

Art in Focus: Whitethorn Turning by Nick Miller

Whether it's a cluster of blossoms, a person or a landscape, Miller's intense approach remains consistent.



Aidan Dunne



Whitethorn Turning by Nick Miller for the series, Rootless at the Oliver Sears Gallery, Dublin

What is it?

Whitethorn turning from Nick Miller's *Rootless* series of oil paintings.

How was it done?

Miller's *Rootless* paintings can be seen as related to the so-called *vanitas* still-lives that became popular in the Dutch Golden Age. In a *vanitas* still-life, an abundance of fruit and flowers, together with fine artefacts, serve as a reminder of transience and mortality. Often a clue, such as a guttering candle, might be included. For his part, Miller takes a branch or stems from outside and places them in his studio. From the moment the living plant is uprooted it is dying, and the artist is working against the clock. He gives himself a single day in each case, imparting as directly and fully as he can his encounter with the wilting plant. The images are vivid, urgent and instinctive, rather than being made to a pictorial formula, as with a conventional still-life. The setting is appropriately informal and the workaday trappings of the studio remain undisguised.

Where can I see it?

Miller's exhibition *Rootless* can be seen at the Oliver Sears Gallery, Molesworth Street, Dublin, October 25th–November 29th. Besides the recent *Rootless* paintings, the show also includes earlier examples, extending back to 2013, when he first embarked on this way of working following a four-year collaborative residency at North West Hospice in Sligo. In the meantime, the loss of both of his parents enhanced his commitment to the process, especially when one sequence of paintings became a line of connection to his mother when she became terminally ill.

Is it a typical work by the artist?

The common denominator in Miller's paintings and drawings, which extend across the genres of landscape, portraiture and the figure (and he has produced exceptional bodies of work in all three categories), is his pursuit of a lived encounter with the subject. He cites a quote elucidating philosopher Martin Buber's dialogical view of existence from *I and Thou*: "We live our lives inscrutably included within the streaming mutual life of the universe." It's the mutuality involved in the ephemeral process of making a drawing or a painting that engages Miller. The drawing or painting is what remains of the encounter rather than an end in itself, and the materiality of paint or charcoal is important in that regard.

Born in London, he studied development studies rather than fine art, and moved to Ireland in 1984. Settled in Dublin, he seemed to be comfortably finding his artistic voice in this urban setting, so that his move to rural Co Sligo in 1992 (he remains in Sligo, if in a less remote location) was not an obvious development. But it did bring him face to face with the landscape, and he gradually began to engage with it, to the extent of devising an extreme form of all-season *plein air* painting from the vantage point of an open-backed mobile studio – a truck provided by a helpful sponsor. Then as now, his way of working is close-up and personal.

Rootless, Oliver Sears Gallery,
Molesworth Street, Dublin, October 25th – November 29th (oliversears.com)