

'Fiddle icons confidential': the making of a portrait

Nicole Murray

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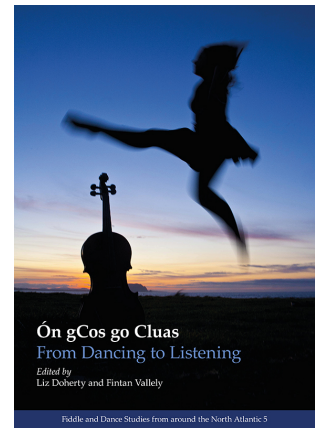
From Dancing to Listening

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic 5

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About the author:

Nicole Murray, Australian painter, is documenting contemporary players of traditional music, and their instruments, in a series of paintings. The works draw on techniques from Byzantine icon painting and are realistic yet symbolic. Her first solo exhibition in 2003, 'The People of the Music', showed paintings and sculptures about Australian folk musicians. Since then her work as an internationally-touring musician for nine years with folk duo, Cloudstreet, in the UK, USA, Europe, Japan, and Australasia, has given her a profound insight into the portraiture, and the opportunity to travel to interview her subjects.

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‘Fiddle icons confidential’: the making of a portrait

NICOLE MURRAY

In Australia in 2012 I created a series of portraits of influential traditional fiddle players, entitled Fiddle Icons, which was shown in Derry City as part of the 2012 NAFCo, the first significant exhibition for this growing collection. The seven works in oils and six sepia sketches were the beginning of an ongoing project, in which stills from video interviews provide the inception of portraiture. The work is documented in a blog, which includes interview transcriptions and images.¹ A book of portraits and interview transcriptions is planned, in order to create an insight into the fiddle landscape in which we are currently living. This paper discusses the inspiration for the project, the process developed for interviewing the subjects and producing the work, the symbolic language used to express their achievements and personalities, the art theory underpinning the work, and future plans for the collection.



Figure 1 The portrait series shown at NAFCo, 2012.

Inspiration for the project

In October 2011, I attended Boxwood, a fiddle and flute camp run by Canadian flautist Chris Norman, in New Zealand. Scottish fiddler Alasdair Fraser and American cellist Natalie Haas were teaching, and an idea for a series of portraits began to clarify. Within moments of meeting Alasdair, I asked to interview him on video to become the subject of a portrait, and the project had begun. *Fiddle Icons* explores the psychological phenomena associated with fame or renown within a community. It observes the response of audiences and music fans to performers whom they admire. Contemporary performers are commonly treated as deities by their fans, behaviour which I have observed and experienced in my own music-touring career. A deep-seated instinct prompts us to deify people who enrich our lives in ways that are mysterious to us; we hold them up as icons in their field. A portraiture project provided the opportunity to paint about this concept, as well as being a fine excuse to meet and interview interesting players, resulting in a cohesive body of work which would continue to grow, and which I could make available to exhibit round the world.

The underpinning concept, which inspires the style of the work and the choice of subjects, is that human society requires a sense of the divine. Even in societies with secular ideas, a great deal of effort goes into seeking and connecting with spirituality:

Man [sic] positively needs general ideas and convictions that will give a meaning to his life and enable him to find a place for himself in the universe. He can stand the most incredible hardships when he is convinced that they make sense; he is crushed when, on top of all his misfortunes, he has to admit that he is taking part in a 'tale told by an idiot'. It is the role of religious symbols to give a meaning to the life of a man [sic].²

In secular society, the understanding of the source of the divine has changed, and there is a move to worship the fount of creative brilliance which is seen manifested in our artists. The *Fiddle Icons* use ancient representations of divine art to inform a modern view of portraiture, and comment on the artist/musician's role. While the stylistic approach is appropriated and represents the subjects as quasi-religious icons, the resulting pastiches are not entirely ironic, engaging as they do with a range of literal and psychological symbols to tell the portrait subject's story. The *Fiddle Icons* portraits refer visually to the religious art of the Byzantine Empire (c. 550–1450),³ appropriating some of its conventions and methods.

The icon imagery is combined with psychological symbolism, referencing the ideas of Carl Jung; the symbolic meaning of the works is further informed by sacred and secular themes of art history. The circle is a strong linking device in the collection of works, used as a halo in each piece. The circle may symbolise the psyche, the self and ultimate wholeness (Jung's view) or enlightenment and human perfection (the Zen Buddhist view).⁴ The halo itself is a device of Byzantine art, which, when appropriated to the contemporary art setting, affords multiple symbolic readings. From the Symbolists (1885–1910) is borrowed the idea that art should represent absolute truths that can only be described indirectly.⁵ This concept of tacit, or intuitive, unarticulated knowledge⁶ applies to the viewing of the artworks, where the more contact with the players depicted, their musical style, and art history a viewer

has, the more layers of meaning they may read into the work. It is also strongly associated with the learning of traditional styles of music. The portraits are realistic, but the choices made about colour, background, use of objects, composition, and even style of moulding on the edge, are all symbolic and work together to express that person's story, history and personality.

The portrait subjects

The first seven portraits in the collection, completed for the North Atlantic Fiddle Convention 2012, are of noted players from across the world. They are: Emma Nixon (Australia), Nancy Kerr (UK), Natalie Haas (USA), Alasdair Fraser (Scotland/USA), Martin Hayes (Ireland/USA), Dougie Maclean (Scotland), and Ado Barker (Australia). Fraser and Haas were interviewed in New Zealand in 2011; Nixon in Brisbane, in 2012; Maclean at Woodford Folk Festival in Queensland, 2011; Barker in Melbourne, 2012. Two of the subjects I had to approach differently due to distance constraints: I contacted Nancy Kerr in England, asked her to be part of the project and to make a short video, and I later interviewed her as well. Martin Hayes was the only subject I couldn't personally interview within the time constraint, but it was important to represent him at NAFCo since he was performing there and is prominent in Irish fiddling. For his portrait, an interview which was conducted in St Mary's Church in Feakle, County Clare, during the Traditional Music Festival in 2011, was downloaded from YouTube.⁷ While interviewing these subjects, the chance arose to interview a number of other subjects in the same locations. The original plan was to create ten major works for NAFCo. However, the time needed for experimenting with suitable substrates was extensive, and the portraits took approximately fifty hours each. Seven full portraits were achieved in two months.

As a way of representing more fiddlers in the interim while working on their full portraits, a series of watercolour sketches was created. The subjects for these are Andrew Clermont (Australia), Brittany Haas (USA), Catherine Fraser (Australia), Pria Schwall-Kearney (Australia), Richard Wood (Prince Edward Island, Canada), and Chris Duncan (Australia). There are currently fifteen interviews awaiting interpretation into oil paintings; these are with:

Al Parrish, Dwayne Cote, and Richard Wood (Canada); Brittany Haas (USA); Andrew Clermont, Catherine Fraser, Chris Duncan, Danny Holmes, Dave O'Neill, Holly Downes and Pria Schwall-Kearney (Australia); Vicki Swan, Tom McConville and Catriona Macdonald (UK); Liz Doherty (Ireland). Three of these subjects were interviewed at NAFCo 2012.

Development of the process

The working method which was developed involves interviewing the subject on video; parsing the video frame by frame and choosing stills for reference; researching the subject to reveal more of their story with imagery; composing the portrait using pencil sketching and Photoshop; and painting it using oils and gold leaf. The second method for creating interim sketches was subsequently developed, using line drawing, watercolour wash and photography, combined in Photoshop. The opportunity to paint the portraits from life is

generally not available, because most of the subjects lack the time to sit for me. They are busy musicians, and the interviews were conducted when they were working at festivals, workshops or concerts. Working from video is as close to working from life as can be achieved, and gives an expressive sense of the person. Each interview takes about fifteen minutes. The videos are solely intended to capture a broad range of expressions and attitudes in the subject, to look at their instrument, hear their commentary, and build up an impression of the person.

The process involves very few questions, the choice of which was 'tested' on Emma Nixon, and the first ('What gives you joy in your music?') was chosen because it brought out such a positive response in her. Musicians can be plagued by feelings of self-doubt or a sense that they haven't achieved their potential yet, and pursuing questioning about future plans or achievements can cause them to retreat. But asking about joy generally allows everyone to connect with what motivates them to continue their musical journey, and brings out their passion. My second question is: 'Could you tell me about your instrument?' Some players have very intriguing stories, and everyone has an interesting reason for having the instrument they play, so from these two questions, extra depth can be added to the portrait, or at the very least, can inform the viewer more broadly about the subject. One aim of the Fiddle Icons project is to create an insight into the early twenty-first century fiddle world. By holding up one artform as a mirror to another, by reflecting visually and verbally on the essentially ephemeral art of the musician, the works reinforce the cultural importance of these practitioners and their music as tradition bearers.

Description of the process

1. Identify desirable subjects to paint, using practical guidelines: Who should not be left out? Who will be available to see and interview? Who is going to NAFCo, which will make them more relevant to this show?
2. Conduct interviews on video. This process involved developing an interview procedure, which is still under improvement. The challenge is to consider compositional ideas while staying engaged with the conversation as it happens.
3. Examine the video, usually with the sound off, to identify characteristic poses and body language which express the subject well. Take a screen shot of every possible still. This step is best done quickly. Dwelling on the detail isn't very productive, because instinct is a good guide here.
4. Prepare the surface: this took a great deal of experimentation with board thicknesses, mouldings and surface preparation. Information from Kentish icon painter, Peter Murphy,⁸ helped to decide on the substrate and surface preparation. Icons are traditionally painted on solid wooden panels, but he recommended reliably flat, easily acquired plywood, to which were attached wooden mouldings. The aim was to achieve panels of approximately the same weight, which didn't warp. Initial plans to follow Peter Murphy's preparation

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procedure faithfully – which involved covering the board and moulding with a layer of calico, attached with gelatine glue – proved unpredictable. The calico was either completely secure, or towards the end of the drying time would suddenly, dramatically bubble off the board surface. The surface preparation was eating severely into the available painting time, so good quality primer was used, followed by ten coats of traditional gesso, made with whiting and gelatine. This dried for a full day, and was sanded perfectly smooth.

5. Use graphic design techniques to start the painting: Photoshop was used to create a ‘cartoon’ or line drawing from the main reference picture, to transfer to the gesso surface. Gold leaf was then applied, and the portrait and background were painted in oils.



Figure 2 Pria Schwall-Kearney layers.

For the watercolour sketches, a line drawing and a watercolour layer were created by hand, scanned, and digitally combined with a photographic element derived from a screen-shot from the interview video. The illustration shows the proportion of each layer used to make up the finished artwork. The watercolour sketches were completed while on tour in the UK over two months. The technique is portable and has clearly-defined steps, so it is possible to achieve results in small bursts of activity.

Case study: Nancy Kerr

Nancy is one of the finest musicians of her generation, a multi-instrumentalist who plays in several traditional styles and is well-known for her songwriting and complex *fiddlesinging* (accompanying her own singing on the fiddle). I was very clear from the start that she needed to be represented. As our schedules would not coincide until after the paintings for NAFCo needed to be finished, I asked if she would be part of the project and if she could have herself filmed in advance at home. I specified that I would like her to sit near a window to create a side-cast of light, with her children to be in the shot. From this film and two others I selected screen-shots and developed a triptych. In symbolic terms, I have represented her as the Madonna of the Fiddle, referencing Leonardo da Vinci's Madonna of the Rocks,⁹ with the triangular composition in which Nancy is singing with her son Hamish,

but still including baby Harry in her attention. The image spills out of the frame with leaves and growth, representing fecundity, the living tradition, and of course the picture literally depicts the passing on of tradition from one generation to the next. The sky could be dawn or dusk, it is simply the peaceful calm of golden light, and is based on a Claude Lorraine pastoral painting. Nancy's dress is the night sky of the southern hemisphere, a reference to her Australian husband, so the whole painting addresses the timeless turn of day and night, and the balance of dark and light, which is also the name of one of their albums: *Between the Dark and the Light*.

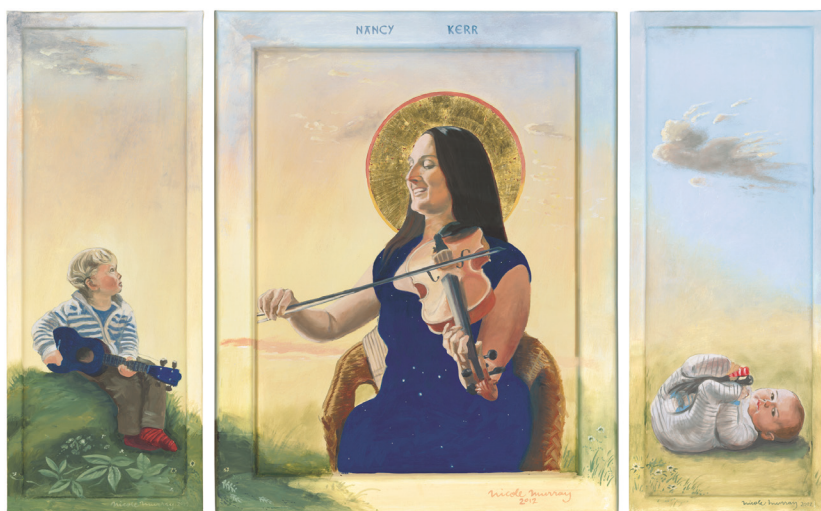


Figure 3 Nancy Kerr.

Future plans

I chose to paint some quite well-known traditional musicians initially, as a way of raising awareness of the project, and perhaps, by selling prints of the work, to allow it to fund itself. I intend to continue to paint well-known players, because they are worth acknowledging. The work will continue until they can be shown in subsets of paintings linked by geography or genre such as 'Fiddles and Feet', 'Women of the Fiddle', 'Fiddles of the World'. Undoubtedly the project needs to pay for itself so I can begin work on another valuable aspect, portraits of players who are not famous, but who are a significant musical link in their community. Such artistes are often old, and have taught whole generations of younger players, or are real characters with a fascinating story. Representing them will give the Fiddle Icons extra storytelling depth. So far I have only worked with living subjects, but some of the most iconic figures of the fiddle, who have directly influenced our current players, have now died. It is possible that I could still paint an authentic portrait and represent them symbolically if there is film footage of them, and people to interview who knew them. Tom Anderson is the one who comes first to mind.

Strategies

As the collection of portraits grows, it will be made available to arts festivals and galleries, which can host the painting show in combination with live fiddle music. The works are more fully realised when accompanied by fiddle, and the exhibition space would ideally be used to host chamber concerts for traditional music.

Archival-quality prints of the works are being sold online and at the shows. *Fiddle Icons* showed in Derry, Townsville, and Brisbane in 2012 and as mentioned above a book is planned. The very fact of painting them, in some way, makes icons out of the people I choose to paint. Such a formalised representation of a performer has the effect of validation in the eyes of outside observers, and every artform reinforces and validates every other artform when it reports on it. In physics it's known as 'the observer effect', and refers to changes that the act of observation makes on the phenomenon being observed. This effect is unavoidable. In essence, the Fiddle Icons are creating an archive of this moment in time, in the world of traditional fiddling.

Notes

¹ <http://fiddleicons.blogspot.com> [accessed June 2015].

² Carl Jung, 'Approaching the Unconscious', in *Man and his Symbols*, ed. by Carl Jung (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1964; paperback edn, Picador, 1978), p. 76.

³ John Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), p. 12.

⁴ Jung, *Man and his Symbols*, p. 268.

⁵ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symbolism_\(arts\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symbolism_(arts)) [accessed June 2015].

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tacit_knowledge [accessed June 2015].

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oyn3N2lilOc> [accessed June 2015], posted by Aveire Media, Mountshannon, Co. Clare, 6 August 2011.

⁸ <http://www.petermurphyicons.co.uk> [accessed June 2015].

⁹ I have referred to a variety of digital representations of 'The Madonna of the Rocks' by using a Google images search to amass a gallery page.