

Fiat lux, et Lux fuit - "let there be light and there was light": the celebrated verse from the Book of Genesis describes the single event occurring in five paintings which make up Tim Maguire's 1992 Canal installation. The verse could stand as an epigraph to the whole artistic tradition from which Maguire's paintings are descended.

Fiat lux, et Lux fuit was quoted by the Roman rhetorician Longinus as an example of the style he termed Sublime - a rhetoric where simple words take on vast implications. For Longinus, the disproportion between a slender aesthetic cause and a grandiose effect was a keynote of sublimity.

Longinus's characterisation of the Sublime, and the passage from Genesis he quoted to illustrate it, inspired a group of 19th century landscape painters who have held a more than passing interest for Tim Maguire. Directly or indirectly, these texts gave rise to the theophanies of light and the trend towards drastically simplified composition which figures in paintings by Turner and Constable in England; Caspar David Friedrich and Karl Gustav Carus in Germany; Thomas Cole, Thomas Moran, Albert Bierstadt and the Hudson River painters in the USA; Eugen von Gußard in Australia.

Simple in form, but not as simple in implication, Maguire's paintings resemble Sublime rhetoric in their disproportion of means and ends. The fact that they evoke a number of imaginary contexts, histories, genealogies may also have something to do with the compounded self-consciousness (and the compounded irony) of being not just an Australian artist, but an Australian who exhibits a good deal abroad. A few years ago Maguire confessed he was fascinated by "the loss of fidelity when ideas and images are transmitted over cultural and temporal distances". Obviously, the works he has conceived for a British audience, specifically to be installed on a wall backing onto the Grand Union Canal in East London, would not be seen and interpreted exactly the same way if they were transported in front of an audience in Katoomba, in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, where Maguire usually lives. And vice versa.

Tim Maguire lives about an hour and a half's drive from Sydney where, from a promontory on a cliff called Sublime Point, one can look out over a vast, mountain-encircled nature reserve. Here the wilderness is "produced" for the beholder in an epic, quintessentially 19th-century manner - panning-out from well-tended, carefully planned walking tracks and arrayed in grand vistas before well-appointed viewing platforms. A narrow belt of suburbia stretches across the escarpment, dotted with garden show-places and Devonshire tea dispensaries - a corner of Australia that will forever be England. There is a thriving local trade in domestic-sized landscape paintings - a crop of which, one imagines, Maguire takes a keen, if surreptitious, interest. In fact, the Blue Mountains is a perfect environment to study how the romantic Sublime has been domesticated, how Nature has been subsumed by Culture, and how art may prepare the way for tourism.

The scenery in Maguire's home turf in the Blue Mountains, the Grand Union Canal in London, the colonization and settlement of Australia, the metaphysical tinge in 19th century landscape painting and other, much more topical 1990s issues (with regard to ecology, cultural theory, philosophy, etc) are evoked simultaneously by Maguire's new works, forcing us to consider the interrelationships of these seemingly disparate phenomena. Some of the connections are quite straightforward and are a basic part of all Australians' self-knowledge. For example: the Industrial Revolution which built the Grand Union Canal from London to Manchester caused large-scale demographic disturbances in Britain, which caused a soaring crime-rate, which stepped-up the policy of deportation to British colonies, which resulted in the British settlement of Australia.

The "sublime" style in European landscape painting corresponded directly to conditions brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the social revolutions sweeping the Continent at the turn of the 18th century.

In this revolutionary era (as J.-F. Lyotard put it), "the community now had less need to identify with its prince, its core, than it had to explore its boundaries" - whence the taste for wilderness scenery attracting painters into the solitudes of the American West or to Brazil, into the Blue Mountains or to other newly opened hinterlands of the Australian continent. In fact, a Viennese-born, Dusseldorf-trained painter specialising in sublime landscapes, Eugen (or Eugene) von Gußard, became the founding director of the first art school established in Australia. (One work from Maguire's 1990 Horizon series is subtitled "after Eugene von Gußard"; it resembles one of his Canal paintings turned on its side.)

The new individualistic and libertarian ethos of 19th century Europe gave vent to religious feelings that were sometimes expressed in unorthodox ways, bypassing the authority of the Church - in the guise of the fervent transcendentalism and nature-mysticism which fuelled the landscape cult, for instance. In Romantic landscape painting (and lyric poetry) the Sublime was usually signified by an awesome discharge of cosmic violence, an inconceivable vastness, or a beatitude of light. It is now customary, when we want to ascertain the specific religious beliefs of a Romantic artist, to examine whether he or she identified the Sublime with the Deity, with the Demiurge, or with the Being of beings - distinctions which establish whether the artist was a Christian, a Neo-Platonist or an agnostic.

In the early 1980s, the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard mounted a persuasive argument reclaiming the Sublime from mysticism and reconsecrating it for modernism. Irrespective of its erstwhile religious colouration, Lyotard argued that the Sublime summoned up the idea of a radical otherness, of an irreducible difference, of something unknowable, indeterminate, non-demonstrable and unrepresentable. He emphasized that Kant had characterized the Sublime in quite unmythical terms - as a "negative presentation" - and had equated it with "the abstract".

Lyotard suggested how the Romantic landscapists' commitment to the Sublime had placed art (maybe for the first time in history) in a critical, antagonistic relationship to the common suppositions of its patron class. It challenged scientific rationalism, technology and capitalism by refuting the assumption that one could "know all, be capable of all". In this respect, Romantic landscape painting was a forerunner and model of that "negative presentation" and "the abstract" which have become familiar to us through the modernist avant-garde.

Tim Maguire's paintings reflect his own creative engagement with art history and his exploration of the traditional iconology of the Sublime. However, strictly speaking, it is a contradiction of terms to consider the sublime as imagery, to think of it in terms of representation. "We are defeated in the attempt to form an image of its concept" (to steal a phrase from Friedrich von Schiller). Or, to steal a more recent phrase from Mark C. Taylor, "the revelation of difference is always at the same time its revelation".

Of particular relevance to Maguire's Canal series are works of the American painter Barnett Newman, whose abstract colour fields, traversed by one or more vertical bands (or "zips", as Newman termed them) are prototypes for Maguire's formats. Barnett Newman's importance as a polemicist is almost equal to his influence as a painter: in 1948 he wrote an essay entitled 'The Sublime is Now', defending the emerging generation of American abstract painters (including Pollock, Rothko, Still and of course Newman himself). The terms of this polemic were, at one and the same time, provocatively novel and astoundingly antiquated. He resurrected the terminology of the 19th century transcendentalism, applied it to the avant-garde paintings of his own time, and it all made perfect sense.

But Newman's paintings were themselves the proof of the pudding: if the sublime pretensions of his manifesto had been linked to a lesser painter or to a lesser order of artistic achievement, they would be very fatuous indeed. However, there is an exhilarating openness, clarity of colour, perfection of scale, human

warmth and resonance of feeling in his art; the "subject" of Newman's paintings, which he insisted upon so repeatedly and strenuously, was, it seems, related to that ultimate western philosophical abstraction: Being.

"Being" was the link between the kind of abstract painting produced by Newman and his peers and their Romantic antecedents: they all emphasized a metaphysics of "presence", put faith in a "spirit" which preceded, exceeded, transcended the means of representation. The sublime subject was only accessible to viewers by means of empathy, via a mode of "poetic knowledge". Without this leap of faith, spirit was undemonstrable, was unrepresentable.

The sublime is not an essence but an iconography in Maguire's paintings. It persists as a kind of threshold - yet, if it holds out any invitation to make a leap of faith, neither the artist nor his viewers may be tempted. The trappings of the old Sublime confront us as affectless, calculated, empty, vacated of the rhetoric of presence and spirit, snap frozen by scepticism.

No doubt there are parallels between Maguire's purge of the metaphysical from Barnett Newman's formats (which is corroborated in Dan Flavin and Philip Taaffe's work - another two artists influenced in rather perverse ways by Barnett Newman) and certain tendencies in contemporary philosophy - notably a parallel in Jacques Derrida's project of dismantling the old western "philosophy of Being" by stripping it of its "metaphysics of presence". And if Derrida considers his own philosophy to be a kind of post-philosophy, so Tim Maguire's work implied a gamut of "post-ness" - post-industrial, post-modern, post-colonial - towards which his comfortless beams of light seem to point in so many avenues warranting exploration, and conversely seem to converge upon the viewer in a baleful interrogation.

But the view from Sublime Point, Australia, is a little different. A kind of apocalypticism thrives, as it must do, in a landscape which for aeons has adapted to extremes of drought, flood and fire. Sunlight and fine weather abound here, but we mistrust their benefits increasingly: Australians have the highest incidence of skin-cancer in the world and Tasmania and the southern parts of the continent are being affected by radiation let in by the hole in the ozone layer.

Hence Australians have little choice in the matter of maintaining their collective, cultural investments in the Sublime. We are impressed with the fact that Edmund Burke equated the Sublime with Terror - more specifically with terrors which, Lyotard pointed out, were linked to privations: "Privation of light, terror of darkness; privation of others, terror of solitude; privation of language, terror of silence; privation of objects, terror of emptiness; privation of life, terror of death". Perhaps the post-modern has added another fear to Burke's 18th century list: the fear of the death of art.

The sublime reminds us of finitude and indicates the closeness of death. Let the viewer of Tim Maguire's paintings consider the protagonist of Wallace Stevens' poem 'Auroras of Autumn' who, before he opened his door onto a sky bedevilled with Northern Lights, seemed to find innocent amusement in mumbling a parody of the abstract language, clumsy paradoxes and quaint, Germanic syntax associated with the philosophy and artistic trappings of the Sublime. But then experience overtook him:

There is nothing until in a single man contained,
Nothing until this named thing nameless is
And is destroyed. He opens the door of his house
On flames. The scholar of one candle sees
An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame
Of everything he is.

Terence Maloon

Sydney, July 1992