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TIM MAGUIRE

A close-up portrait of a bloom, far larger than life and bursting beyond the confines of the painting's edge; a white flower, filling the canvas. A red poppy spreading its papery petals, stark against blackness. An insect climbing a stem, toward a jungle of cut flowers.

Tim Maguire's flower paintings are derived from details of colour-plate reproductions of 17th and 18th Century still lives. But these are not so much transcriptions of three hundred year old paintings as transformations.

While Maguire's paintings may appear to be scrupulous reworkings they are as much improvised as copied from their sources, and often painted extremely rapidly, *alla prima*, in a manner quite at odds with the meticulous techniques of the Dutch genre painting which provide their source.

Often, as he picks his way through a picture-book, searching for details to paint, Maguire has only the vaguest idea who the artist of the original is; neither is he always certain what kind of flower he's painting – beyond recognizing that this is a tulip, that a dahlia, he couldn't say. The pursuit of rare flora – while a major preoccupation of the collector and the horticulturalist, and for the painters of *Vanitas* compositions – interests him not at all. Nor are the compositions of the original painting that he's working from strictly adhered to; their scale has been altered, elements have been moved around, cropped or lost under a wash of turps.

Sometimes Maguire will focus on some small detail; a single flower amongst many, or a corner of a composition dominated by darkness – the background rather than the motif itself – or a dense, tangled mass of flower heads and stems from another part of the same composition. Yet he attends to essential qualities of individual flowers with some accuracy – the curl of leaves, the shapes of petals, the density and translucence of a flower head, the different varieties of bruising, wilting and decay, the fullness of a carmine peony against a splay of blue cornflowers.

The historical lineage which provides Maguire's flower paintings with their provenance (a kind of artistic respectability) is played-off against the spectacular effects of his paintings, with their celebratory pursuit of what appears to be pure optical pleasure. The process of editing, cropping and enlarging the images from which he is working, leaves us with hypervivid fragments, cinematic close-ups which apparently edit out the symbolism of *Vanitas* paintings, removing from their inherent critique of human folly and greed, sanitizing and removing their focus on death. And yet it is difficult to imagine painting such a still life today without a

degree of self-consciousness, of irony or scepticism. What, after all, could be more retrogressive, quaint or naïve than to paint naturalistic bouquets and button-holes?

After the radical re-articulation of objects and spaces in a Cubist still life, and after the trembling stillness and presence of a few poor objects placed on a dusty shelf in a painting by Morandi, is there anything more to be said about the still life? Can anyone now paint a still life without being terrified of the impossibility of equalling Cezanne's questioning gaze, or the perspicacity of Chardin? And who could match, as a flower painter, the Dutchman Jan van Huysum (more than that, who would wish to?), or Fantin-Latour? What is there to be said that was not already said in one succinct sentence of Gertrude Stein, about the nature of Nature ("A rose is a rose is a"); and how can a painter approach the motif of the flower without remembering Georgia O'Keefe, or Warhol's pansies ... What can a painter do, that has not already been done?

If it seems barely possible to imagine making a painting now without a certain disquiet, it is because of the thought that to paint today is to engage in a dispute about the continuation of painting, to both play out the apparent endgame of painting and, at the same time, to refute its finality.

Two series of works precede and come after Maguire's flower paintings. A group entitled *Canal*, from 1992, took the iconic, centred, vertical "zip" which Barnett Newman had first used in the mid 1940s (principally in *Moment*, 1946, and most famously, and decisively, in *Onement 1*, painted in 1948) as their sole compositional device. In *Onement 1* Newman had lain a strip of masking tape down the centre of a small canvas already coloured with a ground of cadmium red dark, and using the tape to test a second colour, smeared over it with cadmium red light. Newman's zip was both break and form, figure and void: it presented the idea of an object in a pictorial space, but without recourse to figural allusions or illusionistic space. The painting declared itself solely in terms of a material fact, and with it Newman had removed the last vestige of atmospheric space, organic form and recognizable symbol from his art, an act that was to have profound consequences, not just for his own work, but for the development of painting during the latter half of the 20th Century.

In his reworking of Newman's zip, however, Maguire treats it purely as a schematic device, and, revoking the literalism of its vertical division – which had declared itself in material terms as much as in terms of hue value or tonal break in the composition – recast it in terms of a highly illusionistic optical space, created by means which, too, would have been completely antithetical to Newman's concerns.

Maguire's *Canal* paintings were built up using layer upon layer of glazed translucent colour. The colour in Newman's *Onement* relied on the difference between the two forms of cadmium red, both used as supplied by the paint manufacturer, while Maguire's paintings used impure colour, and sought to create an undulating, pulsing atmospheric space. They revoked flatness, literalism, and purity in favour of impurity, spectacle, illusion, sensuality and theatricality.

Seen in reproduction, Tim Maguire's most recent paintings might be taken for copies or pastiches of the work of the Argentinian born, Italian painter Lucio Fontana, who died in 1967. Fontana's act – to slit, perforate and puncture his canvases – was also his means of composition, and his trademark. Fontana's "spacial constructions" might now be taken as emblematic deconstructions of painting, and his actual violations of the surface interpreted metaphorically. Fontana's paintings were often, to borrow Picasso's phrase, "a sum of destruction", and he was careful to title his work in terms of construction, rather than destruction. Maguire's paintings, like Fontana's, appear to have been cut or punctured. A highlight gleams on the edge of a slit, and the canvas is puckered and indented along the line of the tear, casting a shadow. The hole in the canvas, as in Fontana's work, reveals only darkness rather than the wall behind the painting: Fontana frequently taped a piece of black material to the rear of the canvas, so that it hung behind the cut.

But Maguire's paintings have not been slashed or gouged: their wounds are painstakingly painted. And what appears to be raw linen canvas is commercially produced, white-primed canvas board, repainted with a wash, its wound only a fake wound, a trompe l'oeil violation.

The fascination of painting relies on its paradoxes, even the paradox of its never-arrived-at end. The art of painting depends on the duality of painting's flatness and the illusions of depth the painter creates. The painter creates space, and no space at all, form and a complete absence of forms. The painter both refutes and recasts the paintings, which have already been made, pays homage to and criticizes the paintings of the past. There is nothing new, nothing "Post Modern" in the idea that the subject of painting is less the scrutiny of earlier forms of painting than the acceptance that any new forms of painting are impossible. And yet painting goes on, and new forms continue to be created.

Tim Maguire's paintings occupy an ambivalent position in regard to their source material. Never does it seem that he is engaging in the trite Post-Modernist game of requotation and appropriation (words which now have a desperate, embarrassing air of the late 80's about them); instead, he treats the art of the past (whether it is the recent past of post-war Modernism, or the activities of Dutch genre painters of the 1700's) as something to be recaptured, not from the linear flow of history, but from a field of possibilities.

Tim Maguire is interested in more than history, although history might seem to weigh more heavily on painters than it does on contemporary artists in other media. In the face of the paintings themselves what strikes the viewer first, and most forcefully, is a sense of spectacle, of space and colour. Maguire can find as much space in a single flower-head as in the undifferentiated field of colour in a Barnett Newman, or in the mysterious space behind the surface of a Fontana. Maguire approaches the models he uses not with the cool eye of the theorist or the academic but as a painter, one for whom the endpoint of history must serve as a beginning.

Adrian Searle
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