The New Criterion

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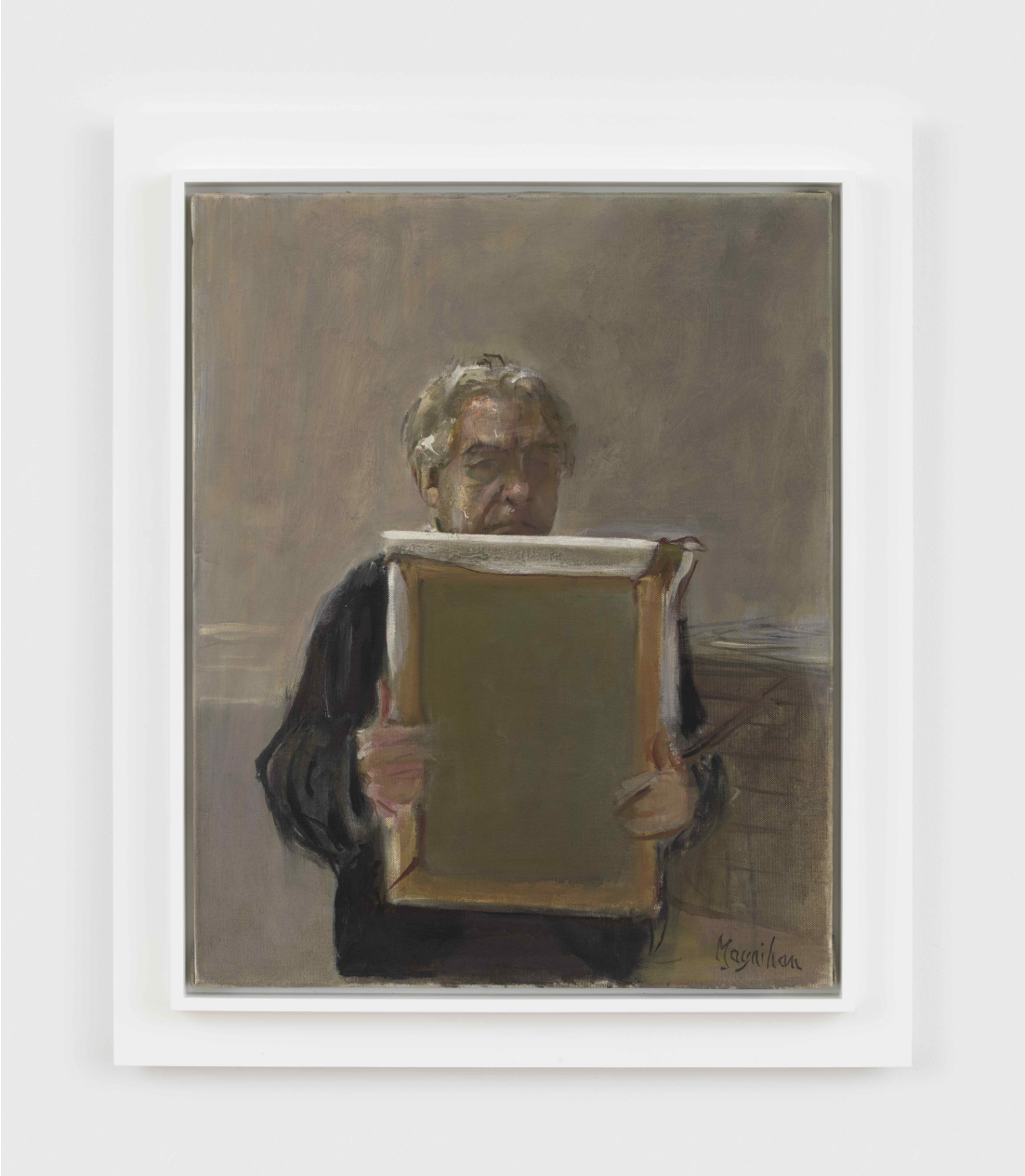
Turning inward

by Robert Becker

A small self-portrait called *Holding a Canvas* (1983) is the first painting you see in the David Nolan Gallery exhibition of the British artist Rodrigo Moynihan's late work. Moynihan painted himself from the waist up, his face weathered, his head crowned with daubs of gray and white applied in such a way that they might represent either his hair or, like a garland of laurels, the remnants of a lifetime in the studio. In a clever twist on self-portrait convention, however, he makes the main attraction not himself but an empty, olive-green rectangle, the back of the canvas he's gripping in his hands.

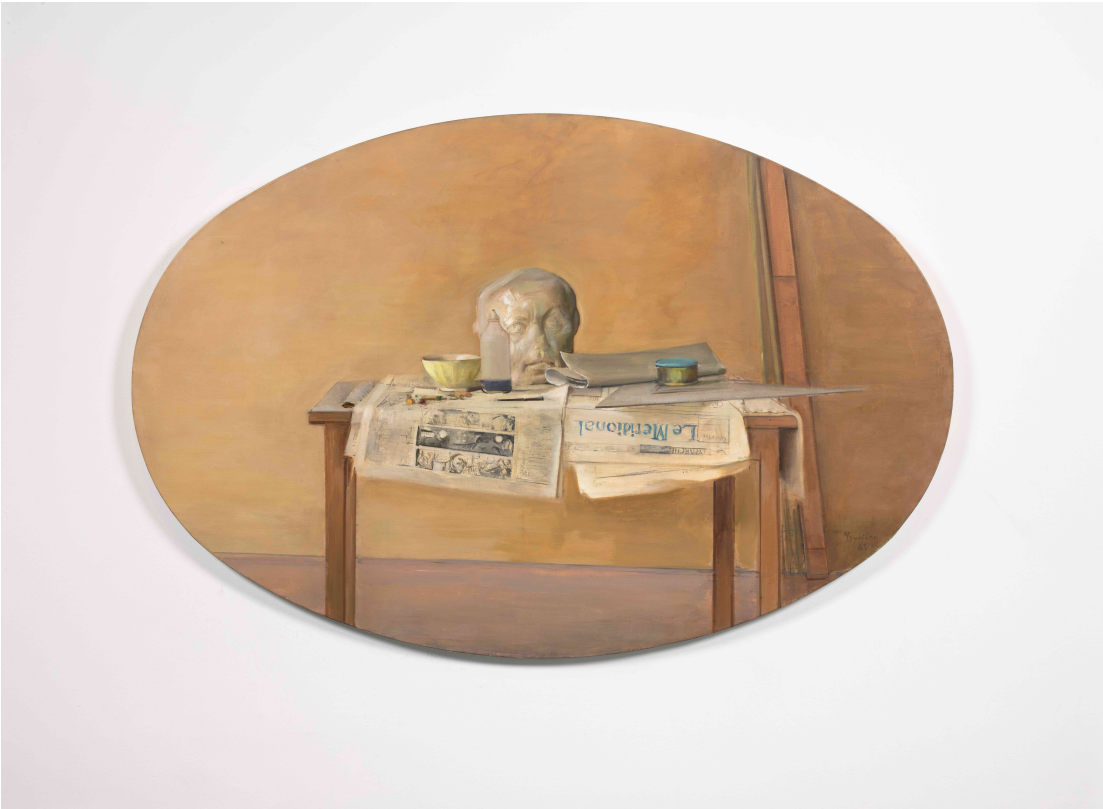


Rodrigo Moynihan, Holding a Canvas, *1983, Oil on canvas. Courtesy of David Nolan Gallery, New York.*

When he made this picture, Moynihan (1910–90) was seventy-three years old and had been showing work for over five decades. Though his education at the Slade School in the late 1920s was steeped in classical drawing, his earliest works to be seen publicly were pure abstractions influenced by Turner's skies and Monet's Rouen Cathedral paintings. He even made an all-white painting at the time, two decades before the appearance of Abstract Expressionism. Such conceits were mostly rejected in pre-war London, so Moynihan proceeded to carve out a career and attained an enviable reputation as a representationalist, taking prestigious commissions for individual and group portraits (Princess Elizabeth, Clement Attlee, and the editors of Penguin, for instance), painting his friends (William Coldstream, Victor Pasmore, Francis Bacon, etc.), making landscapes, and teaching at the Royal College of Art. In the 1950s, he had a short-lived return to abstraction, this one more successful, with many works ending up in important private and

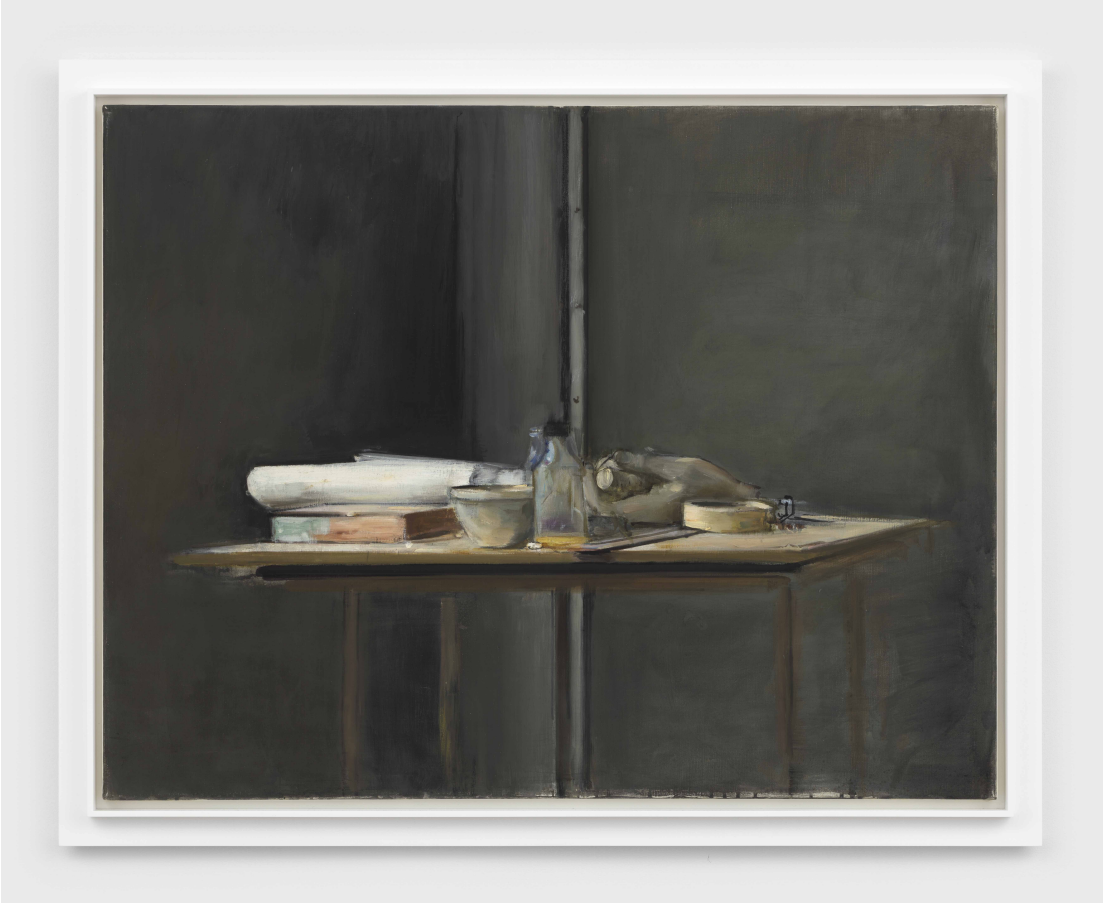
museum collections. He also earned a cbe and full membership to the Royal Academy of Arts. Between 1964 and 1967, he published a quarterly edited by Sonia Orwell and John Ashbery called *Art and Literature* with his second wife, Anne Dunn. Its index reads like a who's who of the era's avant-garde, many of whom were friends or acquaintances of the Moynihans. As Sir Lawrence Gowing said of Rodrigo, "The impressiveness of his sheer capability was mixed with the impression of a more bohemian persona." Finally, in the 1970s and 1980s, this restless, cultured, profoundly skilled artist settled into making an exquisite series of still lifes or "shelf paintings," as he called them. Along with late self-portraits, nine of these shelf paintings are the focus of the current show.

In *Corner Shelf* (1974), the earliest of the works at Nolan, Moynihan rendered a handful of cylindrically shaped objects against a chalk-gray background like old plaster—water glass, coffee cup, ink bottles, all resting on a shelf tucked into the corner of his studio. The vertical line where the walls meet, and the horizontal of the ledge, intersect just slightly off-center in the tondo canvas. Bottles of incandescent liquids like precious gems jump off the shelf in *Roman Head, Bottles & Paint Tubes* (1981–82), their ethereality and fragility contrasting with the bulky sculptural fragment and its heavy, dead eyes. Turning inward for these paintings, that is, to the inside of his studio, he was painting meditations on the everyday things surrounding him, the tools of art-making, the elixirs of his alchemy.



Rodrigo Moynihan, Roman Head on Newspaper, *1986, Oil on canvas. Courtesy of David Nolan Gallery, New York.*

The lozenge-shaped canvas *Roman Head on Newspaper* (1986), with its radiant ocher ground, printed broadsheets draped over the edge of the table, and its warm palette bathed in the afternoon light of the south of France, is an homage to the still lifes of the Cubists, who, along with Cezanne, had elevated the genre from the charming and pretty but entirely static to the crucial and influential. Moynihan argued that his own paintings weren't, strictly speaking, true still lifes because he hadn't consciously manipulated the objects for the purpose of composition and affect as Cézanne, Braque, Bonnard, or for that matter the seventeenth-century Dutch had; they were instead readymade configurations, found interior landscapes with shelves acting as horizon lines.



Rodrigo Moynihan, Still Life with Roman Hand & Roll of Photographs II*, 1988, Oil on canvas. Courtesy of David Nolan Gallery, New York.*

Landscapes were a constant theme in a career of varying approaches to painting. Drawings Moynihan made along the way in France, Morocco, and Canada reveal his fascination with forms above and below the horizon. Some of the artist's non-objective abstract paintings of the 1950s seem to presage these later still lifes, preparing the way and the thinking. *Yellow and Violet* (1957), which the Tate owns, is a tightly contained blast of thick oily color centered in a canvas that recalls the reflection of trees or mountains on a lake and creates the sensation of natural spectacle. Moynihan's close observation of the natural world is also apparent in the latest of his works at Nolan, from 1988. In *Still Life with Roman Hand & Roll of Photographs II* (1988), painted at the top of his game—his marks direct, the outlines of objects crisp like pencil on paper, his palette rich and the brush strokes effortless—Moynihan shifted the background from pale, putty colors to dark and

bold ones, reminiscent of Whistler's portrait of the Comte de Montesquieu. (Moynihan had admired Whistler since his Slade days.)

The foreground of *Still Life with Mirror* (1982) is a table scattered with a few jars, the open mouth of a funnel, and a handful of paintbrushes, all loosely sketched and painted in muted grays with deftly added touches of yellow and gold. Behind the objects, in the mirror, the white-haired painter in a pink shirt, leaning into his easel, studies himself and the arrangement over his right shoulder as he makes a self-portrait of a painter painting a still life. This and the other works feel like pages from Moynihan's diary, with their passages of prosaic existence, their lists of an artist's accoutrements and personal belongings, and their shifting light and evolving perspectives, candid expressions of the man who spent much of his life capturing them.

Robert Becker was the arts editor and a writer for Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine in the mid-1980s and is the author of *Nancy Lancaster: Her Life, Her World, Her Art* (Knopf). You can find him on Instagram: @RobertBecker3.