling your sitters while they were lying down, rather like the photographer in Antonioni's *Blow-Up*. Why?

NM: I think there is a performative element to my practice, working against the clock in real time with a subject. The painting is completed during the encounter, so there are obvious parallels to live performance, but in my case there is a painting or a drawing left behind. The 'Closer' drawings (1996-1999) followed attempts to work with people in the studio in a more traditional artist/model context. Anatomy drawings I had made in the College of Surgeons, Dublin in 1993 had helped shift my focus to working very closely with what I was looking at, and I wanted to find ways to spark some urgency. I was trying to get life onto paper, and I needed the physical sensation of intimacy to make me respond. I couldn't be any



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1 Nick Miller,
painting Alice
Maher, 2015

2 NICK MILLER
b.1962
PRIMROSES
2014 oil on
linen 61x51cm
Courtesy artist/
Rubicon
Gallery

3 **TREE HOUSE**
360° x 27
panels.
Installed size
233x512cm
(each panel
76x56cm)
Courtesy artist/
Rubicon
Gallery

4 **BEN BULBEN**
CARGOS WITH
BIRDS 2008 oil
on linen
183x168cm
Courtesy artist/
Rubicon
Gallery

closer to another human being without sexual union. It was very physically and psychologically demanding with no distance between me and the person I was drawing (Fig 6). Straddling my mother or father while drawing them was very intense and slightly hysterical. I hadn't been that close to them since they were changing my nappy! I think the people I worked with put their trust in me and the ensuing intimacy was collaborative, despite the intrusive appearance.

In more recent years, I have begun to address the performance aspect directly with film and painting installations like the piece *Painting Patrick: after Venus and Olympia* shown in the 2011 Kilkenny Arts festival (Fig 5). It is a matter-of-fact male nude portrait of a friend, Patrick, from my college days, someone who has often worked with me over the last 35 years. It follows the canon of reclining Venuses from Titian to Manet. I made the 20-minute film with just the two of us in the studio while I worked over a few days, and it observes the oddness of the painted encounter. When I showed it in Kilkenny, the film was projected onto a canvas of the same size, hung in the same room, while the audience could choose to view the film sitting on the sofa that Patrick had lain on. I have been trying to push it further with portraiture over the last number of years with projects like '40 days: 40 Portraits', a residency I did in Brooklyn in 2012, finding and working with new sitters each day for three hours for 40 straight days. Then 'Sitting', a residency and show I did with Laois Arthouse last year, brought it close to the realm of 'speed dating' with 6 or 7 one-hour sittings in a day, working on watercolour portraits of strangers who had signed up for the experience. I know there seems to be a sporting endurance thing going on,

but I don't know if that will last! I think I have just been trying to force myself to respond to the pressure of time and the limits of attention. I often joke, I do it because I like painting with a gun to my head. On reflection, I have always liked to put myself in situations that I have to paint my way out of, whether it is reversing the mobile studio into a bush, and painting the impossible denseness of vegetation, or putting myself in a room with a person with a self-made contract to just be with them and paint.

B McA: For a long time you had a portable studio in a truck and you positioned yourself so that the 'view' was from the truck's narrow door. You've referred to this, experientially, as working in a landscape but surely, experientially, you're not *in* the landscape: you're in the truck looking out *into* the landscape. You are framed just as surely as the frame of a camera?

NM: Well, actually, since their first showing, I specifically refer to those works as 'Truckscapes': they could not have been made in any other way than from the mobile studio. They are portraits of land, but they are also studio paintings made from the truck, facing nature. The truck afforded protection from the elements but it also allowed the direct encounter: that is the core of my work process. It was a couple of years before I realized the narrow frame doorway was what defined the encounter. *Whitethorn, truck-view* (Fig 10) was the first work where I truly understood the importance of the framing doorway, and that I was not composing but engaging with being there in the truck, and with the aliveness of the tree.

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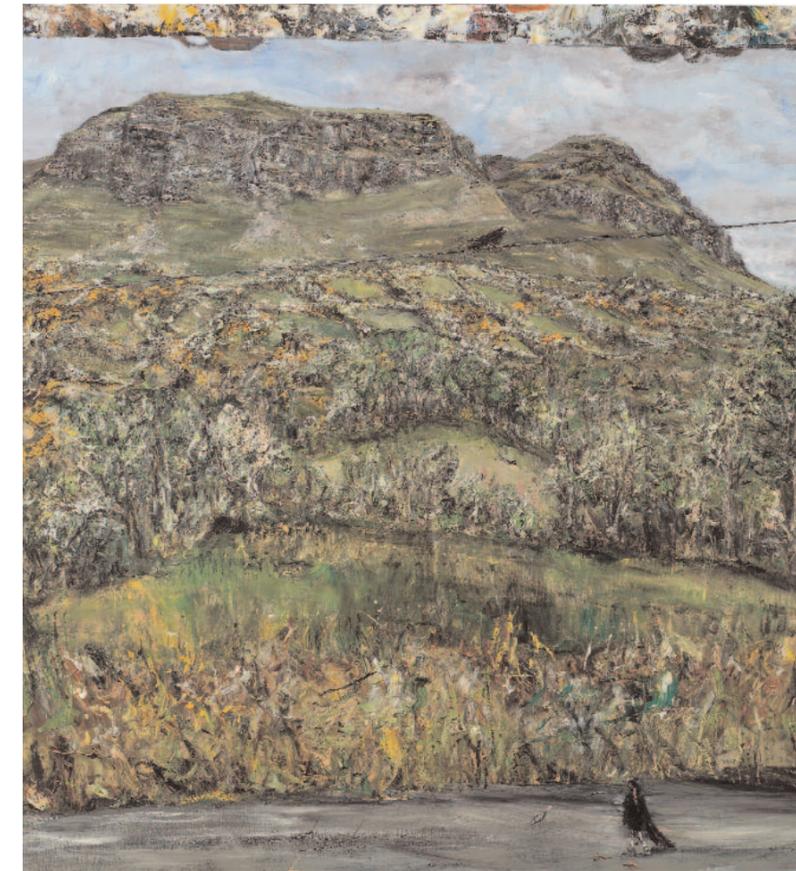
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B McA: You were born in London in 1962, a city which is still in many ways an agglomeration of distinct 'village' areas. What did your parents do, what part of London did you come from and what are your strongest memories?

NM: I grew up in North London. My father, Hilton Miller, was a mathematician who became a painter in mid life. He was a very hermetic man who didn't engage with the outer world but painted nearly every day for the last 40 years of his life. My mother was a medical social worker and family therapist who made her name internationally in relation to haemophilia and then HIV. From the early days of the crisis she travelled the world advising on managing AIDS for the World Health Organization. I always drew as a child and my parents were relatively cultured and encouraging. They were Jewish, but not religious at all. They came to England in the 1950s from South Africa, and, although I'm English by birth I have no huge national affiliations. Each generation of my family has settled in different places since the Russian pogroms of the 1880s drove them from Eastern Europe. I suppose I continued that rootless diaspora, moving to Ireland in the mid 1980s. I had a relatively comfortable upbringing, but my family never integrated with either the North London Jewish community or broader English culture. My need to paint, maybe, comes from some inherited sense of disassociation, along with a desire to connect. My father really was very hermetic, I did learn from him about concentrating only on the work in front of you, and have strong memories of his sense of order and preparation in the studio. But when you're a teenager, all you want to do is escape everything, yourself and your background. Art seemed like a way of doing that, internally at least.

B McA: You went to the University of East Anglia (UEA) in Norwich where you read Development Studies. The university had the Sainsbury Centre as well as a very lively art gallery. How did the university impact upon your trajectory as an artist?

NM: It was a very good course, taught by active practitioners of development economics, philosophy, politics and so forth. It taught me a lot about the world and gave me the tools to think. But after a year or so, I knew my heart was in painting, but did not know what that meant. I had been good academically, so art school was never on my radar. I wasn't particularly talented at painting but I had the stubbornness to pursue it, more as a private preoccupation rather than a career. Towards the end of my second year in university I was quite emotionally unstable and I tried to transfer to the Norwich School of Art. I had a bizarre interview with Edward Middleditch, the English 'Kitchen Sink' painter whose work I quite admired. He was absolutely plastered after a liquid lunch. He slowly went through my work, looking me in the eye, he said: 'We can do nothing for you. You wouldn't fit in, keep doing it if you must, but go away!' At the time it was very upsetting, and I did not understand,



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but since then I've been grateful for his drunken candour; intentionally or not, he maybe 'got' me. It was in retrospect, sound advice, but it did keep me on a trajectory on the outside of the art world.

The Sainsbury Centre at UEA was the biggest thing for me. There was a fantastic collection there, as well as the world-class ethnographic collection and the contemporary programme. It definitely sustained me. There was a great show of Giacometti's sculptures, drawings and notebooks. He was a strong early influence in terms of drawing and seeing.

B McA: You are often described as a self-taught artist but you studied part-time at Norwich School of Art.

NM: Well, I suppose everyone is self-taught, but the sessions in Norwich School of Art were 'drop in' life/figure sessions for committed students at the Art School that a friend invited me to join unofficially. It was then a renowned figurative painting school. The life room doubled as a real working studio to two painters: John Lessore and John Wonnacott. So I saw substantial paintings being made over time, and one of them by Wonnacott included images of Lessore, Middleditch and Wonnacott himself. I saw it years later in the Tate Collection. I certainly connected with some of the students, and learnt

much from them, but I felt to some degree like an outsider, since I was the only non-art student there.

B McA: London is a treasure-house for an artist, having a huge range of museums and galleries, not to mention an art-network second to none. Yet in 1984 you chose to go to the Republic of Ireland, then a backwater. Why?

NM: Growing up in London, I was exposed to art and culture, and absorbed a lot from painters like Kossoff, Freud, and Auerbach; they had a powerful influence, though more so in retrospect than consciously at the time. More directly the National Gallery was a refuge and a repository of historical greatness in painting that started my real art education. But I also felt stifled by the 'treasure house' and when I was young the art world was way beyond both my awareness

B McA: Lots of Irish writers and artists have lived for long periods outside of Ireland or have exiled themselves as a means of gaining critical distance. Even if you relocate permanently, you are always, to some extent, an outsider. How do you see yourself?

NM: As a Jew, even a non-practising one like me, being a blow-in is a normal state, so it doesn't feel strange. I have not felt much need for distance from English culture, as my family 'blew-in' there too! No one understood my choice to go to, and then to stay in Ireland. There was a huge economic recession going on and many people were leaving, but I found an odd freedom in that, in being far from the 'centre' of things. I just wanted to see what would happen with life and with painting. I was not chasing the art world. I arrived to a rare heatwave in 1984. It was like paradise, phe-

and Temple Bar was redeveloped: I moved west again, this time to Sligo, where I have been since the early 1990s. Meeting Noreen Cassidy, my wife, and raising two kids here to adulthood really grounded me in Ireland. We moved to a remote spot in Sligo when Noreen was just twenty-five, so we often joke about doing it in reverse and spending the later years of life in the city, hobbling around Central Park in New York walking poodles!

BMcA: You've had residencies at Annaghmakerrig in 1987 and 1990, one at Dublin Zoo and one, I think, at the College of Surgeons to observe anatomy. What do you get out of such experiences?

NM: The College of Surgeons in 1993 was not a residency. I brought students there from IADT where I was teaching on the evening diploma. It was a 'field trip', but I got interested and ended up staying on to do my own work. Later, in 2010-11, I did do a residency in the Anatomy Department of Trinity College, part of a wider project curated by Patrick Murphy at the RHA celebrating 300 years of TCD Medical School. Both were very strong human and visual experiences. I suppose, observing and trying to understand what is 'not life' was important to me, as in portraiture I am trying to hold in paint what 'is life'. Annaghmakerrig was great for me in the late 1980s. I met a hero of mine, John McGahern for the first time at the dinner table (Fig 7). I went on to paint him years later. But I met many writers and artists, who were important to me and it certainly helped me feel I existed as an artist in the world as well as in my own mind.

My six-month residency in Dublin Zoo in 1988 was seminal, in that I found there what interested me in art. It was not the animals as such, but a very tangible physical/mental sensation I had, at the point of 'seeing, being and doing'. Drawing them walking in repeated patterns in their cages clarified everything for me: that it was the experience of connectivity that mattered. I have been chasing that sensation in all the work I do since then. When I see a Rembrandt portrait I see the energy of life fixed in the material of paint. From that point I started looking for people to sit for me and to try and bring that focus to my studio work.

B McA: The Chen Zhongsen & Nick Miller exhibition 'East – West' (2002) seems to have been formative for you in terms of eastern influences. How did the show come about and what did you learn from Chen?

NM: I was trying to find ways to open myself up to the nature that enveloped me, living and working in that very rural part of Sligo. I felt I wanted to let nature pass through me, through my eyes and body as I worked, and out through my hands to become a painting, with as little interference as possible! I was studying a lot of Tai Chi at the time, even making trips to the USA to learn. That is where I first came across Chen Zhongsen's work. It was so mind-boggling that I ended up going to China to find him and



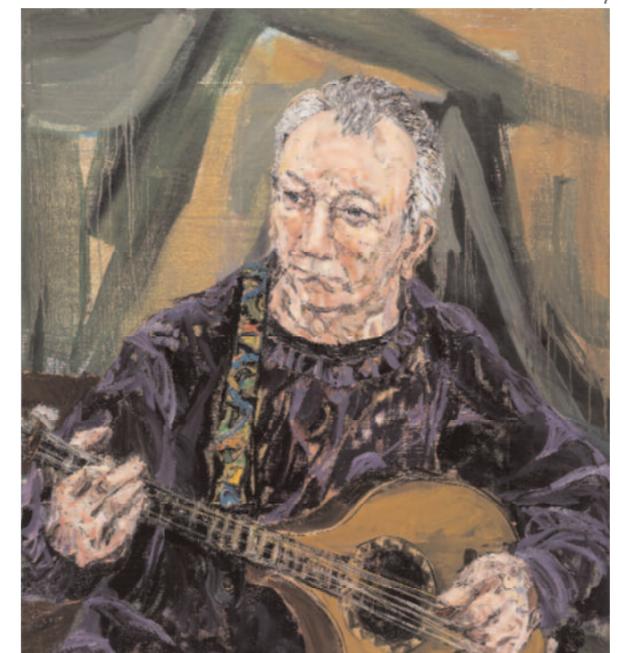
STRADDLING MY MOTHER OR FATHER WHILE DRAWING THEM WAS VERY INTENSE AND SLIGHTLY HYSTERICAL. I HADN'T BEEN THAT CLOSE TO THEM SINCE THEY WERE CHANGING MY NAPPY!

and reach. It seemed impregnable and closed. Every logical voice said: 'Go to New York or London' but I really didn't have that logic. I just wanted to disappear and learn to paint in my own way. If I returned to London I would have been submerged economically and artistically.

How I ended up in Ireland was happenstance. I replied to an ad on the college notice board to work part-time on an organic farm in Whitegate, in east Co Clare. It was still Thatcher's Britain and I remember taking pleasure in responding to Norman Tebbit's advice of the time, to 'get on your bike and find a job': I sold mine and bought a one-way ticket to Limerick! I was looking for space and quiet, and a fresh start, but I had no realistic timeframe or intent beyond painting for the summer. I had fond childhood memories of a holiday in Ireland, so there was a seed there that made me go for it. As it turned out, I never returned to live in England.

nomenally beautiful, and I fell in love with the West of Ireland, with all its contradictions. I made very few conscious decisions. I left Co Clare after 6 months, when a tree fell on the caravan I was living in. I was heading back to England, but I'd met an art teacher from Dublin, Glen McMahon, who came down to Clare at the weekends. In Dublin he lived in the caretaker's gate lodge of the barely-known Jewish cemetery on Fairview Strand that dates from 1718. He offered to put me up there and I couldn't resist the cultural synchronicity. But I was run down and developed shingles, so I ended up staying longer in Dublin, and eventually found a studio in Temple Lane for ten Punks a week in one of the old CIÉ buildings.

I liked Dublin in the 1980s. Returning to London to try and play the YBA game was not on my mind. So that's where I based myself for a number of years until boom-time came



5 PAINTING
PATRICK AFTER
VENUS AND
OLYMPIA 2011
22min HD film,
painting and
installation
Heritage
Council,
Kilkenny Arts
Festival 2011
Courtesy artist/
Rubicon
Gallery

6 RIVA 1996
conté on paper
15x122cm
Courtesy artist/
Rubicon
Gallery

7 PORTRAIT OF
JOHN
MCGAHERN
1998 oil on
linen 97x97cm
The Niland,
Collection, The
Model, Sligo

8 DÓNAL
LUNNY,
PLAYING 2015
oil on linen
102x91cm
© Nick Miller
Photo ©
National
Gallery of
Ireland.
Commissioned
by the National
Gallery of
Ireland as part
of the
Hennessy
Portrait Prize
2014

9 LAST
SITTING:
PORTRAIT OF
BARRIE COOKE
2013 oil on
linen 61x56cm
Collection of
National
Gallery of
Ireland

bring him and his work to Ireland. He paints, but also makes these rationally incomprehensible micro-carvings. He slows his heart and breath to almost nothing and carves calligraphy and images into small stones, most famously carving two poems into a single strand of his wife's white hair. We did a show together at the Model in Sligo, the Rubicon in Dublin, and a live micro-carving performance in the Chester Beatty Library, to whom he donated a major piece, *The Diamond Sutra*, which has several thousand characters of the Buddhist text carved into a stone only 4x5cm in size. It is there to see, but easily missed! I misunderstood a lot, but also learnt a lot, about how to respond to overwhelming amounts of information coming through



the eyes and mind when looking — a sort of reverse to his process, which was internal to external.

A year later in the RHA (2003) I showed the 'Trucksapes' for the first time, along with two bodies of figure work in a show called 'Figure to Ground'. For me it was about that interconnected learning. It is not all so weird as it sounds. I just gave a talk in the National Gallery as part of a study day on the West of Ireland. I quoted Jack Yeats: 'I dislike the word art as to painting. There is only one art and that is the art of living. Painting is an occupation that is in that art and that occupation is the freest of all the occupations of living Life is made up of an endless series of momentary events and we should cultivate each one to the full, seeking not the fruit of the experience, but the experience as a whole'. It is so close to what you can learn from eastern thought that it gives me pleasure to think that Yeats could have understood what I am on about. When I am at my best, painting has always just felt like the by-product of learning to live.

B McA: When you visited the Albers Foundation in Connecticut, USA in 2009 for a residency you worked from a 360-degree platform, high in a tree. Rather like Jan Dibbets with photographs, you reconstructed a 360° view.

NM: Yes, that describes it well. It is similar to the portrait projects I have been doing — putting myself in a situation, a timeframe, with painting as my only available response. It was not something I planned. I found the treehouse platform by chance on the foundation grounds and then spent eight weeks there, 30-feet high, in a tree. I was watching leaves go from full cover in the forest, through to the fall. I would literally rotate a little each day and I went round and round, repeating and intensifying the painting like a slow motion



I FELT I WANTED TO LET NATURE PASS THROUGH ME, THROUGH MY EYES AND BODY AS I WORKED, AND OUT THROUGH MY HANDS TO BECOME A PAINTING, WITH AS LITTLE INTERFERENCE AS POSSIBLE!

whirling dervish. The segments were practical because I was high up in a tree and had to carry work up and down the ladder, and I could add another segment as I began to see how to resolve the image as a whole. It really was a liberating and transcendental human experience to be so engaged in the trees. In the truck I was covered up: physically and culturally protected. In the woods I was exposed, but lucky that apart from some snow days, it was dry and I could work outside. It was not far from Walden Pond and I was absorbing some Thoreau and the New England Transcendentalists, Emerson and Walcott, who were all based not far away in Concord, Massachusetts, where I eventually showed the work in 2011.

B McA: You won the Hennessy Portrait Prize in 2014. Now portrait painting is one of the few ways in which an artist can earn a decent living these days, but it usually means trimming one's sails to the expectations of the client. How would you see your practice in relation to painters like Colin Davidson, or Robert Ballagh for example?

NM: I've not specifically made a living out of portraiture, even though I am very lucky to have had a few portraits bought or donated to various national collections; IMMA, the Hugh Lane, the Model (Niland Collection) and now the National Gallery of Ireland. I love that they will exist there in the future: it is a true honour. I have always tended



to ask someone to sit, rather than the other way around. I have 30 years of portraits stacked in the studio, slowly building towards some kind of show. I haven't worked much to commission, partly because of the risk involved in making portraits the way I do. I don't have the academic skills to guarantee the expectations of a client for an 'official type portrait'. Robert Ballagh and Colin Davidson, who you mentioned, both have remarkable skills that can meet those expectations — they are very different and able painters. With me it either works or doesn't; it is like betting on a fired up donkey in a thoroughbred horse race, and even when it works for me, I can't guarantee people will get the way I resolve flesh and presence as painting. I am getting better at managing it, and am very open to commission if it is understood what is involved. I just finished the Hennessy Portrait Commission for the National Gallery of Ireland, but, luckily they gave me a lot of freedom to make a painting as I see fit, and a sitter, Dónal Lunny, very open to the process (Fig 8).

BMcA: It's been a long trajectory since 1984. How do you think the work has changed, and what, specifically, are you doing now?

NM: It has been a long time, 31 years since I moved to Ireland! Living here has been very good for me and to me and I am genuinely grateful for that. Although you have asked me much about my early life in England and its impact, when I came here in 1984, I severed a lot of my earlier life to try and make myself into a painter. My work has really been based, supported and evolved in Ireland. I kept very few ties in the UK beyond close family and a friend or two. In the last three years both of my parents died, so there has been an even more pronounced letting go of England for me, at least in terms of personal connections. The most recent work has given me a new lease and curiosity. Recently I showed at the RHA and with Rubicon Projects the series 'Vessels: Nature Morte' begun in 2013. A year or so after my father died after a long decline with Alzheimer's, my mother developed a brain tumour, and was also slowly disappearing and changing. Each time I visited her in London I would bring back more of the vases and glass jars she had collected during her life, and find some plant, weed or flower to put in and paint the vase and vegetation. I could not attend her every need in London, but I could connect through painting. It gave an energy to these works that took me by surprise. I have been working since 2011 on a collaborative project with other artists and musicians at the North West Hospice in Sligo. I bring found flowers in the same vases and set up studio on the ward to help change the environment for patients and staff. I started painting flowers there, watercolours. Sometimes I make portraits if appropriate. As both my parents became terminally ill, that hospice work triggered these new paintings in my own studio which are still evolving and feel vital. The next show I am working on sort of closes the circle in relation to questions you have asked about. It is a small project for IMMA in November. The Collections Department have offered me the curious opportunity to respond to the work of Edward McGuire and the contents of his studio which has been donated to the museum. McGuire died in 1986, not long after I came to Dublin. My contribution to the exhibition will be small, re-visiting and painting a few of McGuire's sitters who are still around, as well as his studio material, the subject of his still lifes, to see what happens. I greatly admired his portraits and paintings of stuffed birds. He had studied in London, and when I first saw his work in Ireland, I immediately connected with it, partly because I saw how he had found his own way to absorb and move on from the strong influences of the London School and the likes of Lucian Freud to make unique paintings of his own. They represented a sense of hope for me in Ireland. ■

Nick Miller 'Meetings: Into the studio of Edward McGuire' IMMA, Dublin 12 November 2015 - 27 March 2016.

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Brian McAvera is an art critic.

10 WHITETHORN, TRUCK VIEW
2001 oil on linen
168x214cm
Courtesy artist/
Rubicon Gallery

11 TRUCK VIEW: WHITETHORN
2007 drawing-in-progress
studio photograph

12 STEEL YARD, STUDIO VIEW
2013 oil on linen
102x122cm
Courtesy artist/
Rubicon Gallery