

THE LURE

*For all the antique and learned imagery
Has been erased, and in the place of it
The ivy and the wild-vine interknit
The volumes of their many-twining stems;
Parasite flowers illumine with dewy gems
The lampless halls, and when they fade, the sky
Peeps through their winter-woof of tracery¹*

Percy Shelley

*Visibility should – not be visible. According to an old
omnipotent logic that has reigned since Plato, that which
enables us to see should remain invisible; black,
blinding.²*

Jacques Derrida

Tim Maguire's art introduces an abstraction into the field of painting not commonly encountered within the fixed two-dimensional work. This deterritorialized visuality is exposed by interrupting the stable frames and subjective illusions of painting. It is more usually apprehended in new technologies such as early cinema where audiences found the mobile distortions of the image monstrous and frightening. It appears less often in historical forms like painting, when image, frame and gesture have lost their quiddity and meaning is fragmented.

We can see the effect of this dispossessive visuality in *Untitled* 1994 (p.29) and *Untitled* 1992 (p.23). The hybrid Dutch tulip rears infernally into our viewing space reversing the direction of aesthetic meaning, depriving the viewer of power over the exhibited space of the painting. Because our gaze is the vanishing point for this almost cinematic protrusion, visual meaning unravels even as it appears, withdrawing as it advances. Maguire's painting invariably addresses antagonistic viewing bodies; the formal body of the "art" viewer and the more dispersed spectator of film, television and video. For this reason the significance of the paintings arises from that which Shelley calls the "Spirit within two frames"; from divisive, erased forms, hieroglyphs that generate an aura like Maguire's Dutch tulip because of their very hybridity, not in spite of it.

The interpenetration of the near and the distant, in *Untitled* 1994 (p.29) and *Untitled* 1992 (p.23), as in so many of Maguire's flower works, is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's "aura"³. This aesthetic enjoyment was perceived as a harmony of closeness and distance through which self-knowledge was lost and found anew. Benjamin named this aesthetic perception auratic and compared it to a Renoiresque "day in the country". Beyond representation, this ephemeral auratic experience eludes framing unless there is a sensate experience such as Benjamin's, of being "touched" by the shadow of a branch on a summer's

afternoon, to which the viewer may compare their perception of the artwork. Benjamin's notion of aura rendered "reality" as unbidden yet redolent with cultural meaning. He was certain the decay of aura was linked to mass spectatorship whose emblematic filmic form overly immersed the viewer in its illusion. Mass media formats and auratic significance were in Benjamin's eyes opposed systems of meaning.

In Maguire's flower painting, for example, we find precisely this penetrating filmic image operating as the vehicle for auratic effects. Invariably Maguire's art conflates oppositions: formal and allegorical, symbolic and literal, conceptual and sensual, upon all of which prior aesthetic meanings have historically been founded. It is as though the paintings were switching an object around just below the threshold of vision – an object which, despite its invisibility (indeed because of it), is crucial to the advent of meaningful sight. Philippe Lacque-Labarthe refers to this metaphoric object as the "rhythm clue" or "participatory idea"⁴. Without this conceptual/sensual prop, scopic perception is "thrown off" and estranged. Benjamin's pastoral contemplation functioned as such a sensate metaphor. The alternate visualities invoked by painters working after conceptualism, such as Maguire, reveal how formalist painting relied upon these metaphors. Such metaphors were as important for the painterly act as were the visually obvious canvas, the viewer and the gallery wall. By deploying participatory ideas and sensate metaphors relevant to the contemporary viewer Maguire is able to create compelling visual forms from painting's threadbare *mise-en-scènes* of colour, glaze and skein of paint.

For this reason the bodily metaphors mobilised in Maguire's art are never proper to painting conventions. Architectural, theatrical, cinematic, filmic and linguistic, these spaces have all been critical to painting's history as excluded or "erased" material. The sensate "ideas" introduced by this art by Maguire are invariably those upon which painting and aesthetics have historically foundered. This art is in fact built from the detritus of formalist aesthetics. In Maguire's painting we find the post-modern "filmic" canvas, the flickering media image, the mass spectator as locus of address. His paintings are art historical compendiums of fallen aesthetic metaphors: the Dutch *vanitas*, Newman's metaphysical zips, Alber's ubiquitous square, Novalis's "impossible" flower, Fontana's slashes, Kant's bridges and Merleau-Ponty's "flesh".

By forcing these formats and metaphors into positions where their symbolic structure collapses, they can no longer achieve that delicate hierarchic balance through which the viewer loses then finds understanding. Instead, significance is achieved through the clash of antithetical meanings and from the failure of "proper" framing. The tenebrous darkness surrounding the plum of *Untitled* 1993 (p.16) does not preserve the weight of the figurative motif of the fruit and gold leaf; thereby "centring" it. In this work the painterly dialectic of image, frame and surface has broken down. The centrally located – yet decentred – plum, bobs quixotically in the inky black glaze; it is displaced by the very *chiaroscuro* that circumscribes its form. The anodyne flatness of the plum, like the lucre of the striated gold leaf, is at odds with the way it lures our look – a filmic lure to which the eye clings.

There is a radical disjunction between the frame and contents of Maguire's paintings that defies any kind of hierarchical ordering. Yet in this way the losses that painting has experienced come to be the site of a new impossible identification – impossible due to the antagonistic viewing bodies his works address. In this sense Maguire's painting functions apotropaically – like the evil eye which both destroys and protects. Sites of aesthetic loss and decline are transformed into fertile modalities by turning them *volte-face*, a reversal achieved by introducing inassimilable elements into the events of the work.

Maguire introduces these foreign elements performatively; altering the fictive scenario and so imaginary space that the work and viewer inhabit. He has evolved an extensive visual vocabulary from the perverse obstruction of painterly meaning by working with installation, local geography, lithography, pastel and such de-skilling techniques as drawing with his feet. For example by employing a filmic form in which image and surface are not separable but are continuous. Maguire obstructs the dialectic tension between image and surface so crucial to conventional painterly significance. Through his painting the artist deliberately confronts the way in which subjective meaning divides along axes of self-knowledge. Maguire's preoccupation with what he terms "truth lost in the telling" is evoked by the titles of his first flower works *Lapsus Memoriae* in the exhibition *Lapsus Linguae*⁵. As these Latinate names indicate, such a poetic "truth" appears only when visual certainty lapses.

There is an abstraction in the filmic image not figured through surface impasto but in the extreme close-up, where something is exposed that does not lie beyond the image but in it; an abstraction which is the stain of our desire to see ourselves seeing. Maguire has pursued this abstraction appearing in the image itself for most of his career. It is created in his early flower painting from veils of erotically blurred, semi-transparent glazes that visually coalesce into petals, stamen and light. More recently this deliquescent light and shape appear in his "flesh" paintings. Visual homonymy of illusionist colour gradation, filmic blur and "monochrome" canvas collude to produce a fantastic estrangement of visual sign from affect. This estrangement elicits an almost hallucinatory projection that Edward Colless compares to "Shelley's vision of his wife Mary's breasts as eyes"⁶. In Maguire's painting the sublime illusions sought by romantic poets and artists via organic metaphors is instead produced from the rhetorical destruction of their most sensuous artistic format, the framed painted surface.

The pictorial strategy of using a visual homonymy transforms the most psychologically convincing artistic metaphors into surface device. It was initially deployed to full effect in the *Bridge* paintings, which exploit the confusion arising from the square format spanning opposed artistic philosophies. In *Bridge* 1988 (p.14) Alber's symbolic abstraction is linked with the transcendent light and figuration of American luminist landscape painters who created essentially the same humanist glow that is embodied in the square of non-illusionist colour. Using the fortuitous visual homonymy of the bridge and the square, Maguire conflates opposed philosophies, depriving both of the distinctions via which their artistic stances were promoted. Like a riddle, the method reveals much in a most economical manner. There is a conceptual striptease here which is mathematical

in its depiction of all artistic manoeuvres, including its own, as illusions that bring the works to an abyss.

In the *Canal* series (p.9), this abyssal vision outmanoeuvres the capture of even the illusionist devices such as the ersatz zips of light bisecting fields of modulated colour that Maguire employs allegorically in the style of Barnett Newman. The *Canal* works evolved from the depiction of candescent waters in the Grand Union Canal, East London in his *Bridge* series. Chisenhale Gallery, where the *Canal* works were initially exhibited, is located on this same canal, but lacks a view of it. In this exhibition space the canal functioned theatrically as a sensate force behind the paintings; artworks such as *Canal 1* 1992 (p.15), acted like blind windows onto a physical fiction, the canal. Here the metaphoric presence of the canal waters comprises a poetic film marrying painting, viewer and image. This aquatic metaphor wends through the *Canal* series as a reflective pool in the painterly image. Through this filmic metaphor Benjamin's opposition between nature and technology is collapsed and another vision finds itself mirrored.

Maguire's painting produced auratic effects but it does so in a fashion antithetical to everything the aesthetic and the aura has to date represented. In Maguire's painting the organic and the technological are not set in opposition, but collude to create aesthetic significance. Long regarded as inhibitory, the possibility of a fragmented filmic vision as the basis of intersubjective meaning continues to challenge theories of art. Yet this shift away from the formal, "natural" body as the only metaphor for painting has allowed for the diversification of painterly meaning, not prohibited it. In recent works, like *Untitled* 1994 (p.35) this shift has prompted links between Fontana's destructive expressive slash and the calculated mechanisms of *trompe l'oeil* and monochrome art, referenced in earlier paintings.

As well, Maguire's use of deterritorialised metaphors in his painting enables alternate identifications with past abstract poetic visions to be made. Pushing the illusionist abstraction of previous flower paintings to extremes, *Untitled* 1994 (p.25) recalls Flaubert's spectacle of *The Temptation of St Anthony*, whose hallucinations showed rocks that looked like brains, "stalactites like breasts, veins of iron like tapestries adorned with figures". In *Untitled* 1994 this promiscuous vision liquefies the "canvas" with abstract illusions. The coloured glazes on the smooth paper surface mimic the textural depth of the missing canvas⁷. The surface of these paintings is an image, and the image a surface that is formed through the voluptuous direction and chimerical twists of brush and smeared red palette. This painting abrades our sight with corpuscular light. Like Maguire, we succumb to the painter's temptation to glimpse the sensuous limit created as it departs from our vision, even as our vision strives to grasp it.

Eloise Lindsay
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Notes

¹ Percy Sheeley, "The Triumph of Life", cited in J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic As Host", in Bloom et al. eds. *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Continuum, New York, 1992, p.239. Taken from Thomas Hutchinson, ed. *Poetical Works*, Oxford University Press, 1973.

² Jacques Derrida "Living On: Border Lines", Bloom et al, eds, *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Continuum, New York, 1992, p.90.

³ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *Illuminations*, Fontana, Great Britain, 1970, p.224.

⁴ Philippe Lacque-Labarthe, "The Echo of the Subject", in *Typography*, Harvard University Press, 1989, pp.193-4.

⁵ *Horns of the Dilemma* 1986 is the title of a 16 part still-life drawn by foot in the exhibition *Lapsus Linguae* where *Lapsus Memoriae I & II*, 1989, were first exhibited. *Lapsus Linguae catalogue*, Chameleon Contemporary Art Space, Hobart, 1989.

⁶ Edward Colless, "Evil Eye", ex. Cat. *Tim Maguire : 1989-1990*, Deutscher Brunswick Street, Melbourne, 1990.

⁷ All Maguire's flower paintings are executed on sized paper on canvas. The weft of the canvas is thus an absent material presence that is illusionistically articulated via layered semi-transparent colour glazes.