

**Tim Maguire Catalogue, published by Curtain Gallery,  
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## **TIM MAGUIRE**

At first glance Tim Maguire's recent 'abstract' paintings resemble photographs. There is little evidence of human creation or even mediation: no recognizable trace of the artist's hand; no reference to the world negotiated daily by the naked eye. Numbered and dated, and of varying dimensions, the patterns could belong to something infinitesimally small – an object seen through an electron microscope perhaps – or equally, something awesomely vast, like a distant galaxy viewed through a powerful telescope. One has the sense of looking at, or rather through, air, water, fire, porous earth, corroded metal, or an infinity of stars. By way of a meaningful frame of reference, one might speak of 'elemental' or 'galactic' landscapes – although land is already too familiar and solid a term. 'Spacescape' is perhaps more appropriate, in its suggestion both of unbounded depth and cosmic indifference.

These are not places a viewer might confidently examine or comfortably inhabit. They prompt an awareness of one's limits: spatial, bodily, conceptual, existential. At this level – at once macroscopic and microscopic – there is no longer any distinction between animate and inanimate; organic and inorganic. There is a touch, here, of the abstract sublime: sublime in the sense of the implacable forces and raw stuff of nature.

For all its variety over the last century, abstract art has retained a fairly constant association with such essences, whether in the form of a divine creator, universal truths, pure sensations, or basic human emotions. (In contrast, naturalism has come to be linked with the transient world of appearance and anecdote.) Yet Maguire's flirtation with transcendence is not without irony. In his earlier Canal paintings, the abstracted forms of water tanks are the unlikely scene of an archetypal struggle between darkness and light. Elsewhere, a series of Bridges reprise Mark Rothko's floating slabs of colour. The ordinary – a tank, a bridge – is revealed as extraordinary; and at the same time essence is contaminated by appearance, transcendence by banality.

The 'abstract' pictures included in the present exhibition continue in this direction, even if their connection to the objective world is more tenuous. Like the Canal works and Bridges, they can be seen as profound or disorienting views of prosaic subjects. But here the strategy of depaysement beloved of the Surrealists is applied to the medium of representation itself. To be sure, these are weird visions of reality, if one wants to see them that way. Perhaps more importantly, though, Maguire makes painting strange.

Let us return to that inevitable double-take, before the indeterminate image settles finally into a painting. I have suggested that Maguire's paintings are photographic, and certainly their smoothness and flatness betray no sign of manual production. Nor, however, do they seem the product of deliberation or aesthetic choice. If this is painting masquerading as photography, then the photographer is noticeably absent. There is no attempt at framing, no focal point, no sense of surveying a scene. The apparent randomness of these images, combined with their physical properties, speaks of technological rather than human production. A couple of comparisons may help to underline the peculiarity of such painting.

The most obvious counterpart to Maguire's large scale spacescapes is American abstract expressionism. Rothko's ghostly presence has already been noted. There is something, too, of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings: the way the canvases exceed the viewer, like effects of nature or unnavigable landscapes. Both artists achieve a random element through the application of paint at a distance. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that the end results are so dissimilar. Paint is often described as an intimate medium, in that it preserves the very gestures of the artist, translating thought and movement into visible marks. In Pollock's hands (or those of his biographers), the application of paint became a form of self-portraiture, a memorial to the creative process. Maguire's use of paint is altogether more self-effacing. Despite the large format of much of his work, these are not hymns to the genius of the artist. They seem elemental rather than personal.

Tim Maguire's art is also stunningly illusionistic. By applying layers of paint, then using droplets of solvent to burn back through the layers, he conjures a strong sense of projection and recession without the slightest hint of geometrical perspective. This is not space as we know, but it is nonetheless a masterful negation of paint and canvas. Like the Renaissance painter, Maguire uses art to cancel art; but – and this is the important difference – not in the service of greater naturalism. Instead of re-presenting identifiable objects or places, Maguire foregrounds the paradoxical nature of painting – the symbiotic relationship between matter and metaphor, vision and imagination, form and content, figure and ground.

It is not surprising, in light of these concerns, that Maguire's nominally abstract canvases have coincided with figural works (the relationship between abstraction and figuration being equally symbiotic). In his literally overblown flowerpieces, the relation between figure and ground is turned on its head. The objects – based on Dutch still life paintings of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries – become the ground, while the medium itself is the site of a richly textured illusion. One experiences a shift of perspective, as when looking through a rain-streaked window. Maguire takes the time-honoured notion of the perspectively constructed 'window', and instead paints the glass.

The 'abstract' works take this interrogation of figure and ground to its logical conclusion. The illusionistic surface now displaces any original object, yet at

the same time the images are haunted by things and associations: skin, metal, heat, bone, light and dark. Such associations resonate across the artist's oeuvre, so that what initially seem to be disparate phases or bodies of work – variously baroque and abstract – are in fact closely related both conceptually and aesthetically. Perhaps, in the end, it is the sheer beauty of Maguire's painting that makes one look, a second time, at painting itself.

**Suzannah Biernoff**

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