

## TIM MAGUIRE - "CANAL"

### CHISENHALE GALLERY, LONDON, 1992

This exhibition is based on a series of five large paintings, oils on canvas. Its title, *Canal*, is at once straightforward – referring to its inspiration and an immediate geographical context – and oblique, as it conflates notions of man-made and natural phenomena. The work is site-specific, declaring itself to be in and “about” a particular place, and at the same time precipitates thoughtful generalisation. Through Maguire’s work the canal becomes an analogy for our interaction with the world, the confrontations and impositions that shape our reality.

*Canal* literally refers to the Hertford Union Canal, which branches off the Grand Union Canal system and runs alongside Chisenhale Gallery. Inaccessible and not visible from inside the gallery, it exists immediately behind the long wall on which the series is hung. This wall, like the other walls of this hermetic space, has no windows. Particularly in these circumstances, the format of the work constitutes a pun on the conventional metaphor of paintings as windows. Hung at regular intervals, the paintings are bisected vertically by a band of high-keyed colour, thus suggesting casements and a penetration of the wall. The band is easily seen as an aperture, through which light emanates, and the smooth finish of the paintings, reminiscent of glazing, only serves to reinforce the metaphor.

Equally, the paintings might be read as aerial views, or maps. The vertical bands, in fields of gently modulated colour, have the straightness of canals – rivers, being natural things, never do – signifying the difference made by human invention. Arguably such invention is epitomised by artistic activity, and this perhaps accounts for the fact that Maguire’s work, which could not be described as self-referential (as this word connotes closure and exclusivity) is very much art about art.

*Canal*, characteristically for Maguire, alludes to various aesthetic stereotypes. Most obvious perhaps are those derived from Barnett Newman’s sublime abstraction and the Spatialism of Lucio Fontana – Maguire’s vertical bands resemble “zips” and razor cuts respectively. But that Maguire isn’t aspiring to the condition of modernism is a message conveyed by his medium and an appropriation of artistic devices, especially those associated with Romantic German and post-war Australian landscape traditions, conducive to the creation of pictorial space as opposed to an emphasis on properties of the picture plane.

Towards the bottom of each painting in this series, breaking the symmetry, are brushstrokes that reveal themselves mimicking the movement of water. We see reflections and refractions such as those that might be found at the base of lock gates just opened, or almost closed. These brushstrokes complicate our overall impression of the paintings – simultaneously, they construct a *trompe l’oeil* (an

illusion of the effects of light on water), they demonstrate deftly the way paint works, and they function as steps towards a breathtaking vision of emptiness.

The complexity of these paintings, belied by their formal stringency, is typical of Maguire's work as a whole. Earlier untitled ("Bridge") paintings by him, for example, similarly relate to the Grand Union Canal and modernist abstraction – here, images of a bridge entrance over the canal are fused with Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square*. The square, again an unnatural phenomenon, and usually associated with stability and permanence, dissolves in its own reflection. Like the vertical band in the paintings of *Canal*, the square represents an illuminated void, and plays a similar role within the work. It evokes a similar response in us.

Prior to the Bridge paintings, Maguire had not painted reflections of light in relation to particular discrete objects. The paintings of columns (1986 – 1989), in particular, assert a weight and tangibility – if only to suggest their subversion – and so, despite formal similarities, the *Canal* paintings make different propositions. Their femaleness (conveyed without the implicit cruelty of Fontana's cuts) complements the phallic quality of the columns. A post-painterly abstraction spliced with a seductive illusionism is appropriate for the subject of *Canal* and thus contrasts with the figurative style of the earlier paintings.

The paintings of *Canal* are extraordinary for their allusive quality. They are sumptuous, suggesting that they might exist for their own sake, but this possibility is contradicted by the countless references they make. They embody and assert a knowingness which foils aesthetic delectation. We cannot bask simply in their light.

**Jonathan Watkins**  
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