
Alex Miller’s career as a novelist is most distinctive for its generic gear-changes. To date, Miller has brushed with the Bush (*Watching the Climbers on the Mountain* [1988]), inhabited the English rural scene (*The Tivington Nott* [1989]) and experimented with cross-culturalism and narrative cross-cuttings in his award-winning *The Ancestor Game* (1992). Miller’s fourth novel, *The Sitters*, takes on the difficult task of rendering the painterly experience in print.

Novels about the plastic arts constitute a troubled sub-genre. Their authors frequently raid the image-bank for convenient symbols, a strategy critiqued most fully by Jeffrey Meyers’ *Painting and the Novel* (1975). Then there is the “life of the artist” story, the popular biographical blockbusters made famous by Irving Stone’s *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (on Michelangelo) or *Lust For Life* (Van Gogh) full of implausible high Romanticism; and the comically obsessive beauty-in-squalour of Joyce Cary’s *The Horse’s Mouth* (which alludes to the visionary Stanley Spencer). A third variety analogizes modes of representation, drawing complex parallels between painting and writing: in the Australian context one thinks of the modernist-baroque of White’s *Vivisector*, but the most successful instance must be Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, a novel configured around the painter Lily Briscoe’s aesthetics-of-the-everyday in a prose that can legitimately be termed “post-impressionist.”

*The Sitters* most resembles Woolf’s sparser parallelism, suggesting the problematics of imaging in both paint and print. This is not to say that painting is a wholly convenient metaphor for writing — though when Miller’s painter-narrator reflects that art is bedevilled by “looking for a fixed truth resident behind the reality we’ve brought into being ourselves,” and that this is the “fallacy of the Western intellectual tradition,” he is clearly thinking of Derrida rather than Robert Hughes. At the same time, Miller offers insights into the painstaking craft-process of painting, a process that a writer like Irving Stone would bury under volcanic psychodrama. A composed and low-key novel, *The Sitters* shows painting as an ordinary activity framed by the everyday operations of memory, desire, and momentary feelings of mutual human understanding.

Miller begins with a simple situation: after a casual meeting, an unnamed portraitist asks a woman, Jessica Keal, if she will sit for him. Initial reservations and uneasiness on both
sides give way, a working relationship is established between artist and subject, and from there The Sitters begins to examine questions of representation, of knowing the Other, and of knowing the Other to know the Self, through the bond between painter and model. Two private archives are unpacked as the model takes the painter back to her family farm, where he recalls his childhood in Britain, his failed marriage, and his indifferent relationship with his son. As in Miller's previous novels, the autobiographical element seems thinly veiled — the expatriate painter on the fringe of Canberra university culture strongly resembles Miller the Visiting Fellow at La Trobe. In that respect, The Sitters maintains The Ancestor Game's interests in the artful depersonalization of reflective concerns with time, distance, loss, legacy and identity. For the painter, the portrait of Jessica Keal is

an image in which I'm content, for once, to recognize myself. As I remember her, I remember myself and am able to approach the last enigma of my life — my family and my childhood.

The novel seems to involve modes of "knowing": the epistemological quest for an end-solution which will reorganize all the elements of the narrative in a final big picture.

What saves this project from the obvious dangers of self-absorption, banal teleology and (as so often in the painterly novel) predictable affirmation of the orderly Aesthetic over the chaotically Experiential is Miller's sustained denial of presence and of the possibility of conclusive realization. As the portraitist accumulates charcoal drawings, photographs and objects which represent Jessica, the sense of an end is deferred by his critical awareness that "Portraiture is the art of misrepresentation. It's the art of unlikeness. That's why it's so difficult. No one really knows how to do it."

Miller's unusually articulate painter-narrator is equally alert to the problem of language, the point at which paint and print disarticulate:

The image is more primitive, it's more archaic and more direct and more public than the word. The image belongs to everyone. You can't keep it private. It jumps at us from ten thousand years ago from rock shelters in Arnhem Land and caves in Europe and from billboards on the side of the highway... The word is more of a secret sign than the image... Words are not firmly attached to their meanings.

As many have commented, White's Vivisector can only resolve its interests in symbolism and visualization through language. The Sitters, like any novel, is likewise linguistically hide-bound; its problematics of representation are ultimately those of poststructuralism rather than of post-expressionist artistic practice. By any definition, Miller's appraisal of the plastic arts is conventional — space,
dimension, and performance are less interesting to him than the more traditional idea of the image as communal icon, fixed in time and meaning.

David Marr argues that the two chief sources for *The Vivisector's* main character, Hurtle Duffield, are John Passmore and Godfrey Miller — though one can readily identify Patrick White himself as the real player and aesthetic co-ordinate. Alex Miller is a shade more coy on the source-game, but ultimately *The Sitters* also reads as a novelist's novel, not a painter's dramatic monologue. Perhaps, given the problems of representation the text sets up, its slender inconclusiveness is only appropriate. Whilst *The Vivisector* word-paints in over-rich oils and *The Ancestor Game* spreads across a broad canvas, *The Sitters* reads like a rehearsal, a sketch for a larger engagement, at some time in the future, with the limits of language.