



Nick Miller, *Portrait of Salvatore of Lucan*, 2021, oil on linen, 46 x 41 cm, studio view, December 2021; photograph by Nick Miller; image courtesy of the artists.

# This Energetic Thing

NICK MILLER AND SALVATORE OF LUCAN DISCUSS THE ALCHEMY AND MELANCHOLY OF PAINTING.

**Salvatore of Lucan:** So, how do you feel about us being paired together, as younger and older artists?

**Nick Miller:** I'm happy. I'd seen your painting, *Me Ma Healing Me*, 2020, in the Zurich Portrait Prize before it opened, and it had an energy that interested me. I messaged you to say that if I was judging, I'd give you the money! That was our first contact. I like to jump cross-generationally, both ways. I mean, age doesn't matter, but I *am* older. As we hadn't met before, I thought the most real way to connect was by asking you to sit for a portrait in Sligo, then visiting your studio in Dublin for this conversation.

**SoL:** Did you enjoy painting me?

**NM:** Yeah, I really did! Because of lockdown, I haven't painted anyone new for a long time – it was curious and thrilling.

**SoL:** I only paint people I know and very rarely paint people I don't. Do you have a preference?

**NM:** As I get older, I worry less either way – if someone is willing to sit, anything is possible.

**SoL:** Do you think you get to know people when you paint them?

**NM:** Yes and no. I'm a bit like Homer Simpson – I'm not sure what I learn, or retain beyond a painting. In portraiture, I am chasing a sort of alchemical transformation, a holding of life and energy in the materiality of paint. This is something I also sense in your work, but it is maybe driven more by composition, emotional intensity and a humour that you seem to embed in the material.

**SoL:** Yeah. My mate Glen Fitzgerald, who is a painter, was talking about alchemists and how he thought they were recreating the flesh or objects from paint. And I thought, "Oh that's what I'm trying to do" and started



looking into it.

NM: To me, it's an alternative art history, understanding how artists transform the energetic thing they're trying to hold into inert material.

SoL: Do you think that's the hardest part of painting, or do you think that's a basic thing that painting needs?

NM: It is just *what it is*. Personally I don't know what art is without it; a way of approaching the world beyond yourself but also inside yourself at the same time.

SoL: When we were talking yesterday, I started thinking about the poem, *Having a coke with you*, by Frank O'Hara. There's a video of him reciting it on YouTube, I'll show you after. The question I want to ask is in the poem; there's something kind of sad about the artist trying to capture this energy. Do you ever think about the act of trying to capture something as a sad thing?

NM: Yes, we talked yesterday about melancholy in facing our awareness of a complicated and damaged world. A certain melancholy brings me to painting, but the activity itself can rescue me from sadness, towards joy. I've been reading a new book on the subject by philosopher, Brian Treanor, which felt like a homecoming.

SoL: You mentioned *Melancholic Joy*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021 – that's something I'm trying to get through as well, but also humour. If I could make a painting that could make someone laugh out loud, I would be so pleased. It's very hard to do with a still image. Do you have an impossible dream for your paintings that spurs you on?

NM: Well I guess alchemy *is* an impossible dream. I feel most alive when painting, and I hope I leave that in the work. I sometimes worry that I don't care if a painting ever sees the light of day. My father was like a hermit; he spent 40 years in a studio and barely showed any work, so I have that in my genetics. He was only interested in what happened on the

easel.

SoL: For me, that's the bit I don't enjoy as much. I really like coming up with ideas and composing pictures, but when it comes to the painting, I'm always terrified and sort of sulky, or stressed about how much work there is for me to do, to realise this idea that I've come up with.

NM: I really get that. I've had to learn to let painting do me, more than me do it. You spend a lot of time composing in preparation of painting. I find that very interesting. Why and how do you do that?

SoL: My earliest experiences of painting were by my uncle, who painted from the age of 17 to 25 but never pursued a career as an artist or exhibited – they were all essentially surrealist paintings on the walls in my house growing up. My family are not huge on talking about emotions, but when I looked at his paintings, I'd always be trying to read into them and get some kind of clue to an emotional state, or some meaning or insight as to what was happening in the family, or some sort of secret. So, when I come up with a composition, part of it is trying to give someone the feeling that something has happened before or is going to happen after or that there's a little secret. I like paintings that strike my imagination.

NM: Do you literally embed meaning and secrets in them?

SoL: I do yeah, a bit – the idea that someone could read something into it that isn't there. On one hand, I'm trying to illustrate it and on the other, I'm trying to conceal something in it.

NM: I don't often like illustration in painting, but I really admire the dangerous path you tread with narrative in your work.

SoL: I know when I'm bad, I'm *really* bad. Because of this, I feel I can miss by a long way.

NM: Missing is good; there are new ways forward with

everything, including painting. Wasn't this conversation supposed to be about our materials?

SoL: Ah yes, so is there a colour you can't paint without?

NM: Probably Old Holland's *Scheveningen Purple-Brown*, often mixed with Old Holland *Blue Deep* and *flesh ochres*. In portraiture, it is to do with the recesses of the face, like nostrils or ear holes – it helps make flesh that's alive but disappearing. And for you?

SoL: Similar in painting flesh. It's the *Quinacridone Gold-Brown* from Williamsburg. I use it for the bits that aren't shadow but don't hit the light and I mix it a lot with the *Payne's Grey-Violet* by Williamsburg too, which is a similar combination to the ones that you use, actually.

**Salvatore of Lucan's new solo show opens at Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, Dublin, on 31 March.**

@salvatoreoflucan

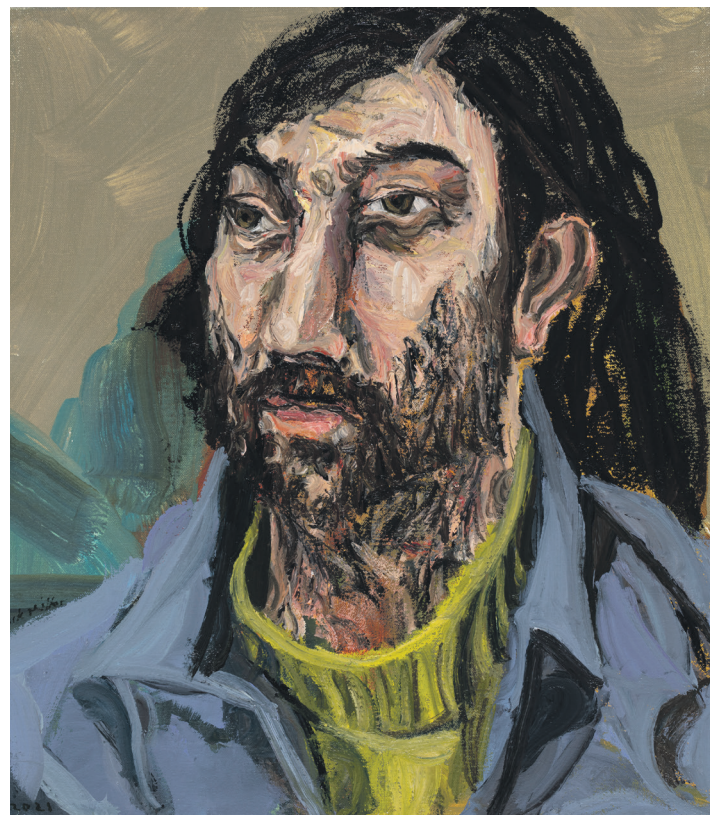
**Nick Miller's two-person show with Patrick Hall opens at Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin, on 9 June, followed by 'Still Nature' at Art Space Gallery, London, in September.**

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Salvatore of Lucan, *Me Ma Healing Me*, 2020, oil on canvas, winner of the Zurich Portrait Prize 2021; image courtesy of the artist and the National Gallery of Ireland.



Nick Miller, *Portrait of Salvatore of Lucan*, 2021, oil on linen, image courtesy of the artist.



Salvatore of Lucan, *Me being an arse*, 2021, installation view, Public Arts Space Juraplatz, Biel; photograph by Enrique Muñoz García, courtesy of the artist.