PAINTING UNDER DURESS:
Tim Maguire's Colour Separations, 1998 – 2003[1]

> Physically, he said, painting has kept him pretty fit … Maguire has been throwing paint lately. At large canvases. He walks back and forward eight metres, all day long, to see what the pictures look like as they grow … at the end of a working day he sees his track marks all over the coloured [studio] floor.
> - The Age[2]

Tim Maguire's artistic practice turns around the *physical* act of painting; as he recently asserted, "my subject matter [is] really painting."[3] The registration of Maguire's concern with painting is pervasive: in the scale of his work (which at first seems to announce painting as a monumentally significant practice); in the intense chromatic and tonal effects of his surfaces (that indicate a Baroque painterliness); in those surfaces' ambivalent indexation of the artist's presence (suggestive of painting as auratic and precious); and in the play between production and reproduction, and the painterly and the photographic embedded in the surfaces of his canvases.

But Maguire's interest in each of these conditions is not unambiguous. This survey of the artist's recent *Separation Paintings (1998 -)* indicates his concerns as simultaneously invested in, and critically engaged with, painting as both an historical and a material practice. This essay is concerned with this often contradictory engagement and its effects. It argues that in Maguire's work, painting is always both historical and contemporary. But these temporal modes do not exactly co-exist. Like the surfaces of Maguire's paintings, they rub up against each other in a relationship that is neither dialectical nor easy. This essay uses this image – of two surfaces that look to meet, but whose meeting is always deferred – as a model for both the painter's methodology and the mode of engagement enabled by the work.

Separation

Consider two remarkable paintings. The diptych, *Untitled 20020701* (2001), is an immense, at times almost pornographic, three-quarter view of a glowing red chrysanthemum. Like most of the work produced by Maguire during the previous decade, it is based on a photograph. But the painting belongs to a shift in the artist's work away from appropriated photographs as source material (reproductions of Dutch still lifes, of Lucio Fontana's paintings, of children), towards photographs taken by Maguire himself – in this case a digital photograph of an actual flower. We should not mistake this move towards the production of "original" source material as part of an effort to locate and privilege a particular kind of source or subject that might be understood according to the terms "originality" or "image ownership". (The pervasive image of the flower precludes Maguire's oeuvre from notions of iconographic ownership.)[4] Instead, the painter's shift to the production of digital photographs was driven by a series of largely formal concerns related to the ambitions and the methodology of the colour separation project.

Untitled 98U42 (1998) presents a sweaty, closely cropped image of a young boy. This gigantic, nine-panel portrait, inaugurated Maguire's *Separation Painting* series, and makes apparent the project's conceptual and formal concerns (its "rigorous framework"), many of which had preoccupied the artist for over a decade.[5] This beautiful painting is based on a photograph of a friend of the artist's son, sent to Maguire by the boy's parents.[6] Maguire is thus removed – separated – in many ways from the source image: he did not take the photograph, and his emotional relationship to the subject is via a chain of third persons. The process used to reproduce the photographic image is also one of separation. Separation as both method and effect is embedded in the material conditions of the painting, which is modelled on the three colour separation technique used to produce chromatic and tonal effects mechanically, digitally and commercially.

In the late 1990s, Maguire became interested in the "weird" luminosity of the digital photograph, and realized that this effect was reproducible in paint, using a colour separation process with which he had already experimented.[7] This process sees Maguire download and manipulate ("enhance") digital photographs.[8] The painter then prints out a series of colour separations, showing values of cyan, magenta and yellow. These are, of course, the subtractive colours used in both commercial process printing and the common CMYK mode of digital print generation.[9] Each of these colour fields is then painted as a discrete, transparent layer, which sits over a brilliantly white, non-porous polyester canvas. The artist then flicks solvent (an odourless mineral turpentine) over each of these half-dry colour fields, before dragging a dry brush over the surface. The solvent-infused paint lifts off the surface of the painting, revealing the colour underneath.

This effect resonates with both the formative moments of learning to make marks with paint and, paradoxically, the processes of mechanical image production. The process and its effect remind me of some of my earliest, most magical experiences with paint; using crayon resist and paint in order to create mesmerizing fields of image and colour; scratching into layers of thick, black, oil-based pastel to reveal – quite miraculously – part of a multi-coloured painted ground underneath. At the same time, the solvent marks burnt into Maguire's colour fields achieve a tonal and chromatic effect similar to that of Ben Day dots in half-tone printing or moiré patterns of dots in the digital CMYK mode, in that they enable individual colours to be seen side by side. Rather than the canvas reading as a mass of darks (the black/"K" that results from the layering – and consequent cancellation – of each of the subtractive colours), Maguire prepares a pointillist surface of "pure" subtractive colours, which the eye merges into continuous-tone colour. What I am suggesting here is that the effect of the burn mark points toward two distinct moments – of making and reading – in the process of our immersion into image culture; learning how to make meaningful and pleasurable marks with paint, and learning to read mechanically or digitally produced images.

The burn marks caused by the flicked solvent are often regarded as gestures of abandonment or self-effacement (a kind of "other" to intention). Assertions that "Maguire uses art to cancel art", that "he is not a painter" and so on, are common.[10]

Such a reading makes sense if the solvent marks that burn fields of colour – applied, often gesturally, with brushes and rags – are considered as signs of erasure.

But perhaps it is more constructive to consider these marks as simultaneously highly performative indices of the artist's controlled hand and of hypertrophically motivated degeneration. ("Physically, he said, painting has kept him pretty fit …") There exists, of course, a significant precedent for the action of flicking and its effect within Modernist practice. We need only look at the surfaces of Jackson Pollock's 'drip' paintings to see it. I am not interested in considering the relation of the flick (of solvent) or the drip (of paint – which I see up to a point as formally correspondent) in terms of their possible biographical or economic relations, where the flick figures or emanates some privileged authorial moment.[11] Instead, I am concerned with their methodological implications: in each case, the mark (the solvent burn, the drip of paint) is produced both by an instrument that does not touch the surface – it is a mark unmediated by an instrument, a mark produced by the particular physics of the space between the instrument and the ground – and a certain, highly unstable relation to control. But just as Pollock argued that his drips were highly controlled – "I deny the accident" – Maguire's burn marks are the result of real precision and care.[12] "[I]ncreasingly I'm developing a vocabulary of gestures," Maguire informs us. "I know that if I flick my wrist in a particular way, or, say, put my shoulder more into it, I'll get different [effects]."[13] The flick materialises as an intensely uncertain and precarious figure, whose terms are simultaneous authority and vulnerability: whose task, then, is the performative articulation of the terms and conditions of the making and reading of images.

And this is a distribution of marks that has little to do with the representational aspects of the painting. Consider *Untitled 209020701*. Here, the traces of solvent pay no attention to the form of the flower. Flicks ignore the edges of individual petals and each petal's registration of space. To be sure, the marks of erased paint actively deny representational space, aside from the flat, frontal space of the ground itself. In this way, I might appear to agree with Suzannah Biernoff, who has argued that the subject of Maguire's painting is not its figurative content.[14] Here the referent – the flower, or, more accurately, the appropriated, photographed flower – becomes the ground, and paint itself the figure. Such a reading gels in part with the painter's account of his relationship to the "original" flower: the "further away I [get] from the original image," Maguire has asserted, "the more scope there [is] for painterliness and asserting the materiality of the process.[15] According to such a reading, the all-overness of the flick lodges the painting squarely within the space of an historical formalism that has as its leitmotifs optical flatness, frontality and purification, and where meaning is internalized, hermetic and discontinuous.

But equally, the application of colour and the patina of the painterly surface replicate the material conditions of the digital print, where the image is reduced to transparent fields of colour which sit on the hard, opaque surface of luminously white paper. (Compellingly, Maguire confuses the order of colour application – CMYK – of the half-tone and digital print. Colours are applied light to dark and, as is also the convention for oil painting, dark to light within the same canvas.) There is, of course, a formalism in action here; the process makes legible something of the digital print's

indifference to content. In the colour separation process, the painter reminds us, the image is pulled apart and reconstituted as a sequence of informational fields, which are bound together by a series of formal effects.

Maguire's surfaces hold these competing formalisms – of the Modernist canvas and the digital print – in close proximity. But – and we can now see this as a pervasive methodological device – these historical veneers do not meet. They are held in place by a series of tensions in the application of paint itself, and by their own proximity to an equally ambivalent discourse of figuration – "two different kinds of illusionism" – marked by either traces of the photographic source (where paint and brushstroke follow and articulate form) or trompe l'oeil.[16]

In this way, the presence of the photographic source is entirely avowed by Maguire. This identification is registered in a number of ways. The photographic source is indicated through the painter's attention to the mechanical techniques available (often commercially) for the generation and reproduction of photographic images (digital photography and the three colour separation process). The patina of the paintings themselves is also significant: at times, the paintings resemble – at a particular distance from the canvas – the richly chromatic, metallic surfaces of Cibachrome photographs. Close attention to Maguire's brushstrokes makes clear that his photographic sources are much more than a "ground" over which the real thing – "the materiality of paint" – takes place.

Maguire's investment in the photograph (as content and formal effect) may enable – following Douglas Crimp's famous question, "to what end painting?" – a reconfiguration of the practice of painting.[17] This suggests that, in photography, painting finds a "perceptive intelligence" through which to rearticulate its terms and meaning.[18] But if Maguire's project is interested in the question of painting's "end", then its response is one of problematisation: of the practice (as expressive device) and of the question itself (with its dubious formalist logic). The separation process is also invoked as a model for a series of formal and methodological strategies. Not the least of these is the manner in which the process itself invokes simultaneously two completely different systems for the production of tonal and chromatic effects. Fields of colour (like painting and photograph in Maguire's work) sit on top of and in-between each other. Colour and tonal gradation are mixed both actually and optically. This is the split, precarious space of Maguire's method and surfaces.

Duress

While studying with Jan Dibbets at one of Europe's most influential art schools, the Dusseldorf Kunstakademie in 1984 and 1985, Maguire found himself linguistically "disabled" He was not able to communicate effectively on account of a lack of access to language and the difficulties of cultural exchange, particularly in relation to the contingency of meaning. His work just made no sense to its new audience.[19]

We know, via the substantial, decades-long enterprise that has been the popularization of Lacanian psychoanalysis, that castration anxiety is, precisely, linguistic.[20] That is, we are precariously placed in language, always slipping

between positions of assumed authority or command and inadequacy. Maguire's "disablement" – his recognition of his own effective displacement from language – was literalised in the work he produced under Dibbets and on his return to Australia.[21] Images of typewriters drawn by mouth, of self-portraits produced "unsighted", details of Willem Kalf's meticulously painted *Still Life with a Nautilus Goblet* (1662), drawn with slippery paint applied by foot, figured Maguire's linguistic castration.

There are a number of aspects to this project that demand scrutiny. The most compelling is Maguire's effort to produce work "under duress"[22]. Here, the artist structured the process of drawing and painting around a set of physical and psychological constraints which both literalised and heightened the effect of disablement. In this way, Maguire actively engages with a broader problematisation of the myths of artistic production. His methodology maintains a perverse conversation with that of Chuck Close, whose paintings since 1988 have been produced in the face of extreme bodily restrictions. Since suffering an attack of paralysis that rendered him quadriplegic, Close has been confined to a wheelchair and paints with a brush attached to a wrist brace. As Close works different areas of his canvas, it is moved with the aid of a hydraulic machine. Close's movement (in terms of the act of putting paint on canvas, and in relation to the canvas itself) is, in every sense, restrained. His paintings, which continue the formal and conceptual concerns of his pre-1988 work, are a direct product of this series of restraints.[23] And Close's paintings produce a space of contradiction in many ways similar to that of Maguire: the discursive authority of the mark maker is rendered absolutely precarious by his bodily and methodological "lack".

The figures of Carolee Schneemann and, especially, Matthew Barney also resonate throughout Maguire's working method of making art under duress. Historically coincident with Maguire's foot and mouth paintings (and Close's post-paralysis paintings) are Barney's *Drawing Restraint* performances (1988 – 1993). In these actions, Barney – the paradigmatic artist-athlete – attempted to produce representational drawings while physically restrained: while pushing blocking sleds, or jumping on a trampoline or over hurdles while restrained by lengths of surgical latex hosing.[24] This latex binding, attached to the architectural space of the performance (the studio), placed severe limitations on Barney's ability to move and make marks, in a gesture that suggested the act of drawing as correspondent to both the lifting of weights (hypertrophic, repetitious and straining) and the paroxysmal actions of dystrophy. Barney's performance ironically refigured a series of highly mythologised archetypes of the male artist as expressive agent: the ascetic, the medium, the madman and the wild beast unrestrained by history of ideology.[25]

In a similar way, Maguire's work utilizes the model of production under restraint as a means to unhinge the notion of painting as teleological and "expressive". Maguire's work continues to mediate the possibilities of disablement and duress as method, now performed at the level of material surface. Caustic solvent and colour separation now mark the painter's critical interrogation of the space of painting: an ambivalent and anxious space bounded by questions of both history and currency.

Duress is now actually figured through "degeneration": of the image, of the material and of the surface, at once assuming and not assuming authority.

And finally, the uncertain relation of Maguire's painting to authority is articulated at the level of reception. Maguire's canvases produce an unstable mode of scrutiny. Like Close's paintings, Maguire's position their viewer in a phenomenological space marked out according to two distinct orders of relation or "distance".[26] In Maguire's work, this space is both contradictory and active, where "active" evokes actual bodily and ocular movement. (The movement and experience of the viewer is one that mimics both the movement of the camera lens and the eye itself as each focuses on its object.) This space might be understood, albeit simplistically, as the space of image and paint. Within this space, the painting shifts between figuration (at a distance) and abstraction (up close) and, at a stroke, between one version of illusionism (the image legible at a distance) and another (the surface itself as trompe l'oeil). It also shifts between picture and referent (the source photograph and, in turn, its object). Neither is cancelled out; neither "space" is privileged over the other, since each is, in its way, compellingly crystalised. Ultimately, one is forced to ask what is the optimal distance with which to encounter Maguire's paintings? Or do these paintings render uncertain the assumption as to an "optimal viewing position", with its suggestion of a set of fixed, pre-determined relations between viewer and object?

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[2] Andrew Bock, "Tim Maguire", *The Age* [Saturday Extra] 20 Mar, 1999, p.6.

[3] Tim Maguire, email to the author, 16 Mar, 2003.

[4] This assertion is tied to Maguire's extended use of Dutch flower painting as a source for many of his own still lifes. As Paul Taylor has shown in his fascinating account of the relation of Dutch flower painting to the fiercely speculative and extremely bullish market in flowers during the seventeenth century, unlike the cold, hard tulips and hyacinth bulbs exchanged for astronomical figures in the market-place, no one painter actually "owned" any given representation of a bloom. Largely on account of the prohibitive cost of blooms, there existed a well established practice of a painter reusing the image of a particular flower from painting to painting. Equally, painters freely borrowed examples of especially rare blooms from other painters. Thus, it is possible to identify a series of generic blooms across an artist's work or the work of a number of artists. Maguire continues this historical practice. When I asked the painter of his interest in the traditional practice of borrowing blooms, he replied: "I often did multiple paintings from the source painting, in some cases rework[ing] the same detail over and again." Paul Taylor, *Dutch Flower painting*, *1600 – 1720* (New Haven; London: Yale UP, 1995), p.118; Tim Maguire, email to the author 16 Mar, 2003.

[5] Tim Maguire, unpublished interview with Jonathon Watkins, "What is it 'as it really is'?" np.

[6] Tim Maguire, email to the author, 17 Mar, 2003.

[7] While the portrait *Untitled 98U42* inaugurated the Colour Separation project, the painter had been interested in the possibilities of colour separation processes as a method for painting since the late-1980s, when making lithographs with Neil Leveson. Tim Maguire, "What is it 'as it really is'?"

[8] Tim Maguire, email to the author, 16 Mar, 2003.

[9] It is important to note that Maguire's palette is not limited to the subtractive primaries. Perhaps modeling his method on a high-fidelity colour printing process, the painter uses, among other colours, greens and purples for darks, and white pigment for areas of highlight. Within the logic of CMYK, of course, white represents an absence: the bare ground or the unfilled bit.

[10] Suzannah Biernoff, *Tim Maguire*, exh. Cat. (Sydney: Mori Gallery, 1999) np, and Bruce James, "Tim Maguire", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 April 2002, p.13. Biernoff and James describe Maguire's technique as, respectively, "self-effacing" or "self-effacement". But these readings miss the point. While Maguire has himself described the application of paint in his flower paintings as an instance of "effacement" ("It's as if I'm making marks and partially erasing them at the same time"), his relationship to the act of painting and the figure of the painter is much more ambivalent than Bierhoff and James might have it. The painter's account of his encounter with Luke Reinhart's book, *The Dice Man*, spells out the terms of this relationship. In Reinhart's book, "[t]he central character becomes addicted to the notion that rather than make a decision he would let the dice choose. He would come up with the options, and then roll the dice. He would either a) go for the job, b) not go for the job, c) leave the country, d) ring the girlfriend, and so on. As a result, his whole life became a product of sequences of chance – he took himself out of the equation. That's my approach to painting." Tim Maguire, "What is it 'as it really is'?"

[11] See, for example, Jean Baudrillard, "Gesture and Signature: Semiurgy in Contemporary Art", *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,* trans. Charles Levin (St Louis, Mo: Telos, 1981), pp.102 – 111.

[12] Jackson Pollock, Interview with William Wright, *Art in Theory, 1900 – 1990*, Ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) p.576. Think also of Robert Rauschenberg's apparently chaotic (and thus socially indexical) drips and strokes: "What seems a brush stroke thrown on as hurriedly as possible and followed by droplets in an entirely accidental fashion is in fact a very studied gesture which Rauschenberg is capable of repeating at will." Otto Hahn, 1964, quoted in Jean Baudrillard, "Gesture and Signature", p.106.

[13] Tim Maguire, "What is it 'as it really is'?"

[14] Suzannah Biernoff, catalogue essay, *Tim Maguire* (Bently, WA: John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University of Technology, 2000), np.

[15] Tim Maguire, "What is it 'as it really is'?"

[16] "That's how the trompe l'oeil occurs – the paint gets pushed to one side and creates the illusion of a shadow." Tim Maguire, "What is it 'as it really is'?"

[17] Douglas Crimp, "The End of Painting", October 16 (Spr. 1981); reprinted in *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Pr, 1993), pp.84 – 106, p.87 quoted.

[18] See Luc Lang, "The Photographers Hand: Phenomenology in Politics", *Gerhard Richter,* ed. Jean-Phillipe Antoine et al (Paris: Editions dis Voit, 1995), pp.28 – 52, esp. p.51.

[19] Many of the references I'd been [using] in my work in Sydney didn't mean anything in Dusseldorf … [they] didn't really translate." Tim Maguire, "What is it 'as it really is'?"

[20] "[W]e can only signify ourselves in a symbolic system that we do not command, that, rather, commands us." Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca; London: Cornell UP, 1985), p.20.

[21] Tim Maguire, Artist's Statement, *Lapsus Lingae; works on paper, 1984 – 1989*, Exh. Cat. (Hobart; Sydney: Chameleon Contemporary Art Space & Mori Gallery, 1989), np.

[22] Tim Maguire, "What is it 'as it really is'?"

[23] Margrit Franziska Brehn, "On the Simultaneity of Difference and Variety of Sameness: The Evolution of Chuck Close' [sic] Work", *Chuck Close*, ed. Jochen Poetter & Helmut Friedel (Ostfilden; New York: Cantz & DAP, 1994), pp. 63 – 99, esp. p.91.

[24] Neville Wakefield, "Matthew Barney's Fornification with the Fabric of Space", *Parkett 39* (1994), pp.118 – 124.

[25] Barney also ironised – analogous as he is to the AIDS-era's permanently-latexed prick – the figure of the virile, procreative artist "who paints in ejaculatory 'paroxysms of passion'." For an engaging account of this trope, see Amelia Jones, "The 'Pollockian Performative'," *Body Art; Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis; London: U Minnesota Pr, 1998), pp.53 – 102, p.64 quoted.

[26] See Luc Lang, "The Photographer's Hand", esp. p.32; for Close, see Helmut Friedel, "Reality and Representation", trans. Burke Barnett, *Chuck Close*, ed. Jochen Poetter & Helmut Friedel (Ostfildern; New York: Cantz & DAP, 1994), esp. pp.31 – 35.