

Life & Culture

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Seeing the wood from the trees



AIDAN DUNNE
VISUAL ART

Nick Miller forged a reputation with landscapes painted from a truck, but his latest work offers a panoramic view of a Connecticut forest, but seen from a 25ft-high treehouse

LAST YEAR, one evening at the beginning of September, Nick Miller arrived at the Albers Foundation in rural Connecticut to begin a residency. He decided to go for a walk, following a trail through the extensive surrounding woodlands. The map he'd been given, he noticed, pinpointed a tree house, and he made that his goal. But the light was ebbing, the forest was shadowy and dark, and he just couldn't see it. That made him all the more determined to find it and, eventually, he did. It was a surprisingly large structure, about 25ft above the ground.

Then, as though in a fairy tale, he climbed the wooden stairway and found himself in another world. Dense masses of trees extended away in every direction. It was, he recalls, like being a child again, rediscovering a sense of magic and wonder.

Oddly enough, high above the ground, perched among the branches, he felt secure. In fact he fell asleep and woke up with the certainty that he had found his ideal studio for the duration of his residency. He would paint from the tree house.

It is not, strictly speaking, a tree house, more a tree platform, surrounded by a protective wooden rail. As Miller recounts it, Nicholas Fox Weber, who runs the foundation,

harboured a childhood wish to have a tree house and figured the woodland setting was the place to finally get it. Artist Fritz Horstman and architect Andrés Garcés set about building it.

If you know Miller's work, you probably recall that he has done a great deal of work from his truck studio. He used the truck not to visit exotic locales and unusual sights, but as a means of getting close to the landscape around him. He is based in Sligo, and often, he pointed out in the past, he would move the truck no further than a mile or two from his house or, quite often, some point on his own drive, before setting down to work. The point was that it offered him a fully equipped painting studio, completely open to the elements on one side. The sides of the truck appear in many paintings as vertical borders.

The tree house was more dramatically open, and that much higher. Miller notes that he found it interesting to find himself on a level with the trees rather than looking up at them as he normally would. These two factors, height and the all-round view, were something new and exciting.

Used to the truck-sides cutting off the view, he found himself continually turning around, amazed at the fact that the prospect just went on and on. Throughout his seven weeks at the foundation, he was hardly out of the tree house. Every bit of work he did was made there, and being there shaped the direction his work took.

As he made individual pieces, he became more and more taken with the fact that each could continue indefinitely. Each was, as he put it, a segment of a jigsaw that would slot together with the next. The surrounding landscape, a relatively young woodland, also had a jigsaw quality in the sense that it is a continuous mass of intricate and very similar detail.

There is something quite repetitious about the dense tangle of the forest. In this it recalls an aspect of many of his Irish landscapes, in which he is drawn to the sense of overwhelming, unstoppable growth that you can find in the Irish countryside in spring and summer.

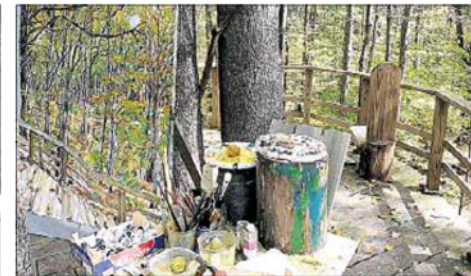
It's fair to say that Miller steers clear of the picturesque. His landscapes, whether Irish or in the US, tend to consider the ordinary, workaday environment rather than obviously beautiful locations. He was aware that there are sev-



eral striking locations on the foundation land. But he preferred to deal with the intractable, visually impenetrable view of the forest from the tree house, with every potential avenue of sight leading to a tangled mass of fallen leaves, tree limbs and vegetation.

From individual pieces he was gravitating

towards the panoramic, and then it occurred to him that the panorama could complete a circle. The largest work he made, Tree House 360°, is a huge, five-metre wide composite built from 27 individual panels that takes us all the way around the view from the wooden platform. As an overall picture, it connects but it's not quite



Natural inspiration: the tree house at the Albers Foundation, above left and right, which was built between two pine trees in 1996 by artists Fritz Horstman and Andrés Garcés. Nick Miller's Treehouse 360°, left

continuous. It reflects the day-to-day process of making, the concentration on successive segments of the landscape – in fact Miller has remarked that the concentration, the paying attention in the present moment, is mostly what painting is about.

He felt his way towards a new way of working in another sense as well, discovering casein paint, a pigment based on a protein found in milk that was once widely used but which was eventually displaced by acrylic. He used casein on paper and mounted the paper on aluminium for rigidity, allowing a scaffolding grid of metal to delineate each panel. The result is a striking work, delivered with urgency, fantastically alive, a maze of endlessly proliferating detail that keeps our eyes restlessly searching through the richly layered image.

Tree House 360° Paintings by Nick Miller. Rubicon Gallery, 10 St Stephen's Green Wed-Sat 12noon-5pm. Until November 13 01-670 8055