

Tolarno Galleries – Tim Maguire – 12th Melbourne Festival, 1997 Exhibition – The Art of Tim Maguire, published by Tolarno

RELUCTANT ROMANTIC

Early in the 1730s, God sent a tiny worm to punish the sinful Dutch. The worm, dutiful to its Creator and voracious in its appetites, busied itself under the waters of the North Sea, gnawing through the wooden foundations of the dykes. Soon, the dykes collapsed, and a great flood inundated the country. The worm became, in the popular imagination, not only a potent symbol of the power of the Lord to punish a nation's sins, but a warning to His subjects about the dangers of human arrogance and pride.

Jan Ruyter made an engraving in 1731, which depicts pieces of timber from the dykes eaten into a fine filigree by the worms. It has the same monumental abstract quality we find in later Romantic art (Ruskin's detailed watercolours of natural phenomena, Graham Sutherland's gnarled natural forms of the 1940s, or, closer to home, Drysdale's huge uprooted trees). On Melbourne's late Victorian buildings, from the grandest public monument to the smallest terrace house, we can find countless examples of 'vermiculated' (literally 'worm-eaten') stonework, in which this reminder of decay is carved directly into the building's fabric. (Decoration in the Victorian era generally had a moral purpose.)

The iconography of natural retribution for mankind's abandonment of God (or of Nature, to give it its modern, secular spin) has been strong in Western art since the industrial revolution, and finds renewed impetus in the ages of AIDS, even if, as the 1994 exhibition *Don't Leave Me This Way: Art in the Age of AIDS* at the National Gallery of Australia demonstrated, artists now seem to lack the equipment for dealing with such big moral issues.

As a metaphoric interpretation of cultural decay and decadence, Ruyter's print is more explicit, yet no more potent, than earlier Dutch paintings which used the conventions of still-life to convey moral instruction. These paintings are at once joyful celebrations of the simple pleasures of middle-class material well-being and reminders of just what complacency might lead to. Flowers in a vase, lush and beautiful, yet perhaps just past their prime, one petal eaten by grubs, one fallen onto the table; or pomegranates burst open, spilling their sticky seeds; or the emptied wine glass and the opened oyster shells; such symbols reveal a complex moral universe in which every blessing of Nature implies a responsibility and every turning-away from Nature a cost.

If today, when the costs of abandoning Nature have never been more apparent, we can no longer believe in the power of art to talk to us meaningfully about them, this is not because the paintings of the Dutch golden age articulate moral certainties we can no longer believe in (they are, in fact, allusive rather than didactic), but because visual art itself has become self-referential to the extent that we can no longer trust it to talk about anything other than itself.

And it is this quandary, which results from modern art's ingrained fear of storytelling, that is played out again and again in the works of Tim Maguire.

Maguire's recent works can be read as essentially Romantic narratives which imply a moral response to the culture / nature dichotomy. This is not the only way they might be read, but it is, I think, as potentially fruitful as any other. And, since Maguire appropriates seventeenth- and eighteenth-century still-lives, we must assume that this is a reading he wants to encourage. Nevertheless, seen in this light, they raise important questions about this imperative to be self-referential.

To explain what I mean, let me go back to Maguire's earlier work.

In the mid 1980s he began a series of paintings of corrugated-iron water tanks. The best of them had a moody intensity, delicately balanced as they were between representation and abstraction. When read as objects in space, seen against the bright sky, they were evocative reworkings of Australian vernacular landscape. And that rich narrative reading kept alternating with another, which would have them as flat squares of colour. As you looked at these paintings, the 'content' kept draining out of those tanks, then flooding back again into them again.

Over time, Maguire chose to pursue a particular image of the narrow gap between the two water tanks, where a thin vertical strip of bright sky ran down the centre of the picture, and the tendency, increasingly, was to abstract this strip of light into a Barnett Newman stripe, with a rather endearing transcendental glow added to Newman's sublime. What happened in the process was a gradual elimination of the narrative dimension in the earlier, more realistic works.

The abstracted stripes were more in tune with the concerns of contemporary art, less unfashionably 'about' landscape and nationalism and social history. Like the parodical hard-edge abstracts that artists such as Robert Rooney and Dale Hickey were contriving out of knitting patterns, paling fences, and brick walls in the 1970s, these, along with the later canal and bridge paintings (which also conjured glowing abstract forms out of objects from the real world) were, among other things, sophisticated subversions of American hard-edge painting, a sort of cheeky colonial mockery. They were no longer about water tanks or bridges or canals (and all the associations those things might trail along with them), they were about art and its internal problems.

However, might this shift from narrative to abstraction have been a kind of retreat, a pulling back from Romanticism, to which Tim Maguire's natural inclination appears continually to draw him?

This convoluted and problematic relationship between what we might loosely call history painting and 'pure' abstraction is nowhere more starkly apparent than in this current exhibition, which is almost equally divided between lush, extravagant flower paintings and relatively austere textural abstractions.

The first response to the flower paintings might be to see them simply as appropriations of details from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European still-lives. But this would be to ignore their emotional impact. Maguire isn't so much deconstructing and reconstructing.

By grossly enlarging a tiny detail from the earlier works, he emphasizes not only the processes of artmaking (his bravura brushwork is sharply at odds with the pristine surfaces of the paintings he is borrowing from) but he also reinvents the sense of foreboding and decay that they were originally meant to convey, and which has slowly been leached out of them by time and familiarity. Maguire's flower and fruits, simply by having been selected out and enlarged, appear blowsier, riper, more decadent, richer in association, and stranger, than their progenitors can ever seem to us now.

But there's more: here and there the physical surface of these works appears to crackle and bubble, so, like the vermiculated stonework on Victorian buildings, the suggestions of decay and corruption is built into the very makeup of these lavishly decadent paintings. Not only are the flowers and fruits depicted beginning to fall apart, but also the depiction itself. Several interlocking Romantic narratives of creation and destruction are being replayed here.

Tim Maguire does not necessarily see the abstracts as a further refinement of the idea of decay suggested by the flower paintings:

'There is of course a sense of extreme magnification – as if that abstraction of a fruit or whatever had been carried on to the point of total unfamiliarity with the subject. But while they could be organic and microscopic, they could also be geological, vertical satellite views of planetary surfaces, sand formations seen through water. I think they all seem in a way photographic ...'

However this is probably not the way most of us will want to interpret these bubbling, crackling surfaces. We have to take into account their context among the flower paintings and, rightly or wrongly, to think of them as a logical extension of those images.

If we don't, if we accept them merely as attractively textured surfaces onto which we might project any interpretation we wish, then it seems to me we fall

into the trap that has dogged so much twentieth-century abstraction: that of meaninglessness. The drama which is inherent in the flower paintings will, in this scenario, be external to the abstracts.

On the other hand, if we insist that the abstracts be read as extreme close-ups of the surfaces of his already magnified still-life images, we must then face the question of what has been gained and what has been lost in the process. Has the act of concentration which pumped the flower paintings full of renewed meaning been taken too far? Might Maguire again be pulling back from Romanticism? If so, I long for him to resist. The flower paintings reveal Tim Maguire to be a Romantic painter of great ability. Like Anselm Kiefer's narratives of German history, they have the power to reinvigorate that great post-modernist taboo: moral debate. Anyone who is capable of talking about morality in allusive and suggestive ways, without moralizing, as Tim Maguire surely is, must be encouraged and trusted.

Peter Timms

is Editor, *Art Monthly Australia*