

Tim Maguire, 1996
Catalogue

ILLUSION and REALITY

Movements in art history can be compared to the swings of a pendulum. The movements always take place within a given limited, and it is only the extent of the oscillation that varies. Counter positions come about automatically. Sparseness stands against extravagance, realism against exuberance, the geometric against the organic, the rational against the fantastic, an art of commitment against l'art pour l'art. Such oppositions can actually coincide, as in Postmodernism wherein all citations from the past, even the seemingly straightforward, are made relative. But should such a reference to earlier artworks not be a citation, but rather a point of departure for something of quite a different nature whose origin is not immediately recognisable, then we can no longer speak of Postmodernism. For things happen that determine the course of art history; something new comes into being that, while actually nourishing itself from that which already exists, runs in opposition to that which has been the case hitherto.

In Tim Maguire's studio in the last few months several kinds of painting have emerged: large format flower compositions and single blooms based on details of still-life painting of the 17th and 18th centuries; fruit, somewhat defamiliarised by his use and manipulation of glazes; and illusionistic works, some with corporeal clefts and protrusions, others trompe l'oeil slashed canvases à la Fontana.

Tim Maguire's flower pictures are, in terms of art history and his own biography, a pendulum swing in a contrary direction. His work up to the nineteen-nineties was characterised by contrasts of light and shade, rectangular or banded vistas within a dark surround. In the "*Canal*" pictures bright central stripes are graded into the dark. Light itself seems to spread out. In some works, by subtle gradations, this light nearly reaches the edge. Already in these simply constructed, axially symmetrical pictures, Maguire announces his love for a transparent painting in which light appears to emerge.

His step towards the Baroque pluralism of the flower paintings was therefore a leap in terms of subject, though not in terms of the underlying painterly conception. It is in the architecture of the Baroque that we can best see how strongly responses to light have been employed. Sacred spaces open themselves to the day and the sun as never before. By its clever play with a multitude of forms, Baroque art brought a fullness to light. But it spoke of more than the bright heavens. It derived from the Catholic counter-reformation, and Hell and darkness underlay its conception of the world. The path to eternal joy or eternal pain was death. Memento mori, attended by terrifying descriptions of hell and its horrors, continuously reminded the populus of the inevitable end awaiting them.

Something of this stark tendency to think in black and white terms can be found in many Dutch paintings of the 17th and 18th centuries. Genre paintings such as flower pieces did not serve to educate the masses but to ornament the living rooms of the rich burghers. Here the brights and darks of the Baroque appear as light and shadow, with bright and colourful flowers against black grounds. These pictures, with their apparently harmless subject matter, were free of weighty symbolism, though the transitoriness of flowers evoked a sense of life's fleeting nature.

For Maguire, with his reduced, light-filled paintings, flowers must have been a revelation. They are also in a way a kitsch embodiment of the beauty of nature, and of the peaceful co-existence of growth and decay. They therefore fitted with Maguire's attraction to the oppositional and the difficult. He has had to find a way to depict flowers in a contemporary way; that is, non-naturalistically. Our perception is influenced by the large formats and enlarged details of advertising the cinema. Maguire takes account of both. He chooses colour photographs of details of flower still-lives, and enlarges these directly, without mechanical assistance, onto canvases of up to 2 by 6 metres. These paintings can barely be apprehended as a whole. Our eyes move around them as if across a cinema screen. Although his flowers often hardly differ from their originals other than in scale, their enlargement substantially changes their nature. Thus the centre of a rose can become like the flesh interior of a body. Single petals, or the spaces between plants, become landscapes, with hills, rocks and precipices. Similar transformations often occur with the enlargements by electron microscopy of micro-organisms: they can hardly appear as that which they are, but become vaguely monstrous or landscape-like. Such immense enlargements make us aware of the boundaries of our vision and comprehension. They demonstrate that our perception is based on relationships that are structured in us as a given. On the other hand, we still recognise these flowers as flowers, if not botanically exact, be they painted, stylised or abstracted.

Maguire's compositions closely follow the details he has selected. He rarely omits anything, and never admits an element not apparent in the original image. As a result of their enlargement the colours and tonal contrasts are magnified. The biblical struggle between darkness and light repeats itself dynamically. In order to extract as much light as possible Maguire applies thin transparent glazes over a white polyester ground which, in contrast to conventional canvas, absorbs no paint and shows no grain, and gives to the paintings the smoothness of a photograph. Although obviously painted by hand, they have the physicality of mechanically produced prints. Their vibrant colour, their rich gradations and subtle brushwork can only be appreciated at first hand. Maguire creates a connection, a state of suspension both seen and felt, between old handcrafted techniques and the new methods of contemporary technology.

This state of suspension is intensified in those of his works based on pure illusionistic structures. These works look like textured reliefs, but if touched their photographic flatness becomes apparent. They deal with contrast in its fundamental form. One rose-red picture (*Untitled 96U26*) shows nothing but protruding particles, large and small, while a light blue painting (*Untitled 96U27*)

seems to depict a plastered wall punctuated by depressions. Both effects are based on the same phenomena of the varying effects of light, but are executed in completely opposite ways. These illusions of recession and protrusion are even more impressive in *Untitled 96C23* and *Untitled 96C24*, two works representing parts of bodies. One shows a key-hole shaped depression which is immediately recognisable as a navel by its position on the canvas and its surrounding pink-red flesh tones. In the other pale bluish grey painting a protuberance is visible, suggesting both a breast and the malleability of the stretched canvas.

These illusionistic works conjure a non-existent spatiality on their surfaces. They are therefore “untrue”. Our eyes are unable to connect the real and pretended dimensions. Since the discovery of perspective, most easel paintings have drawn their sustenance from this paradox. In Maguire’s paintings of peaches and lemons their volume is achieved by the conventional use of chiaroscuro. He then disrupts their veracity by radically distressing their component glazes, so the fruit, though still recognisable as such, become something other, like luminous planetary orbs. This oscillation between the certain and the unknown is typical of Maguire. It reflects his aspiration toward paintings in which the conscious gesture and the controlled use of colour go hand in hand with random intervention and results achieved by chance. Recognising that the conscious and unconscious are united within us, he tries to keep the rational, the emotional and the uncontrollable in equilibrium. And here we sense the actual truth of the paintings; the question of the reality or otherwise of their spaces seems finally to be of secondary importance.

Lucio Fontana solved the discrepancy between real and painted space by slicing into the canvas. In these famous works the light surfaces are interrupted by the black emptiness of space, the dark-as-night as described in Genesis: the formless creation that was in its beginning filled with darkness. When Maguire paints his trompe l’oeil versions of Fontana’s slashed canvas, he inverts the phenomenon: light, thence colour is created, and the picture field which in Fontana’s works was destroyed appears to us to remain intact. Maguire paints the slashes so perfectly that the spatial illusion is complete, and we are forced to scrutinise the paintings at close range to verify their physical reality. These swings of the pendulum between spatial illusion and painting’s physicality characterise the experience of looking at representational painting.

Tim Maguire’s painting proceeds towards the basic conditions of painting itself, and studies their effects. As paint cannot exist without light, light has become a central concern. His technique in oil emulates watercolour in its transparency and luminosity. Goethe said “Everything in painting that is achievable through colours, and that has delight as its end, is finally based on transparency. What gives watercolour its cheerfulness, its brilliance, through the overlaid washes of colour, the day as the white, is the paper ground shining through.” Maguire searches not only for the day, but for the tension between the day and the night, and the dawn in between. He is interested in all graduations of light and darkness and in all variations of colour, and equally in the endless diversity of forms, not simply in abstract construction. But he is also interested in the things of the everyday, the familiar, the particularity of a flower or a fruit. Through his return to historic still life paintings, he makes an arc of connection to history, to an epoch in which meaning

was transformed, and he shows in his enlargements how, by merely making a shift in scale and by use of a symbolic order closely identified with an earlier time, a similar symbolic shift can still be made.

Maria Vogel,

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Translated by Andreas Ruethi and Ian Hunt