

## Garry Fabian Miller in conversation with Charlotte Verity

**Garry Fabian Miller:** *I have a strong memory of first seeing your paintings at Anne Berthoud's gallery in 1988. I knew that this was good work. Now, almost 30 years later, I'm fortunate to live with five of your paintings; they've become part of my life. What makes good work?*

**Charlotte Verity:** The best paintings come out of listening to my intuition – or feeling it, I should say. As I begin to think about a new painting, I have a sense of what I want the painting to be about. I've learnt that it's best not to visualise the painting at the outset, although I will have an idea of it in broad terms: dark or open, perhaps, bright or grey...

*Something you've seen in the world?*

That's right. Things move us, often unexpectedly, and I'm in a lucky position as an artist to be able to do something about it, and this becomes imperative. I try to find things that strike me as carrying a truth about our world. Having a keen sense of the seasons has helped. They're a perennial subject for painting and poetry, and lend themselves quite naturally to wider interpretation. If I want to say something about autumn, I go into the garden with an open mind and find things that will act as a funnel. I'm still learning about how an image carries more than it depicts.

Take the painting *Gathering Leaves*, which I'm proud to say has been hanging in your home since 2006, or a new painting, *Betula Weeping*. The masses of golden leaves put me in mind of the multiplicity of other things: stars or faces say, each shaped through time and by where they've grown and died. I think this is why I strive to make the space very deep in many paintings – to make it everlasting. I don't want to trap the viewer in a particular place. I think of the ideal spaces of Piero della Francesca, Claude, Turner, Morandi. Even Vermeer's rooms know a wider world.

*You reflect this notion of the world being a huge space in which we are a small part. Somehow you're trying to find a way to be part of it through the making of this complex painting of many parts. It's ambitious.*

Painting is capable of holding the greatest subjects we can think of.

*It's a remarkable thing, to go into the studio every day to try to make a picture with that level of expectation. Not many people are willing to struggle with that. But once you have made a body of work over decades, you know there can't be any other way than to keep going – it's your life. The paintings you make today draw on all the successes and failures you have had up until this point. I would hope that the best is yet to come because you're drawing on that commitment.*

I'm learning all the time so I hope so too – and there is a lot of the past to draw on. Seamus Heaney put it nicely: he said that past experience is like 'a culture at the bottom of a jar, although it doesn't grow [...] unless you find a way to reach it and touch it. But once you do, it's like putting your hand into a nest and finding something beginning to hatch out in your head.'<sup>3</sup>

*There must be points when, for various reasons, a picture isn't going where you want it to go. What might enable you to return, for it to work again?*

Take the painting *Border*. I worked on it very hard, it went on and on. I got deeper and deeper into it and became more and more panicky. I had to go away on an enforced break from the studio and was haunted by it. I knew that something radical had to happen. There was too much in it to abandon it. When I got back I took a thick wide brush and swept through with dark paint, cutting out some of the subject; that, I hope, worked.

*There is something about being in the studio; it's very hard to walk away.*

In fact, if it goes too easily I know it's not a good painting. It has to go through an often painful period of destruction. Making watercolours is a reminder. I work in black, grey and sepia as a way of drawing, and the spaces seem to work even if I don't get to the edges. I stop when time runs out, and I'm often surprised by what I have done. But if they begin to fail, in desperation I wash paint over the whole thing and somehow the drama of that – grabbing the rag and rescuing the bits I really want – helps me to understand what the heart of the painting is. It's easy to lose touch with that if you paint from observation.

*I have a painting of yours of a single white rose. It is as much about understanding the paint as it is about the rose. You have as complicated a relationship with that palette on that canvas as you have with the image of the rose itself.*

Well, that's very understanding of you. I put a white rose against a pale background; I wanted to explore that whiteness. I didn't know what would happen. I mean, what is white? How white is each piece? I had to ask myself whether this petal was cooler, warmer, darker or lighter than that petal.

*Being in the moment with the subject – that seems to be what you are committed to. When I think about your paintings the kind of words that occur to me are stillness, quiet, serenity, focus and attention.*

The poets I admire describe with real attention; it is from lucid observation that they say something worth making a poem about. The marvellous thing about painting is that the painter's touch alone can be an embodiment of thought, it travels through your fingertips into the brush. Precision makes me feel at one with the thing that I'm painting. I don't know if I aim for serenity but I suppose judging that the picture doesn't have anything that snags, trips you up or jars has something to do with it.

*And yet there now seem to be more of what I would call the abstracted areas. Specifically, in Spent Stems, which I would say is a fairly abstract picture, and Istalif, which has similar qualities. Spent Stems is probably the emptiest painting of yours I've seen recently. What's happening in it? What is that floating structure?*

I really enjoyed painting that. *The Day's Eyes*, which you own, came to an end but the spent stems remained. I gathered them into a loose clump. The pale gold against blue was striking and I wondered if I could make a painting out of that. It became more important as it went on to get the stems, which were sometimes barely visible, just as they were. The longer it took, the stranger it became. Paul Valéry describes exactly what it's like: 'To see is to forget the name of the thing one sees.'

*Your subjects mean a great deal to you in that they sustain you, in the life that you lead. I think that is one of the reasons I'm attracted to your painting, because you acknowledge that, and want it to be the subject of your pictures.*

I agree. I walk around stony grey streets and then approach our garden with the pear tree full of great drops of sweetness. At each stage of the year I have an impulse to say, 'Oh look! Can you see? This is something I'd like to show you – something you need to see.'

*A painting new to me is called Where They Fell. The title is obviously important.*

Yes, I like the way things fall naturally and go unnoticed.

*What about the actual painting of the picture. What's the process?*

At the point of realising there is something sustaining in the subject, I can choose whether to paint in that spot outside or to work in the studio. There are many practical decisions: Will the sun shine into my eyes? Have I enough room? Will I be overlooked? Like a domestic animal I know my patch, but these decisions are difficult and I don't have time for indecision.

*So, once the subject has presented itself, there are a whole series of questions about how you are going to paint it, how long for, how it becomes part of your life for the duration of the process. I imagine that's somewhat different to the studio paintings. Is one preferable?*

No. Well, I do tussle with that question actually. I sometimes think I make better paintings in the steady atmosphere of the studio. Painting outside is fantastic: you feel the rhythm of the street, see beautiful things in the changing light and witness growth and change. It's a privilege to watch the snowdrops respond to tiny changes in the temperature, the daisy petals shut up shop as the light levels lower, the fruit swell and drop. I stand so still that the birds take me for granted. It is often very uncomfortable, too hot or cold, but it's an important thing to do. There is an urgency and intensity about it.

*How long did it take to make Where They Fell, for example? The subject of the fallen pears is disappearing; does that mean your life goes on hold and you spend all of your time with the subject?*

I haven't got that luxury!

*So how does it work then?*

I feel sickened when I know my subject is mouldering and I am elsewhere. Some outside paintings are accumulations of what I see. I carry on until the subject changes so much that the memory of the first impetus has faded away. Paintings can take several seasons or be comparatively swift. In *Pear's Last Leaves* – which was an excuse, by the way, to use my tube of precious vermilion – the tree was dying and the red of its final leaves was extraordinarily intense and short-lived.

*A photograph would record it at that moment, but you are making a whole series of decisions because the image is alive and you are alive, you are building something together. That's really mysterious to people who aren't painters.*

I think it must be. It struck me recently, when seeing Monet's *Nymphéas* in Paris, that the paintings are not about a point in time or even a particular place. There are so many actual brush marks on those canvases – dab, dab, dab – and each is a moment; these paintings were built up over years. They are an accumulation of moments and have a wonderful sense of time being pulled into each canvas.

*How do you move between subjects that are in the garden and in the studio? As you said, some days the exterior subject is amenable and other days it's not.*

It's not straightforward. In rainy periods, or when the light fails in winter, I of course have a painting or drawing on the go indoors. I rarely paint away from the subject. Take spring – a season of powerful sensations, but so short. I've made paintings outside that have taken several years. *Sky-Blue Spring* is another attempt to say something about the sudden brightness of small things, which, in that spring in particular, seemed to have the poignancy of the newborn. I gathered flowers and budding twigs into the studio. By the time I was finishing, the scillas were long gone but still existed in the painting. I needed their particular blue to make the yellow work. Now we're talking about a painting being made – composing.

*I'm interested in what you say about the idea of spring. When I used to make pictures with plants, if I made a piece about photosynthesis, it would have to happen when the green of the tree was being activated in real time by the sunlight touching the leaf and creating the chlorophyll. That moment would last for days and then weeks and then it would be over. But you can start a painting in one spring and then it can rest and because you have all this knowledge you can carry it forward over four or five years, which is terribly exciting, isn't it? And a great challenge. A painting can be asleep and active. You can bring the repeating springs into a picture. Photography can't do that.*

It's the looking that is absorbing, looking very hard.

*It's a quiet thing. Not so many people want to give that kind of attention and that's part of our role as artists. I think of Winifred Nicholson; she embodied a number of ideas and values that I also associate with you. If you stand still, embedded, things will come to you. If you embrace home, raise a family, make a garden, seek simplicity and create a space where light can gather, something special will happen. Good paintings will be made.*

That's a very positive way of looking at some things that I might have perceived as restrictions, such as running a home, bringing up children – dealing with that side of life. When I started out there was a lot of feminist literature that interested me, but it was difficult to find anyone who'd combined motherhood and making worthwhile paintings with whom I could identify. I doubted whether it was possible and at times it overwhelmed me.

*And you wanted to bring up children...*

Oh definitely. It's a great thing to do. But I felt it was underestimated how tough it is. The day-to-day decisions about the colour of a petal, a shade of grey, the length of a line, that sort of thing, appear meaningless when you have children in the house growing and developing and needing attention. In my thirties and forties, the drive in painting was led by a lot of good male artists, and the emphasis was on being 'strong'. I had to redefine what that meant in my own mind in order to carry on.

*When you were a young painter, working in the way that you did was challenging because feminism was trying to make space for women, but the position taken was often radical and your subjects seemed undervalued. It was as if you should have given up one or the other.*

The real question was how to include this wonderful thing, motherhood – so much part of me – into the work. Painting the children was impractical and felt inappropriate, so I developed an oblique approach. This is difficult to express, but I tried to find a way of transposing tenderness towards a growing child through other things: a rose for example, a pear ripening on the tree or the lily of the valley – the way the leaf guards the strong little flower has something of the Madonna about it.

*When I was younger, the artist who I felt was really important was Gwen John. She has become more important as the years have gone by, yet is still such a quiet outsider figure.*

She had a sort of insistence. Alice Oswald said that the poet Sean Borodale 'catches the world in the split second before it settles into poetry'. It feels like Gwen John insisted on getting that moment into a work of art, that's what gives her paintings atmosphere and distinctiveness.

*Which other artists have been helpful in embodying this very specific vision of what an artist and what a painting can be?*

Oh there are so many, but to name a few: Constable, Chardin, Mondrian, Bellini, but the one that still puzzles me is Piero della Francesca. The subject matter appears so completely different to what I do,

but I feel that I've looked at him so hard and for so long that I'm hoping that some of his formal strength and quietude has come through.

*I think there is a longing for work that comes from a deeper place. Artists who have put in the time, who have really looked, are perhaps going to find their audience now. I hope so. Many women artists are now being given the attention that they should have had. So maybe that's a sign of an openness that wasn't there in the past.*

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<sup>i</sup> Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interview with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 58.