

Tolarno Galleries at Melbourne Art Fair, 2002

TIM MAGUIRE

Tim Maguire's art may manifest itself (primarily) in paint, however, his approach to process and source imagery is essentially photographic. The insubstantiality of the physical surface, the luminous glazes and the panoramic scale allude to cinema. The activated splashed surface and the breaking down of layers draws the viewer in to inspect the surface, whilst the scale and illusionistic presence of the image push the viewer back to take in the whole.

In creating paintings of panoramic scale, Maguire activates the sensorial body of the viewer, by employing various processes as a means of extending, amplifying and transforming the viewing experience into an almost carnal event. The emphasis on monstrous, overblown detail combined with an extraordinary luminosity evokes a sense of cinema, visible as much through the processes of making as the imagery itself. Details are distorted through scale so that the historically observable tensions between, for instance, nature and technology, abstraction and representation, mass media the individuality of paint and gesture, are collapsed. Maguire moves beyond old-fashioned dichotomies to position paint within an art-historical continuum that sees painting not as endgame, but in fecund relationship to the possibilities of other contemporary media.

Maguire is interested in addressing the physical specificity of an exhibition space to create a *misé en scene* for paintings that depict monstrous imagery derived from digital photographs in extreme close-up. The sickly camellia in varying states of maturity provides the starting point for thinking about these works so as to create an atmosphere of oppressive claustrophobia. Richly luminous petals unfold into flat abstract forms; fat fleshy blooms and squishy buds enclosed in shiny green leaves inscribe a movement between the kitsch, the beautiful and the creepy, evoking the ominous overgrowth of fantastical worlds – familiar yet strange. Within the image, the spookiness of domestic flowers run rampant suggests the passage from perfect ripeness to the miasma of rot. That over-lush and dangerously sensual ripeness, historically associated with the flora of new and imagined worlds and consequently a kind of corrupted morality (or amorality), is a recurrent trope in European art and literature, from the 12th century to the Enlightenment. Thus the drama so subtly evoked unsettles the tension between the marvellous and the monstrous, still life and cinema, figuration and abstraction, the domestic and the exotic, 'old' and 'new' worlds.

Maguire's process conflates the boundaries of painting, printing and photography by using colour separation techniques to create paintings that

simultaneously confuse yet heighten the distinction between the digital and the handcrafted, encouraging extreme readings of the work. The relationship of the viewer to the work of art allows another kind of movement in that the artist's process is ambiguous from a distance but very evident in close-up. The transparency of the finished works suggests light effects specific to digital photography.

Tim Maguire is one of Australia's most internationally recognized contemporary artists and one of the very few who has managed, for nearly twenty years, to build an extensive body of work whilst maintaining an active and prolific exhibition history both within Australia and throughout Europe and New York. Maguire is perhaps best known for his large flower paintings derived from details of colour-plate reproductions of 17th and 18th century still lives, however, his oeuvre encompasses numerous other explorations into form, content and process. As many commentators have noted, these works are not so much transcriptions as transformations, often rapidly improvised and if their historical lineage provides a kind of artistic respectability, this is offset against the rather more ambivalent relationship that the artist takes to his source material. As Adrian Searle writes, "Never does it seem that he is engaging in the trite postmodernist game of requotation and appropriation instead he treats the art of the past (whether it is the recent past of post-war modernism or the activities of Dutch genre painters of the 1700s) as something to be recaptured, not from the linear flow of history but from a field of possibilities Maguire approaches the models he uses, not with the cool eye of the theorist or the academic but as a painter, one for whom the endpoint of history must serve as a beginning".

His work has been seen recently in solo exhibitions at the John Curtin Art Gallery, Perth WA (2001) and the Campbelltown City Bicentennial Art Gallery, NSW (2002) as well as the group exhibition *It's a Beautiful Day*, at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne. In 2003 the Bendigo Art Gallery will present a ten year survey of paintings.

Of particular relevance to these new paintings, however, is the earlier site-specific exhibition, *Canal*, commissioned by Jonathan Watkins for Chisenhale Gallery, London in 1992. This exhibition exemplifies Maguire's meticulous approach to the physical demands of particular exhibition venues, in this case, an enormous, black, windowless space typically associated with installation practice. Maguire was the first artist to be commissioned to make paintings for this space. The luminosity of the exhibited suite of paintings emerging out of the blackness almost as squares of light, created an extraordinary sense of illusionistic space – as if there were apertures - within the gallery walls – blind windows onto the canal. As visitors moved from daylight into darkness, these 'abstract' works (recast after the style of Barnett Newman) evoked the physical sensation of an invisible canal just beyond the gallery walls. It is this conceptual as well as technical virtuosity that makes Tim Maguire such an exemplary artist.

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