

A red plastic chair is positioned in the center of the frame. To its left is a wooden easel with two blank white sheets of paper attached. A grey jacket hangs from the easel's frame. In the bottom left corner, there is a white plate with paint and a glass. The background features a wall with patterned fabrics, including a green and blue tie-dye cloth. The floor is dark wood.

sitting

a portrait project

nick miller

Residency: July 12<sup>th</sup> – July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014  
Exhibition: July 1<sup>st</sup> – Sept 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014

Curator of Sitting: Muireann Ní Chonaill, Arts Officer  
Assisted by: Caitríona Maher  
Catalogue Editor: Muireann Ní Chonaill  
Design and production: Caitríona Maher (catmaherdesign@gmail.com)  
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# 1. CATHAOIRLEACH STATEMENT

**John Joe Fennelly,**  
*Chairman, Laois County Council*

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The Laois Arthouse is a very important beacon to artists and has hosted exciting programs and events since it opened in 2011. It is a welcome workspace for artists, local, national and international. It is also an important point of contact for the general public to engage with artists in workshops, exhibitions and through residencies.

This catalogue for the *Sitting* residency is a meaningful record of the time artist Nick Miller spent in the Laois Arthouse in July 2014. Over the course of the residency 36 people had their portrait painted in watercolour. Laois-born artist Cathy Carmen and writer Pat Boran had their portrait painted in oil and these have become a welcome addition to the Laois Art Collection. Many people visited the Laois Arthouse to see the portraits as they were exhibited over a number of months.

We are very grateful to all who have contributed to making the *Sitting* residency such a meaningful encounter between the artist Nick Miller and the public. I wish Muireann Ní Chonaill and the Arts Office continued success in developing the Laois Arthouse for many years to come.



Pictured at Laois Arthouse Stradbally for the launch of *Sitting* – A Portrait Project by Nick Miller were Muireann Ni Chonaill, Arts Officer, Laois County Council, John Joe Fennelly Cathaoirleach Laois Co Council, Artist Nick Miller and Caitríona Maher, Graphic Designer. - The Nationalist, 15<sup>th</sup> July 2014



# 2. FORWARD

## Muireann Ní Chonail

Arts Officer & Curator of Sitting

A 79 year old man who lives around the corner from the Laois Arthouse had his portrait painted by Nick Miller as part of the *Sitting* residency. Upon seeing his portrait, he declared, “no one ever did that for me before”. That to me is the satisfaction of facilitating public engagement.

Once the preserve of the rich and famous, the opportunity to have one’s portrait done was afforded to all through the *Sitting* project at the Laois Arthouse. This was an important chance for the public to encounter one of Ireland’s foremost contemporary painters. To be in an artists’ studio is a rare experience, usually only witnessed by those directly involved in the arts. This residency gave a glimpse into the working life of the artist, offering the opportunity to experience the process and see the results of the encounter one hour later. The sitters’ became the exhibits. The engagement was meaningful and appreciated by the sitters.

The Laois Arthouse opened in 2011 and offers support to artists through a variety of means. Situated in the converted Courthouse in Stradbally, it contains a small gallery, living accommodation, working studios, a kiln, Mac Pro equipment, a rehearsal space and the public library. Since opening it has supported a wide range of residencies and supported artists, emerging and established, working across art form disciplines and who practice in both contemporary and more traditional forms.<sup>1</sup> The Laois Arthouse is a place of work for artists. It is also a place where the public and the artist can meet. The establishment of the Laois Arthouse opened a door for me as a

Curator and has afforded me the opportunity to be the collaborator on a number of diverse residencies.

I have admired Nick Millers work for a long time. His landscapes were my introduction to his practice. He also paints portraits. His portraits, striking in their honesty and certainly not designed to appeal to the vanity of the sitter are characteristically adventurous and again take a different approach to the norm. When I invited Nick Miller to come to the Laois Arthouse for a residency we decided on portraiture, offering a one hour encounter between Miller and the sitters to be captured in watercolour. Over a number of months we planned the residency. The invitation was put out to the public to apply for a sitting through local media and social media. The sitters were easy to find. The slots were given out on a first-come-first-served basis and there was no trouble filling the places. Students of art, curious local people and art admirers from further afield became the subjects. As well as the watercolour portraits I invited Sculptor Cathy Carmen and Writer Pat Boran to sit for Nick Miller for a day, have their portrait painted in oil, enriching the Laois County Art Collection by adding them as a lasting legacy to Miller’s residency and a tribute to these important Laois-born figures in Irish culture. They graciously accepted the invitation to sit.

In the weeks running up to the residency we readied the Laois Arthouse. We had a riser made for the impending sitters as well as a mobile screen for display as the portraits

were realised. We had large banners heralding the residency on the outside off the building, enticing people to come and see what was happening. Fliers publicising the residency and exhibition of the portraits were widely circulated. Curiosity about the residency was palpable with local and national media engaging with it.<sup>2</sup>

The Laois Arthouse became a receiving house for a number of Miller’s portraits from the National Collection, IMMA, and a welcome opportunity to engage meaningfully with the national institution. Five of Miller’s large portraiture works were displayed in the Gallery and elsewhere on the ground floor, offering an interesting insight into Miller’s practice. Arriving, a number of weeks before the residency the portraits set the scene for things to come becoming the backdrop for the impending residency.

On his arrival at the Laois Arthouse it was interesting to observe the choices Miller made. His decision on placing himself in the Laois Arthouse, easing himself into the fluidity of living-to-working-to-displaying on the ground floor. In the same way his modus operandi is equally fluid and measured. He dresses for work in a customised apron and surgical gloves. His tools of the trade, paints, brushes and viewing mirror are laid out meticulously. His manner is sunny, chatting to the sitters and making them feel at ease and his work ethic is admirable. He makes decisions decisively and is clearly the master.

I invited Film Maker/Documentarian, Lisa

Fingleton, to document the residency. She chronicled a number of days, placing herself unobtrusively in a corner of the Studio with her camera and captured the essence of the *Sitting* residency. She also documented the arrival of the Miller works from IMMA through to the final day when all the works were displayed and Christina Kennedy, Head of National Collections; IMMA interviewed Nick about the residency. On that day the *Sitting* portraits were displayed and some of the Lisa Fingleton documentation was screened. The final day had a celebratory feel with families and friends of the sitters gathering to admire the portraits.

During the *Sitting* residency Journalist Ann Marie Hourihane from the Irish Times visited for a day and sat in on a number of the sittings as well as having her own portrait done. She commented in her article about the residency; “After you have had your portrait done, you feel a bit peculiar. Looking at a painting of yourself as opposed to a photo is strange. But it’s special in some indefinable way, as quite a lot of people in Laois and surrounding counties now know.”<sup>3</sup> In today’s “Selfie” culture, it is interesting to think about what attracts us to have our portrait done? Is it to see ourselves as another? Or is it to see how another sees us? Clearly it was something that resonated with the public.

The opportunity to sit for a portrait or simply to view the work created, brought many new people to the Laois Arthouse. We were fortunate to host Nick Miller for the *Sitting*

residency. It was a project which engaged with many people: the majority encountering the artists’ studio for the first time. It offered an insight into the work of one of Ireland’s foremost artists.

*At the time of going to print with the catalogue, Nick Miller was revealed as the winner of the 2014 National Gallery of Ireland’s prestigious Hennessy Portrait Prize. Chosen from a shortlist of 12, he received €15,000 plus a commission worth €5,000 to produce a portrait for inclusion in the National Portrait Collection. The 12 finalists were shortlisted from about 400 entries. We congratulate Nick Miller on this great achievement.*

1. Sustain, Nurture, Grow, Laois Arts Plan 2014-2017, Copyright laois County Council, 2014
2. Miller, N. (2014) Arena [Interview] Interviewed by Sean Rocks [Radio], Radio 1, 30th June 2014
3. Hourihane, A. (2014) Speed Painting: One hour to capture a person’s essence, The Irish Times, 7th Aug

## 2. RÉAMHRA

### Muireann Ní Chonail

#### Oifigeach Ealaíon & Coiméadaí do Sitting

‘Ní dhearna duine ar bith a leithéid dom riamh.’ Sin é adúirt seanfhear, naoi mbliana is seachtó d’aois, atá ina chónaí timpeall an chúinne ó Áras Ealaíne Laoise (Laois Arthouse), tar éis do Nick Miller a phortráid a phéinteáil mar chuid den tionscnamh conáitheachta *Sitting*. Údar sásaimh domsa é sin maidir le caidreamh a chothú leis an bpobal. Tráth dá raibh ba acu siúd a bhí saibhir nó cáiliúil amháin a bhí an deis a bportráid a choimisiúnú, ach an uair seo bhí an deis chéanna ag cách ag an Áras Ealaíne. Deis thábhachtach a bhí anseo don phobal bualadh le duine de na péintéirí is cumasaí in Éirinn. Is annamh a thaithíonn gnáthdhaoine, nach a bhfuil baint ar leith acu le cúrsaí ealaíne, stiúideo ealaíontóra. Thug an tionscnamh seo spléachadh don phobal ar phróiseas oibre an phéintéara agus ar thoradh na hoibre sin uair an chloig níos déanaí. Ba iad na suiteoirí an taispeántas féin ina dhiaidh sin. Bhí brí ar leith leis an gcaidreamh a bhí acu leis an ealaíontóir agus bhaineadar sásamh as dá réir.

D’oscail Áras Ealaíne Laoise i 2011 agus tá tacaíocht a sholáthar aige ó shin d’ealaíontóirí ar bhealaí éagsúla. Lonnaithe sa Teach Cúirte athchóirithe sa Sráidbhaile, tá gailearaí beag ann, lóistín, stiúideonna, áith, trealamh Mac Pro, spás do réamhchleachtadh agus leabharlann phoiblí. Ó d’oscail sé tá tacaíocht tugtha aige do réimse leathan tionsnamh cónaitheachta, d’ealaíontóirí aonair, idir thosaitheoirí agus sheanfondúirí, a oibríonn i ndisciplíní éagsúla ealaíne, idir chomhaimseartha agus thraidisiúnta.<sup>1</sup> Ionad oibre d’ealaíontóirí is ea Áras Ealaíne Laoise. Áit í freisin ar féidir leis an bpobal agus leis an ealaíontóir castáil le chéile. D’oscail Áras Ealaíne Laoise doras dom féin mar Choimeádaí-Léiritheoir agus thug deis dom comhoibriú ar thionscnaimh

éagsúla cónaitheachta. Tá meas agam ar shaothar Nick Miller le fada. Bá dá thórdhreachanna ba thúisce a thug mé suntas. Péinteálann sé portráidí freisin. Tá na portráidí seo an-ionraic, níl rian den phlámás ag roinnt leo, is dual dóibh a bheith dúshlánach agus tá an cur chuige aige as an ngnách. Nuair a thug mé cuireadh do Nick Miller teacht chuig Áras Ealaíne Laoise do thréimhse chónaitheachta roghnaíomar an phortráid mar sheánra, agus thairgíomar uair an chloig do gach suiteoir le go n-athchruthódh Miller iad in uiscedhath. Phleanálar an tionscnamh thar thréimhse cúpla mí. Tugadh cuireadh oscailte don phobal cur isteach ar ‘shuíomh’ trí na meáin áitiúla agus na meáin shóisialta. Bhí sé éasca suiteoirí a aimsiú. Dáileadh na ‘suíomhanna’ orthu siúd ba thúisce a chuir isteach orthu agus ní raibh fadh ar bith againn na háiteanna a líonadh. Mic léinn le healaín, daoine áitiúla a bhí fiosrach, agus lucht ealaíne as baile isteach. Ba iad sin na suiteoirí. Chomh maith leis na portráidí uiscedhatha seo thug mé cuireadh do Cathy Carman agus Pat Boran suí do Nick Miller ar feadh lae le go bpéinteálfadh sé portráid díobh beirt in olaphéint. Comaoin ar leith ar bhailiúchán Chomhairle Chontae Laoise í na portráidí seo a bheith againn de bheirt ealaíontóirí suntasacha ón gcontae mar chuimhneachán ar thionsnamh cónaitheachta Miller. Ghlac siad beirt go fonnmhar leis an gcuireadh.

Sna seachtainí roimh thús an tionscnaimh chóiríomar Áras Ealaíne Laoise. Cruthaíodh ardán do na suiteoirí mar aon le scáthlan gluaiste ar a gcrochfaí na portráidí de réir mar a cuireadh ar fáil iad. Chrochamar meirgí móra taobh amugh den fhoirgneamh le daoine a mhealladh isteach go bhfeicfidís a raibh ar siúl. Scaipeadh bileoiginí faoin

tionscnamh agus faoin taispeántas go forleathan. Ba ríléir an fhiosracht choiteann i dtaobh an tionscnaimh ón spéis a léirigh na meáin áitiúla agus na meáin náisiúnta ann.<sup>2</sup>

D’fháiltigh Áras Ealaíne Laoise freisin roimh roinnt de phortráidí Miller ó Bhailiúchán Náisiúnta Áras Nua-Ealaíne na hÉireann (IMMA) agus ba bhreá an rud é an caidreamh suntasach seo a bheith againn le hinstitiúid náisiúnta. Taispeánadh cúig cinn de phortráidí móra Miller sa Ghailearaí agus in áiteanna eile ar an mbunurlár, rud a thug léargas speisiúil don phobal ar a chleachtas. Shroich na saothair seo an tÁras cúpla seachtain roimh an ealaíontóir agus d’fheidhmigh siad dá réir sin mar réamhullmhúchán agus mar chúlbhrat don tionscnamh cónaitheachta féin.

Nuair a bhain Miller an tÁras amach bhí sé spéisiúil na roghanna a rinne sé a fheiceáil. Roghnaigh sé cur faoi san Áras féin, rud a d’fhág go bhféadfadh sé dul ón leaba go dtí an láthair oibre go dtí an t-ionad taispeána ar an mbunurlár gan mhoill.

Tá an modus operandi aige chomh líofa tomhaiste céanna. Gléasann sé don obair i naprún atá deartha don chúram agus lámhainní máinliachta. Leagann sé amach trealamh a cheirde go cúramach: péinteanna, scuabanna, scáthán féachana. Bíonn sé gealgháireach lena chuid suiteoirí, á gcur ar a suaimhneas gan stró, agus tá a eitic oibre le moladh go mór. Déanann sé cinní gan stró agus is léir i gcónaí gurb é atá i gceannas. Thug mé cureadh do Lisa Fingleton an tionsnnamh a thaifeadadh.

Rinne si cúpla lá a thaifeadadh, á lonnú féin go ciúin i gcúinne den Stiúideo lena ceamara le go mbéarfadh sí ar bhunmhianach an tionscnaimh. Rinne sí taifeadadh freisin ar mhórshaothair Miller

ó IMMA, ón lá ar shroich siad abn tÁras go dtí an lá deireanach nuair a bhí na saothair ar fad ar taspeáint agus nuair a chuir Christina Kennedy ó IMMA agallamh ar Nick faoin tionscnamh. Ar an lá sin cuireadh portráidí an tionscnaimh féin, *Sitting*, ar taispeáint agus taispeánadh cuid den ábhar a bhí taifeadta ag Lisa Fingleton freisin. Atmaisféar ceiliúrtha a bhí ann ar an lá deireanach seo nuair a chruinnigh gaolta agus cairde na suiteoirí le chéile le taitneamh a bhaint as na portráidí.

Le linn an tionscnaimh thug an t-iriseoir ón Irish Times Ann Marie Hourihane

cuairt lae ar an Áras, bhí sí i láthair ag roinnt de na suíomhanna agus peinteáladh a portráid féin. Bhí an méid seo le rá aici faoin tionscnamh 'Nuair a chríochnaítear do phortráid mothaíonn tú cineál ait. Tá sé aisteach féachaint ar íomhá díot féin i bpéint, seachas i bhfoirm grianghraif. Ach tá sé speisialta ar bhealach is deacair a mhíniú, mar is eol do roinnt mhaith daoine anois ó Chontae Laoise agus ó na ceantair máguaird'.<sup>3</sup> I gcultúr an ‘Selfie’ tá sé spéisiúil cuimhneamh ar an gcúis go mba mhaith le cuid againn go bpéinteálfaí ár bportráid. Le go bhfeicfimis muid féin mar dhuine eile? Nó le go bhfeicfimis cé mar a fheiceann daoine eile muid? Is léir, ar chaoi ar bith, go mba tionscnamh é seo a mheall an pobal.

Mheall an deis seo suí do phortráid mórán daoine nua chuig Áras Ealaíne Laoise. Bhí an t-ádh orainn Nich Miller a bheith againn don tionscnamh. Ba thionscnamh é a d’imigh i ngleic le mórán daoine, a fuair deis den chéad uair spléachadh a fháil ar stiúideo ealaíontóra. Thug sé léargas dóibh ar shaothar duine de na healaíontóirí is fearr in Éirinn.

- Sustain, Nurture, Grow, Laois Arts Plan 2014-2017, Copyright laois County Council, 2014
- Miller, N. (2014) Arena [Interview] Interviewed by Sean Rocks [Radio], Radio 1, 30th June 2014
- Hourihane, A. (2014) Speed Painting: One hour to capture a person’s essence, The Irish Times, 7th Aug

# 3. NATIONAL COLLECTIONS IMMA

Johanna Mullan  
National Programmer, IMMA

Portraiture as an art form was formerly reserved for society’s elite- monarchs and aristocrats, military personnel and genteel socialites. It served practically to document and record history and its key actors. Contemporary portraiture has been democratised and reformatted to the point that everyone has the capacity to record and share self-images.

This context of re-imagining the creative contemporary portraiture process and how the public can actively engage within it forms the backdrop to the collaboration between Laois Arthouse and Nick Miller’s residency.

The Laois Arthouse opened in 2011 and is situated in the converted Courthouse in Stradbally. Containing a small gallery, living accommodation and working studios, this space became the setting for the sittings. Members of the public were invited to become subjects for Nick Miller. They would come to the Laois Arthouse and sit for the artist. Nick Miller has worked in the Dublin and Sligo area since coming from England to Ireland in 1984. His work is figurative and is concerned with memory and subjective experience. Interviewed by journalist Ann Marie Hourihane for the Irish Times during his residency, he explained his practice in terms of his experimentation with the process. “His primary interest is not in perfection but in the encounter.”

Muireann gives some further insight into the encounters with the local community as they come to sit and have their portraits painted in watercolour. “A 79 year old man, living

around the corner from the Laois Arthouse on having his portrait painted as part of the *Sitting* residency said, “no one ever did that for me before”. This re-imagining of the process of sitting for a portrait, a local man becoming the subject of a formerly elitist encounter is an important outcome of the artist’s practice for members of the local community.

A further element to this collaborative process involved IMMA’s National Programme. The National Programme is designed to promote the widest possible involvement with the Museum’s Collection and programmes, through creating access opportunities to the visual arts in a variety of situations and locations in Ireland. IMMA’s Collection is the focal point for each project. In this instance, the Laois Arthouse became a focal point for Miller’s portraits from the National Collection. Five of Miller’s large portraiture works were displayed in the Laois Arthouse Gallery, allowing for the public to engage directly with his work as well as with his practice.



Nick Miller & Christine Kennedy

# 4. INSTALLATION

The selected Nick Miller works from the IMMA Collection arrived on 27th June. There are nine Nick Miller works in the IMMA collection. The works exhibited in the Laois Arthouse were deliberately chosen to reflect the theme of the residency entitled *Sitting*. Johanne Mullan the National Programmer from IMMA worked closely with Muireann Ní Chonaill in the planning of the residency and visited the Laois Arthouse in advance. Johanne Mullan accompanied by IMMA technicians, David Trunk and Joe Stanley oversaw the installation of the works.

The Miller works on display included Corban (1996); Nature with History, (1997); Noreen with Polaroid (1994 – 1995; Patrick Hall (1994) and Reflection with Painting (1994).





# 5. THE ARTIST

## Nick Miller *The Artist*

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Periodically I have an urge to put myself in pressured situations that I have to paint my way out of. *Sitting* was one of those. In Stradbally's Laios Arthouse, I wanted to see how I would respond to multiple sittings; having to meet and paint 5 or 6 strangers in a day, one after the other, and to do that each day for a week. I was curious if I could physically and mentally sustain concentration, engagement and attention. In some ways, it was an endurance test, but also a good humoured meeting with others. It continues a long time interest in approaching portraiture through direct encounter.

To those who volunteered to sit, I prefaced the meeting with the caution that there were no guarantees of a likeness or even a good painting, it was just an unusual meeting, an hour given to sitting and to painting. These were not commissions, removing the economic dynamic, by offering sitters a low cost, but high quality editioned print of the work, as a memento of the experience.

Each person responds differently to being painted. There is an uncommon intimacy to looking and being looked at that can loosen our usual reserve. Each sitting has a different tone, ranging from hysterical laughter, through deep conversation to resonant silence. My task is to respond to whoever has shown up and to open up to the possibilities of painting. Usually in the course of an hour, without naming it, both become aware of moments of energetic flow. Something changes in the air, and however briefly, a connection is made. In the context of

this project, that simple but elusive approach is a practice; repeatedly setting the conditions to see could that moment arise. The 'portrait' is the remains of that brief engagement, for better or worse. The truer I am to the process, the better I feel about the work.

This public aspect of the residency, was interspersed with two small portrait commissions for Laois Co Council who funded the project. I tried to keep the same openness in the process, but giving a full day each to my meetings with the artist Cathy Carmen and poet, Pat Boran, both natives of the county. Unlike the public sessions, I have known Cathy and Pat since the 1980's, admired them and their work as artists. I was honoured to have the opportunity to paint them. There is more pressure for a commissioned work to 'succeed', but the challenge remains the same, to use that energy, and stay in the present, as far as possible paint in tune with the dynamic of the particular sitting.





# 6. CLAIRE O’ BRIEN

**Claire O’Brien**  
*Writer, broadcaster & freelance journalist*

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It is something to be met, to be really met in a moment by another, especially when that other person is a portrait artist.

Nick Miller strenuously denies that he is magically capturing any ‘essence’ of his subjects on paper or canvas, and that may be true to a point. When he stands in front of you, he is not, as the woman in Plath’s Mirror is, searching your reaches for what you really are. He doesn’t have the invasive, piercing gaze of the interrogator.

But, as I discovered in a fleeting hour on a sunny Sunday morning in Stradbally, portraiture is an intimate exchange, a two-way act of faith. Let me be me and let you be you and let us see what comes from that.

Nick, perhaps, might say I’m over-thinking, that there’s little depth in a quick sketch and that he hopes for, but doesn’t expect any brief communion between him, the brush and the sitter that might make the painting – as product and process – something more than the sum of its parts.

For once I don’t bring my mic and recorder to get some actuality for Encore, the Midlands 103 arts programme I present. It’s 2014. I’m no girl with a pearl earring, and I’m not presidential. It’s unlikely I will ever have my portrait painted again. I don’t want to alter the experience by pushing it through any artificial filter.

In the beginning Nick is warm and friendly. He says he doesn’t mind conversation while he paints though he confesses he won’t remember anything we discuss. Our chat is wide-ranging and open but I’m his first sitter.

It’s the start of a mammoth undertaking. He’s in a new environment and he becomes agitated. Eventually, bluntly, he insists we stop talking.

In normal circumstances that might be awkward but in this odd, contrived setting that is full of our expectations, it feels like the next logical, natural step.

Nick is a busy artist. He checks the mirror behind him constantly to confirm that he’s seeing what he thinks he’s seeing. He’s light-footed, lunging forward, then stepping back to observe. He moves with the sudden and swift actions of a fencer, then pauses, right hand forward with one active brush like a foil, left hand back with an increasing number of brushes fanned out like a peacock tail. It takes twelve brushes to recreate me.

In everyday life I am, or at least have become, a mostly busy person, both physically and mentally. Quiet times are filled with thought and ideas, not meditation.

But what develops after the chat, after the curious, slightly self-conscious ‘you’re looking at me looking at you looking at me’ experience, is extraordinary peacefulness. Then there is a moment. I feel it and it takes on meditative intensity when I realise that Nick has moved into his element and I’m not really there for him. That, for me, is the big reveal.

In that brief, rare way that sometimes happens with strangers, I have been met. And that, more than a precious sketch by the nation’s foremost portrait artist, is the gift of *Sitting*.



# 7. PAT BORAN

## Pat Boran *Poet & Broadcaster*

*Sitting*, inactive, is usually connected to waiting. Waiting to go, to do, to be taken or be done onto. It is, in that sense, a making vulnerable of the individual, a surrendering, a letting go. The sitting one does in the doctor's surgery, for instance, slowly peels away the layers and masks of identity to reveal something we find it hard to look at, hard to recognise as ourselves. The sitting we do as commuters on the morning bus or evening train surrounds us with images and reflections of ourselves, not just in the ghostly forms travelling parallel in the window glass, but in the almost perfectly matching postures of our fellow commuters facing us in the opposite seats, the same songs leaking from their iPods, the same obscure words resisting ink in the daily crossword on their knees.

Being a writer I suppose I sit a lot, more than those in many other professions, but, perhaps, less than those who are engaged in longer forms than the typical lyric burst to which I am prone. If I must spend the bones of a working day seated, then I do my best to break away, to rise up in revolt when I can, straying around the room at any chance, marching and stomping up the stairs or out through the garden or local lanes, to test, in movement, the sound of whatever latest word-machine the muse has sent my way. The real work may be done in a seated position, but it is hard to get past that idea that the sitting part of the day is merely the preparation for something else (for anything else) yet to come.

Nick Miller is an artist whose raw, visceral

portraits I've long admired, and has been a friend for at least twenty years (through we sometimes go years without more than glimpsing each other on the run). The prospect of sitting for him, then, allowed me to pretend that the gods had in fact organised this encounter as a way to renew our friendship. Maybe, so armed, I could afford to forget about the longer-term implications of being the sitter for a painter whose motivation (whatever else it is) is hardly to flatter. Then again, as someone who has often been surprised by the reaction (sometimes excitement, sometimes disappointment) of people who have featured in some way in my own work, I know too that the end result is, oddly, a thing in itself, no matter how directed the process of its making may have been. Things happen along the way, and the resulting poem (or in this case painting) may bear little resemblance to our view of it from the starting block. In that sense, if only in that sense, the sitting down before the artist's eye is also a kind of a surrender, a letting go.

Of the process itself, of the various observers present the subject is perhaps the least well informed, facing the back of the canvas most of the time, watching the strange ballet of the painter, the small steps back from and back to the invisible image, the tilts of the head, the squints of the eyes, the fascinating occasional retreats to a small mirror on a tripod to his rear, offering the painter a fresh, reversed view of his relationships, a second non-verbal opinion, a third eye.

Friends (many of them dead), family (likewise), loved ones and pastimes (Nick is, like my wife, a relatively recent convert to the obsession that is tennis), the free-flowing conversation is little different to that which attends the occasional meeting of any old friends, and is all the more welcome for that. But the subject of art, and Art (with a capital A), its ambitions and motivations, are seldom far off and have a need to test themselves out loud. We are, after all, two individuals whose working day is usually spent alone and who, at some level, hope we might learn something from this sporting encounter.

Is the process serious? Apparently. Is it made up of equally serious parts and moments? Hardly. Just as a joke shared in the doctor's waiting room seems to have an extra charge about it, so too do the chance exchanges and diversions during a process such as this. Throughout is the sense that an image is forming, being formed by the painter, that a struggle (or perhaps shadow play) is going on in which I am no more than a peripheral observer.

The mystery is great and captivating. I am fascinated by the stick (topped with a cork ball and a hood of leather, fixed with string) that Nick uses to give him a steady hand without touching the wet canvas, leaning in over it much like a snooker player on a rest set down on the baize. I imagine Nick and Barrie Cooke (who suggested the implement to him), walking around one day in Sligo until they spotted it, and find my mind drifting off to that idea of

art as, among other things, a craft shared; a lonely pursuit, certainly, but one which may sometimes be refreshed and reinvigorated by even brief encounters with like-minded others.

And, later that night, again and again I am drawn to that image of Nick Miller's face, reflected in the mirror he has set up behind him to allow him to see things afresh, for all the world like a sailor, embarked on some mysterious voyage, his face as he passes looking clear-eyed and trusting out through that single porthole into the room.





# 8. CATHY CARMAN

**Cathy Carman**  
*Sculptor & member of Aosdána*

To sit for a portrait is an act of madness but also an act of trust. Initially I felt very vulnerable and uneasy. All my insecurities started surfacing in my mind, and my thoughts were in overdrive. However I calmed down eventually, and was able to sit back and enjoy the process.

I have always liked the smell of paint and the soft noise of a paint brush scraping and sweeping the surface of the canvas, for some reason that makes me feel comfortable. I am the sitter but I am part of the creative process.

When I was sitting for Nick I was remembering something Brian Maguire said about drawing; that it must be an act of love. And I was also thinking that maybe sitting is also an act of love. It teaches me to accept myself and to like the space I am in and to trust the painter.

Myself and Nick chatted and joked and I felt we were temporarily bound together in this process. I kept an eye on the paint mixed in batches, the brush dipping in the muted colours and the drops and dribbles falling from the brush. But I could only guess what was forming on the other side of the canvas. That was the hard part. That I could not see what he was shaping on the canvas.

Doing a portrait takes time. And I suppose that the magic is that something magic might happen in that process. There is no technology involved. It's a process that has not changed much for many centuries. And it's a process that brings both the artist and the sitter very close together.



# 9. THE SITTERS

Aisling Brennan,  
Ann Marie Hourihane,  
Bernadette Dunphy,  
Caitriona Maher,  
Cathy Carmen,  
Ciaran Hyland,  
Claire O'Brien,  
Clionadh Martin,  
Colette Wrafter,  
Deirdre Glenfield,  
Dick Dillon,  
Doireann Duffy,  
Gemma Lalor,  
Gerry Maher,  
Jillian Kennedy,  
Julie Shead,  
Jeff Shead,  
Laura Amy Dunne,  
Laura Doherty,  
Margaret Bennett,  
Mary Slevin,  
Michael Callan,  
Michael Tracey,  
Padraig Robinson,  
Pat Boran,  
Ramona Burke,  
Sadhbh O'Niell,  
Sheelagh Coyle,  
Thomas Byrne,  
Yustina Maximova &  
Yvonne McKeon.





Fifty members of public canvas for portraits at the Laois Arthouse





## 10. VIEWING

On the 20 July 2014, the final day of the residency, the public were invited to an open day at the Laois Arthouse. There was a palpable sense of excitement with family, friends and the curious gathering to view the portraits. A sizable audience convened in the Library. Christina Kennedy, Senior Curator; Head of Collections at IMMA, interviewed Nick Miller on the process that happened during the *Sitting* residency. A taster of the documentary by Lisa Fingleton was screened. The portraits painted during the *Sitting* project along with the works borrowed from the IMMA National Collection drew a steady stream of people to the Laois Arthouse until the conclusion of *Sitting* on 1 September 2014.





# 11. DOCUMENTATION

**Lisa Fingleton**  
*Artist &Filmmaker*

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When Muireann Ní Chonaill invited me to document the *Sitting* residency, I was really excited about the opportunity. I had never met Nick but was aware of the dynamic nature of his work. My only concern was regarding the intimacy of a portrait sitting and how my presence would inherently affect that process. Nick and I had two short conversations before filming, in which I assured him that I would try to be as unobtrusive as possible (not always easy in a small room with two cameras and a tripod). We simply agreed that I would create a portrait of him through film and photographs while he created portraits of the sitters. Photographer Rena Blake was also present for a day so we negotiated the space between us. As an artist I was also very interested in the durational and performative aspects of the project, as I had just been accepted into the Claremorris Open Exhibition for a four-day drawing project. I had never publicly engaged in that kind of project before and I felt I had a lot to learn from Nick. I was intrigued by how he defined his own constraints and boundaries. He explained to each sitter that the end result would be a record of the interaction, the moments shared rather than a conventional portrait. Every sitting was completed within the hour.

Initially I had imagined a quiet reflective atmosphere and expected the film to mirror this. I imagined silence or a very subtle soundtrack with ambient sound. I found out straight away that this would not be the case. Nick has a great sense of humour and there was always

a good banter between painter and sitter. It was a pleasure to witness how members of the public tentatively approached the room and within minutes, found themselves relaxed and chatting. It became immediately apparent that the conversations would need to form the narrative for the film. Nick and I also ended up talking on camera at the end of some of the sittings and I felt these observations would give additional insights into his process.

As with every filming process the real job is in the editing. How do you distil the experience of a week into a short film? I didn't film all the sitters but still had over seven hours of footage to draw from. For me the overall *Sitting* project was about engaging with the public in a simple exchange; you sit I paint. I wanted to film to be quite straightforward and to extract the key elements from the process. We screened the film at the Laois Arthouse for the sitters and their family and friends and it was wonderful to see their reaction. I think they also enjoyed having a context for their own experience and understanding their contribution to a wider artistic practice.

I thoroughly enjoyed the project even when sifting through hours of footage. Essentially it reminded me to trust in the artistic process; the magic of turning up at the page and letting the creativity happen.



# 12. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Translation: Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith

Pat Boran, Cathy Carmen and all the sitters

Invigilator: Thomas Byrne

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SITTERS:

Aisling Brennan, Ann Marie Hourihane, Bernadette Dunphy, Caitriona Maher, Cathy Carmen, Ciaran Hyland, Claire O'Brien, Clionadh Martin, Colette Wrafter, Deirdre Glenfield, Dick Dillon, Doireann Duffy, Gemma Lalor, Gerry Maher, Jillian Kennedy, Julie Shead, Jeff Shead, Laura Amy Dunne, Laura Doherty, Margaret Bennett, Mary Slevin, Michael Callan, Michael Tracey, Muireann Ní Chonaill, Padraig Robinson, Pat Boran, Ramona Burke, Sadhbh O'Niell, Sheelagh Coyle, Thomas Byrne, Yustina Maximova and Yvonne McKeon.



# **SITTING**

**A PORTRAIT PROJECT**