

Podcast Transcript: Artists' Voices: Life in a Pandemic

Nick Miller in conversation from his studio in County Sligo.

Donal Maguire 0:02

Artist's Voices: Life in a Pandemic is a new series of oral histories from the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art at the National Gallery of Ireland.

These oral histories were recorded as a series of conversations with artists to document their experiences during the global Covid-19 pandemic. The series is produced with the kind support of ESB sponsor of the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art.

This episode of Artists' Voices: Life in a Pandemic features painter Nick Miller in conversation from his studio in Sligo on the 8th of May 2020.

Born in London, Nick Miller moved to Ireland in 1984, and now lives and works in Sligo. He is a painter who works in the genres of portraiture, still life and landscape, focusing primarily on local subjects including the rural landscape of Northwest Ireland. He has developed a vigorous painting technique that merges representation and expressionism.

He was the winner of the National Gallery of Ireland's inaugural portrait prize in 2014. Miller's paintings have been exhibited widely, and his work is represented in numerous collections, including the National Gallery of Ireland and the Irish Museum of Modern Art.

Nick generously agreed to talk about his life and work as an artist during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Hi, Nick, thank you for joining me here this morning from your studio in Sligo.

I thought we'd begin by returning to a painting that you showed at the National Gallery last year in 2019, in an exhibition called *Shaping Ireland*. This painting was called *From Pat Cogan's Shed*. It's a large oil painting, depicting, I suppose, what can be seen as a fairly typical Irish landscape of rolling hills, small plots of land, some suggestions of human activity on the land.

But perhaps you could tell us how you approach landscape painting, and specifically this painting and paintings from that series, and how you engage with the landscape, particularly these types of remote landscapes that are more rural and further away from human populations.

Nick Miller 2:10

Yeah, that time I was living in the area that painting was based, which is around Lough Arrow looking towards Carrowkeel back towards Roscommon, Leitrim in Highwood. And that, even though you say it's a typical Irish landscape, it's actually not, in a sense, it's extremely empty landscape that, when I lived in that part of the country, there's very little nuclear development of villages and things, the whole community has spread, quite dispersedly through the landscape.

And, quite unusual, the name of the village where I lived, Kilmactranny, or the area was really just a crossroads with the school in it where my kids went to school. So it's actually an unusual part of the country in a way.

And that view was painted back towards where I was living, maybe about three kilometers, but directly high up towards Highwood looking back towards Boyle. And I used to work in a mobile studio, a converted large converted telecoms truck. And really all that is about is about being able to bring the encounter between myself and the world that I meet into a present moment.

So I have a truck because I like to work on pole in front of what I'm looking at. So it's a way of me meeting the world. And that's exactly what I do in that type of painting. I open the doors of the truck, and I paint only during that time, I don't bring them back to the studio and dickie them up and turn them into art. They are the remains of the day, or however long I'm there, spent in the landscape.

Donal Maguire 4:15

Sure, and is your process one of driving around the landscape waiting to discover or find a view that appeals to you that you want to paint, or is it something more planned that you set out to a particular spot to, to paint a very particular view?

Nick Miller 4:30

It was very, very particular during the period from 1997 through to 2007, which was the period I was living and working on those landscapes. It was the literally 20 mile radius of the home in which I lived and partly because I had very young kids at the time so I didn't go too far, I often needed to get back.

Sometimes I just parked in the field or the road where I lived and worked very directly with things around me in the garden, the lanes around the house. So it was all about not just meeting the landscape as a subject in terms of art history, but about being in that kind of isolated rural landscape as a human being. So it was my way of being in that landscape.

And it opened up doors with farmers because nobody knows what an artist is, but they know what a man with a truck is. So things to talk about. Beyond the strangeness of art, people would walk up into the back of the truck with a relaxedness. Because of the machinery nature of the thing. It just, it's like a tractor or something, it had a humanizing rural aspect to it.

Donal Maguire 5:58

And you continue to paint from the landscape, is there a relationship that you see between landscape, portraiture and other genres in which your work?

Nick Miller 6:06

I try, you know, it's a strange thing, the truck was from a time when it's very susceptible to rust. So I've still got it and it sits but it doesn't move anymore. It sits outside my new studio looking at Benbulbin. And I paint one view every so often, same, again and again, just because I can. It doesn't move anymore and I miss having that.

But I also didn't want to become - I was never really a landscape painter. I'm a portrait painter who meets the landscape in this, through portrait. They're a sort of similar engagement to portraiture. So I didn't want to ever get kind of boxed into being an Irish landscape painter, because although I am I'm not, it's like, I'm always trying to escape my shackles.

People know me for that, because they're very particular and also has a story around it. And it's very easy to kind of engage beyond the paintings, but actually, it was an incredibly interesting vehicle, literally, through which to meet the world. It was a, it was a meeting machine, a landscape meeting machine. I didn't choose landscapes, I usually - it was a four tonne it's a four tonne truck. So I parked where I could without endangering myself or anybody else. And I was just under the limit where you needed an HGV license. So I had interesting times on small rural lanes meeting other vehicles.

Donal Maguire 7:49

And you mentioned that you complete the painting in full when you're working inside the truck. So your studio practice operates separately and independently to what you're doing in the truck, you have you work in a different way in the studio.

Nick Miller 8:02

Well I always had several threads always going on, people tend only to see one which gets shown at a particular time. It's like a cycle of things. I've always worked sort of with portraiture with still life, landscape in some form, I continue to work in all three of those in different ways.

Now that I'm not moving in the truck, I am still working on landscape and had a whole period of maybe 10 years and working in the landscape by working in sort of temporary studios in the landscape. Again, a very different sort of process. And then now I'm working in the sea. So which is a whole different ballgame because I can't paint on site. Yes. I haven't yet found a way to float and paint simultaneously.

Donal Maguire 8:54

And is this the most recent work that you've been doing before we found ourselves in this situation of lockdown?

Nick Miller 9:00

So about 3 years ... I started swimming every day in the sea about 3 years ago, throughout the year. And I always wanted to paint the sea and never felt I found an interesting way to do it. For me - A bit like the truck gave me my way to paint landscape - I needed some way to meet the sea.

So the only way I could meet see was to get in it, in the sea. It's a very - painting is a very physical thing for me. It always has been, it's a kind of, it's how you hold the energy of the world you meet in two dimensions. So you have to let it in to you. And then you have to release it into paint.

And for me, it's a physical and energetic practice rather than a kind of picture making practice. It's the paintings for me are the leftovers of a kind of way of just living in stuff. I'm using memory for the first time in 30 years, I'm trying to develop what, what's left in my memory.

Donal Maguire 10:17

In some ways, you're developing a kind of a relationship with your subject matter. That maybe comes from being a portrait painter, where the portrait is a product of the portrait setting and the time that you spend with the person that you're spending time with the sea or with the landscape.

Nick Miller 10:33

That's exactly it and then the reason I moved into the truck, and then into temporary studios in landscape, and then suddenly why I feel the need to be in the sea, is because that is the most tactile, physical sensation of meeting I can have. I need to, I need - it's a bit because I'm a bit dumb. I need to be like slapped awake in the world. So the only time that happens is when I'm with somebody that says, Wake up, Nick, I'm here paint me. Or I'm in, in ice cold water, 2 degrees, standing there, I'm going, looking, what can I remember, what can I remember of cold water?

So I need a physical kind of stimulation. And that's like painting a person. Because when you're with a person, you're incredibly aware of that, because they're giving you back something by their presence, in their physicality, and their aliveness in a way that it's hard to kind of think about in terms of trees. You have to, you have to you, have to let yourself understand that with trees and grass and waves and water, it's a different thing.

Donal Maguire 10:36

And I suppose this idea that you're talking about of creating a relationship with your subject matter, or the person the subject that you're painting. And all of that has changed recently in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and social distancing and all of the social restrictions that we, that we face now.

Is that something that has deeply affected your practice and how you were working?

Nick Miller 12:08

What I suppose the scariest thing for me was, I realised in isolation as I am, by the fact that everybody else is now isolated, showed me what kind of a person I've become. Which is a fairly isolated artist in a certain sense. If you live in the northwest of Ireland, you're not hanging out in social gatherings, in groups, anyway. It's just not your nature.

And unfortunately, my father was almost a hermit. He took to of painting midlife and never left his studio for 40 years and a piece of work never left the studio for 40 years.

So I was highly trained in the art of not meeting anybody. Sort of, it, it's not that it's natural to me, it's sort of semi - I've often tried to fight against it, but you become a bit like, we all become our parents and we all become, bits of them start popping through.

Donal Maguire 13:05

I suppose another way of saying that is, are you missing the cakes and slaps around the face that you said your portrait subjects would normally give you?

Nick Miller 13:12

Yeah, it's, one of the, I suppose, I haven't been doing that many portraits in the last year or so. The portraits, it makes me really want to get back to it. Because when I first started painting portraits it was literally so that I would have some company, that I would have an excuse to have, I wouldn't be spending quite so much time in the studio on my own.

It's quite a, it's not a very huge artistic decision, it's a more of a company decision. I was led to portraiture through the need for human interaction. So, and that's continued, but again, as you get older, you'll, you spend life with your, doing, raring your kids and all that stuff, you sort of drift slightly more from your friends and your peer groups and this and that, just by nature raring a family. My kids are fully grown now. But that's just kind of what happens a little bit.

So although I'm working on portraits, they're less, so it makes me want to get back. If anything, it makes me want to find a way to sort of step up my portrait practice. Again, for company. Yeah.

Donal Maguire 14:23

Could you maybe describe a normal day for you in the studio, if there is such a thing?

Nick Miller 14:28

Well, uh, yeah, 'cos I'm pretty, I'm slightly obsessive or slightly, repetitively obsessive. So if nothing else has happened, if I'm not working with another person, I'm not involved in that something where I have to meet anybody else, I'm up around 6.30 or something, and then I go swimming around the 7.15, 7.30 every day.

The difference at the moment is a few days a week. Normally I would meet somebody else, maybe for a swim. So a bit, so it has some social context. But mostly I swim on my

own in the morning because I can't really use it for work unless I'm on my own. Because you can't, it takes a lot of energy to be in the sea, stay safe, stay alive, and try and observe stuff, to let it into your brain, which you can then use later in the studio.

So I do the studio, I go to the swim, I come back, and I do- my life is so bizarre to explain to the world. I then do about an hour and a half of Qigong, which is a Daoist internal arts practice, which has to do with cultivating your energy, it's all to do with, it's very useful for the type of painting I do. So I do a lot of that, and way more of it now during this period, because I have less to do of other things. So my training in that area has zoomed up. I'm a very slow learner, I've done it for about 30 years and I'm crap and will always be crap. But I'm obsessed. So it's just one of those things, it very much relates to, because the Daoists are very interesting. And they're all about nature, and letting it into you and getting it out of you. And that's all I do in painting, I don't have any complicated procedures. Other than that, which is way too complicated as it is, it's very hard to let the universe into you and then to release it into two dimensions.

Then, sorry, an hour and a half of that, then I go to the studio. And then if I'm doing a sea painting, kind of being absorbing something and being in the water, and then I spend the morning or, and into the afternoon working on one watercolour trying to bring that presence. And I can't use photography, if I introduce, if I take photos on my camera, use, I always take photographs but if I use those, it ruins the watercolour. I have to just deal with the fact that I can't remember things. And then try and make a piece of work from that, if I'm working on the big still lifes and I've found some plant or branch I would have brought it with me.

And I'm slowly trying to finish a number of big paintings around that. But I never really know what I'm going to do. Except when I'm in the sea. I know I'm going to do a sea painting, if it's that kind of day. This is kind of random exposing one's inner workings like this. But anyway, hey.

Donal Maguire 17:34

No, it's, it's very interesting to hear. And I suppose the current situation and social distancing that we're experiencing is affecting people's lives in lots of different ways. Has it affected your painting practice, your ability to make work or to exhibit work, I'm sure it has. And is it something you'd like to talk about?

Nick Miller 17:54

Not so much to make work. I kind of, it's a huge thing that's been going on. And it's affecting us all in hugely strange and unknown ways. So I really didn't, for a while I was going to set up a zoom project of portraiture and I was thinking about that, I was kind of excited by it. But then I kind of felt I was pushing it, I was trying to make something of the time that we're in, and I don't really think it's for me, it just didn't seem right. So I kind of let it go. And it might happen again in a different way.

But I kept, I've kept working on a pretty slow pace. For the first few weeks, I found it incredibly hard to make anything to make work. You're just, your engagement with the news and the current, currency of what's going on sort of just messes with the brain patterns for being able to make work. But then I've kind of settled into a new normality.

I'm extremely lucky that the sea is under 2 kilometers from where I live, so I could keep walking and going. Certainly I've kept that alive. I've been able to access my studio, which is all on its own. So I just, it hasn't changed that much. But the fact that you have to do this, and you have no choice makes a different feeling about it. I mean, I think I'm one of the very lucky ones, I'm still being able to come to my studio, still being able to swim and I live by the sea, which turned into a private beach on a desert island because the roads were sealed off to the rest of the population. So nobody else could go there but the few people live nearby.

Donal Maguire 19:40

It's very heartening to hear that you've established a practice that you can continue in, even through these very difficult times.

Nick Miller 19:48

It is a practice. It's actively, I have to actively practice it. It's not random. It's like I use it to help process the changes going on. I use my own practice to help myself live through it.

Donal Maguire 20:05

You said how you, your work or your practice in some ways responds to what's happening at the, in your environment. What has surprised you most about the current situation and in particular maybe the social distancing and, and what has come out of it, the changes it's made to your life or maybe things you've noticed globally? Maybe where there might be some positives or negatives or what has struck you're surprised you?

Nick Miller 20:32

There's definitely a sense, I've been walking in the landscape a lot, everyday, way more than I would normally do. Because the swimming sort of usually gives me my burst of nature. And that's enough. But I've been out and about and you definitely get the feeling of nature breathing a sigh of relief at the stopping of our incessant activity, including my own incessant type of activity or reduction. It's like you feel - but definitely the birdsong has increased this year just hugely. There are some lovely things about us not being able to manically pursue capitalism, the way we have been for since the Second World War, kind of this escalating consumerism madness that we've all been a part of.

And, you know, I wonder, even though it frightens me in terms of how I might survive, I also wonder, isn't it a better thing that I'm not sending work all around the globe? Maybe this is, we've, we got to reassess how we do all that. Maybe it isn't so bad if we are all stuck where we are? Yeah, I know. You know, I, I'd like to think there's great

possibilities for changing the world. And really, that this is a dry run for climate. This is a, this is a, this is a dry run, for, well a not so dry run, a pretty horrible run, real run for what might be facing us in a big way.

So that's, in terms of good things, being stuck with one's family could be horrendous and has had its moments, but has also had real renewal moments where you get past the strangeness of being all stuck together, my grown up boys back, all this kind of stuff.

So you, you're in a different world, and I've certainly felt good about my relationship with my wife and things like that, it's kind of, it's kind of nice moments of, of - our daily thing where we meet together and do, you know, there is something very, none of us have any choice.

So often, like with children, limitations are very good things, we, we flourish a little bit in limitation, freedom is a very difficult thing to manage. So being restrained, you have to find your freedom in that or find your way to make something good happen in that. I think that's kind of good practice for us all, whether, I, you know, I hope everybody is let out into the world again soon. And we will get to hug. And strange things of non physicality and not being able to, I noticed it with particularly older people, I meet older people out, their natural tendency is to move towards you to talk to you and you have to take a step back. The strange thing of seeing people as both kind of human contact and the danger simultaneously, is very unpleasant.

Donal Maguire 23:37

It's, it's required for, obviously, health reasons, but it's been a very strange social experiment in some ways, for all of those things that you're talking about. The limitations on us, and, and our relate - how we engage with each other on our environment and the natural world. And all of those things, it's been very interesting to see how we've responded to it.

Nick Miller 23:57

I think also, I am, as an artist, I'm kind of privileged in many ways, but have practiced this, I am able to be with myself, most of the time, not all the time. But most of the time when I'm not jumping in cold, freezing cold water to short circuit my brain. So I feel privileged and also have space, I have family, and we're not killing each other. And, you know, there's, there's, there's a big world out there, which has a far more horrific context. And yeah.

Donal Maguire 24:35

And if I could ask one final question. It's obviously a very difficult and traumatic time for many people. But where do you, Nick Miller, see where we might find hope for the future, or what are you looking forward to yourself carrying through from this difficult period or are seeing come from this period and, either locally or globally?

Nick Miller 25:00

I hope we find a way to politically move forward responsibly. We need society and we need to look after each other in a societal way that the solution isn't the kind of money that God of money is just insane in the context of a pandemic. It's done nothing but expose how weak that system is. So I hope there's space for a new politic to grow, a new political class, maybe younger people, I don't know.

Donal Maguire 25:47

This conversation with artist Nick Miller from his studio in County Sligo was recorded on the 8th of May 2020 through a video call with Donald Maguire, curator of the ESB Centre for the Study of Irish Art.