

*Poems of
Paintings*

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Inspired by John Miller



Introduction

Some things, as they say, stay with you. I first visited John Miller's *New Paintings* exhibition in 1997, long before his images became fashionable and available on posters or in the shop front window of Athena. Usually, when popularity arrives to something that I feel to have discovered, I move on. A surprise then, nine years later, when asked for a theme for poetry during my MA at NTU that I chose to go back to John Miller's paintings. His gentle persuasive capture of the Cornish landscape and seascape it seems had not left me - some things, as they say, stay with you.

Christopher Sanderson
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A picture paints a thousand words...a photograph sometimes too

Not a bead of sweat on the brow
Yet I expect
In fact I almost know for certain how
The photographer would have used
Very bright lights indeed

To capture the silver in your
Soft worn away whiskers
To capture the orange and the blue on
Your collar, your cardigan, your ear

You, you take up almost half the picture
The background, your picture, your partner
He covers the remainder, so clear

Memories remain my dear, did you say that
As we forget all our tomorrows
What then was the thought
When the mist burnt off

Before the sunset
The fear
To catch that feel
Before the last & final tear

I did not know you, I don't know
You now, but I see, I saw somehow
Your picture - very bright light indeed
I see, believe me now

John Miller 7; Evening Trawler

Where I sit the sun rises
Where you sail the sun falls

My eyes move between your sail and your sun
For in truth I hope our distance is never far
away

Here my land is white or golden
While I know mostly, your clay is blue or red

My thoughts drift into the darkened sea
For in death I fear doubt is never far away

Is it your anticipation for a good catch
Me, I snatch what words I am able

We share, it seems, an odd sort of silence
In this life truth, or supposition is never far
away

>>>

Anxiety, or worry, or doubt
Or magic roundabout

One day falls into another
One night drifts over the horizon
The red tomorrow may be golden
Fish may once again be landed on the dock

It is what I often do
Settle for repetition
More at ease to fight what I know
Than to discover entirely anew

Tremble just at the thought of it
Steady son, steady
Sure, it is a calm sea
Only the darkness to invade

>>>

Beyond the horizon
Mountains of clouds
Fires of sky

Before the main event
A sea of black and blue
Or at least a turn

A cabin with smiles
Above & below
Jovial laughter – just set out

Beneath the buffeted waves
Old boats lay buckled and broken
Bring on the lost tirade
The night again so soft be spoken

>>>

What lies then that lay over the headland
What mysteries may the bold rocks bestow
From your vantage point can you see their
faces
Are you aware, of their taste for destruction

I lay in the wild grasses, by the heather and the
shrub
I follow the sunset, while Eros runs her fingers
through my hair
I wonder, at the calm capture, of the essence
caught
Your brushstrokes – layered I guess before my
days began

>>>

Left to right: West to East
Setting sun, rising moon

Up and down that's the sea
Getting done a joy to stun

Grass - stone - sand - sea
Sail away - set me free

Right to leave: East to West
Risen sun, settled moon

Down and up, it is not for me
My time is done, time fades so soon

John Miller 10; April Sunrise

Grand horizon, beach head, fallen water
Settle down; rise again after the sunset

Onwards over the purple mountains
Onwards - far away to the west

Thousands of years, millions of views
But for the night
We are alone

My skin there is soft
But a long way from wanting
My dreams are all settled on the canvas

The exhibition
It is to come to a close
Thank you my friends

Say one last goodbye
Here I am - at rest

>>>

Before the morning
Before the day indeed begun
My palette and my paint box
Beside me
In my cool and calm string vest

Two curves
In search of equilibrium
Offset slightly
Nudged over from the best

Lines of continuity
Horizons the world over

Seen from Euclidean space
They have that Euphrates bend
Seen so soon we are so blessed

>>>

Intrusion; your face protrudes
Even the rise of the sunlight
Does not soften the mood

If you have something to say
Then say it
Without your easy whisper

Let the waves roar
Break into your silence
Take over your calm

Daub with your fingers
Take a wider brush
Have a glass of gin

Go on say it
Why don't you
The veneer is thin

Just as easy you see
To see you in another light
Nothing you do

Prevents our own stories
Entering or distorting
Your exquisite interpretations

John Miller 11; SS32

I too am looking for calm water
Somewhere to drop anchor
For steadiness to flower
In this the rumbustious hour

To hear the water lap
Feel the sun on the back of my neck
To think about gardens
And petunias, dolphins & whales

To bobble up and down
In a carefree frame of mind
Once again to be on solid ground
In this, the calamity that I find

>>>

Orange and yellow and green
Afloat
On a sea of blue

Your mast cuts through
The landscape
With your galoshes out of view

Low level apartments
White sheets on unmade beds
Lovers...

Afloat in another place
Their masks rise
To save their face

>>>

I am not with you yet
I was too late in rising
But don't think I would forget
It is no good you now surmising

I watch from the harbour wall
With a coffee and a cigarette
The girls we've met
They drink their chardonnay
In step

We will be there tomorrow
Out on the open sea
We'll drink and drowned our sorrow
And still be back in time for tea

>>>

You are still now
Entirely without movement
You wait, in silence
That I may supplant my dream

Not a murmur or a flicker
No moving sign of life
You wait for me & many others
That our walk is not alone

All in blue
Just a splash of orange
One brush stroke
Or maybe, was it two

John Miller 16; In St Ives Bay

Lighthouse you are so far away
Even now
I drift in and out of your shadow

Beam
With that gleam in your eye
Forever an enigmatic smile

Enough style
To wear your Fair Isle pullover
All tattered and worn

You stroll
With your horse hair brush
Down and up and across

The gold white sand under
And over
The burnt blue sea

>>>

Who but you
Would see the red
On the edge of the ocean

Where the tide and the sand
Join our hands
And heads together

Bring on the better weather
Roll down the dunes
Kick off our shoes

Run free
Run
Right on into the water

Shave our tiny toes

On the shores
Sharp shingle

Draw blood such
That the picture
May be completed

>>>

Out towards Godrevy
The Towans with their camp fires
Smoked charcoal, sausage and surf

On past Lelant Saltings
For Penzance; points changed
For a less circular return

Over the hilltop to Sennon

At the far end
Imagined distant land

And the irregular horizon
She remains
Entirely unplanned

Yet it is the colour of the sand
The colour
Your sand that cries

To me
Ties to try me
Touches me incise

And I'm damned
If I can name it
Or be any more precise

John Miller 17; The artist with Boss

I know so little of sea fishing
Even less
Of walking a dog on the beach
Along the waters edge

Only yesterday I learnt
Though I guess you already know
Of the freshness of fish
Caught by the day boats

I sit in amazement
At your delicate touch
The layers of non calamitous orange
And the almost lost horizon

With the merest glimpse
Of land

>>>

Pick up a colour circle; I beg you
How many shades
Sit directly opposite the blues
Of sea or sky

How many landmarks trace
That place over the
Horizon

How many dreams of the dog
Let off the lead

>>>

On a slide show

Would you project
From right or left

In the night do you
Throw off your covers
And pick up your brush

Do you have the rush of
Inspiration - or are you
Settled in your frame

>>>

Without light, without darkness
Ever so still
Even more so quiet

Listen to the gods

Traverse into your own blood streams
Enter your own iridescent canals

See into this
Away
From all confusion

Even though
You know it to be
Entirely unreal

>>>

The amplifier finds all the nooks
And crannies, the magnifying glass
Brings all the sounds to light

My mothers chequered saffron apron

The flour covered scones and the day
I learnt that I was auburn
Not ginger

>>>

With a mathematical mind I wonder
Why you chose not a perfect square
And why your horizon is not one third
Down the page

Or your final folded wave
Of the shoreline
Why does it fall
So near the base of the canvas

Even the single fishing boat
Neither does she lay dead centre

As if you intend to challenge
All of our past perceptions

Simply then to infuse ourselves
Allow the emotion to bypass the logic
If only for the briefest of moments
Or for the whole of the day

John Miller 28; Thaddeus watching the return of Swift

Slim, bronze skinned figure
Tight fitted swimming trunks

Gaze out to sea, fold arms
Irregular interactions
Out in the distance
Over the white washed wall

Will he be on the boat
Will he be back for supper

Overload again on tales of lobsters
Dolphins and ones that got away
From your incessant enquirers look
You doubt, you disbelieve

That such a scrawny figure
Could have caught such a thief

>>>

Boarded the Archangel Michael
In the town of Kos
Sailed across so many seas,
On poop decks or stooped beneath

Landed in a fishing port
Down Penzance way
Strayed, in and out of bars,
Discotheques, under riotous beach stars

Fell easily into conversation
Doubtful liaisons with dubious sorts
Without roots, of unknown origin
No worry, no matter, no rush to begin

Raised close always to salt water
Does he know if you will be forever

>>>

Time goes slower now
Towards the turn of summer
The fish head off south
The boats go out ever further
For ever diminishing returns

The light is lower now
You return in slumber
The smiles fade elsewhere
Eyes sink ever deeper
With ever diminishing returns

>>>

Polished marble underfoot
Solid ground, granite foundations

A spacious abode, an artist's balcony
Overlooks the open sea

Conversely, a few planks of wood
Separate you and the vast ocean
A turn of wind, between you and me

All these grand possessions,
Embodied in our mansions
Fixtures that fit, held firmly
In place all paid for and secured

Between you, me, and the open sky
I would rescind all to take the Swift
The Swift you see is the space I need
The space to exist between you and me

John Miller 41; Summer Sandbar

Sun steps on the sandbar
We dream
Our faraway dreams

Cloud frets
The skylark
Or seagull seams

Your horizon, my horizon
Everywhere above
Is blue

My horizon, your horizon
Sea washed sand
Laid bare by you

In debt on the sandbar
I mean, I am renewed

>>>

We had our breakfasts early
A bowl of corn or rice
We caught your shoreline
Curling
The morning after night

Later on; it could have been
A Caribbean
Or a Maldives sky

As in *ukiyo-e*
The floating cloud
Floats by

Would that peace among you
Give my girl a try

We caught your shoreline
Turning
In the flicker, of an eye

>>>

Behind the railroad
The pilchards
The rain swept afternoon

Behind the photograph
The emptiness
The well kept crescent moon

I stroke my soft auburn hair
Hair I so adore
My skin is clean
I'm clean to the core

Ahead the sandbar
The blue sky
The far away swoon

There in your picture
Where again
You play my tune

>>>

Turn over;
Ever,
So slowly; you are allowed

Stand, still for another moment
Blow a breath at that old lonesome cloud

So far away, unmet is death
Or at any rate some other shroud

Sing, whistle awhile, time unspent
Once more to weave the weft

Say, hi there, well hello
Won't you, joyous,
Join the joyful crowd

John Miller 46; Trencrom Summer

Face turned away
Turned towards land
Away from sea

Up and down horizons
Sunlight
At the end of the day

>>>

Echoes of sunken ships
Of mine workings ceased
Strips of red sunlight
Caught in the heather
Caught in among the scrub

Down on the beach, orange sand
Where war boats landed
Exercises for the killing fields

Thrown by the big sky
Settled into nostalgia
Pity for a framed melancholy
Caught in the inland
On the contours of creation

>>>

Say, hey its how I feel
Like thanks for the memory
Brought a light to my eye
Reminded me of the walking boots
Nights at the Minack
Swigs of ale at the Old Blue Ball
And Steve with sunstroke
At Watergate Bay...

We'd gone down together
A gang from up the north

Our first sight of blue sea
It's true; believe me, our first taste
Of Cornish pasties and
Outhouses turned into bedrooms
Breakfasts with plates
Smaller than saucers

Anyhow, thanks for the memory
Did I say; some of us
Decided to stay
We washed, shaved, put on our
Eau de Cologne

Set off out on the Town
Drinking and dancing
Girls swinging on either arm
Blue jeans
And thin striped sweatshirts

Young bodies together
All loose and untethered