

TOLARNO GALLERIES

TIM MAGUIRE

OLD WORLD, NEW WORLD

Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, Australia

12 March to 10 April 2021

For those who call the continent of Australia home, the regeneration of native flora in the wake of bushfire is always a welcome sight, and never more so than following the devastating bushfire season of 2019-20. The process plays out as a triumph of colour over monochrome. First comes a lime-green fuzz, smudging the blackened trunks and branches of recently scorched trees. Then the frothy clouds expand to form a garment of chartreuse leaves, radiant and flickering in the light.

Observing the regrowth during regular trips to regional town Orange to visit family, Sydney-based artist Tim Maguire stopped in the Blue Mountains village of Bell one day to take photographs of the delicate swathes of colour as they grew to obscure the skeletons from which they sprang. "I had been thinking about making a couple of paintings based on the aftermath of bushfire for some time, and this particular expanse of bushland caught my eye," says Maguire.

Exporting one of the photographs into Photoshop, he began to finesse the image. "I added a tree, adjusted the light and amped up the colour to give it a lift," says Maguire. Then, using a colour separation process derived from commercial printmaking, he converted the image into three layers: yellow, magenta and cyan.

Printing out each layer on paper as a guide, Maguire began to reconstruct the digital image as a painting, using successive layers of transparent oil pigment applied to a white canvas with a broad brush. Yellow first, then magenta, and finally cyan. Before each layer dried, he peppered it with spots of solvent.

The finished work, *Bell*, is one of two large-format triptychs in Maguire's exhibition of new paintings, *Old World, New World* at Tolarno Galleries. Devoid of ground and crown, the trees pick out a complex rhythm against a pale mauve background, gently rustling their feather-boa leaves. The canvas has a resplendent quality, and yet, while undeniably a picture of rejuvenation, it is not entirely innocuous.

"The leaves down in the bottom left-hand corner could be flames, and that charred trunk in the centre might still be burning," says Maguire, adding that he achieved the glowing effect of embers by splashing solvent onto the cyan layer to expose the red made from magenta and yellow. "The sense that the fire could still be in there came to me while I was painting it."

Maguire was especially struck by the virginal whiteness of some of the trunks, their bark sloughed off by the conflagration. "This painting is about damage but also rebirth," he says. "It's a little bit spiritual – they could be ghosts, or relics."

Bell signals the artist's return to a subject matter he last explored in 2015 with his multi-panel digital pigment print, *Kinglake Panorama*. That landmark work, an impression of which is in the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia, was based on a montage of photos taken by Maguire a year after a catastrophic fire tore through the eponymous Victorian town in the Black Saturday bushfires of 2009.

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“You see the evidence of this massive force that has laid the landscape to waste, and the energy of the regrowth,” he wrote in a text to accompany his survey show, *Everything Changes*, at Newcastle Art Gallery in 2017. “This destruction and transformative regeneration is, I hope, mirrored in my process, whereby an image is pulled apart into its constituent colours, and remade.”

The painting’s rhythmic diagonals find their counterpoint in the exhibition’s other triptych, *Totes Meer*, a semi-abstract tableau of corrugated iron that reads as the buckled remnants of a farm shed following a firestorm.

The work is named after, and informed by, a painting in the collection of Tate Britain by English artist Paul Nash, who served as an official war artist during both world wars. German for ‘Dead Sea’, Nash’s canvas, which he based on sketches as well as photos, depicts a metal graveyard of wrecked German aircraft the artist sighted at Cowley in 1940.

As with *Bell*, *Totes Meer* recalls earlier work by Maguire, including minimalist landscapes from the late 1980s of corrugated-iron water tanks in flood plains. “Those paintings were symbols of the failures of colonisation, geometric and rational structures rendered useless by harsh natural events such as flooding,” he says.

Created in the same way – with transparent layers of yellow, magenta and cyan that combine to give the painting the tonal richness of black mother-of-pearl – the twisted ruins can be understood as emblematic of Australia’s historical – and, many would say, ongoing – failure to adapt to the particularities of this continent’s environment, especially in terms of farming practices.

Complementing the triptychs are five still lifes in extreme close up, another Maguire signature. Dewy and delectable, these lustrous details of flowers and fruit are drawn from works by Dutch masters such as Jan van Huysum (1682–1749), whose visual cornucopias were terrifically popular in the early 18th century. Maguire has been fascinated by this source material for several decades now.

The genre of Dutch still life, especially in the 17th century, is famous for its *memento mori* paintings – think skulls and snuffed candles – designed to remind us of our mortality and inspire godly behaviour. “Yet at the same time, Dutch still life was also about the abundance of empire, a catalogue of material luxury,” he says, referring to the trading behemoth that was the Dutch East India Company. “And, of course, those fruits of empire were not attained without cost to those new worlds from which they came.”

Old world, new world. Empire, colony. Destruction, rebirth. The recent bushfires, which were unprecedented in their scale and ferocity, burnt through more than 12.6 million hectares of forest and bushland. For Maguire, they are a stark reminder that Australia needs to face up to the reality of climate change and do more to protect its natural habitat and animals. “The show’s title refers to the old world of Dutch still life painters and to the so-called new world of Australia,” says Maguire. “But I’m also thinking about the failure to adapt imported concepts from the old world and achieve some kind of harmony here.”

– Tony Magnusson, curator and writer

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Artist biography

Tim Maguire's paintings and prints are cinematic in scale and distinctive for their rich colouration and technical skill. Giant flowers and golden fruit resonate from ambiguous backgrounds. The work is sumptuous, romantic. National Gallery of Australia Head Curator, International Art Shaune Lakin argues that Maguire's painting is 'both historical and contemporary'. But that these modes 'do not exactly co-exist... they rub up against each other.'

Maguire uses digital photographs as source material for his oil paintings. He applies colour separation techniques not unlike those used in commercial printing. The distinction between the digital and the handcrafted is blurred. 'Maguire's surfaces hold these competing formalisms – of the Modernist canvas and the digital print – in close proximity ...'

Shifting between abstraction (up close) and figuration (at a distance), Tim Maguire's paintings are alive, fecund even, with dramatic tension.

Tim Maguire has exhibited widely both within Australia and throughout Europe since winning the Moët and Chandon Fellowship in 1993. Major solo shows have been presented at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK; the John Curtin Gallery, Western Australia; Bendigo Art Gallery, Victoria and Maitland Regional Art Gallery, NSW.

Tim Maguire is widely collected by institutions in Australia, Europe and the US.