

*Elizabeth Magill*

by Declan Long 2014

Among the landscapes featured in Jane Campion's extraordinary recent TV drama *Top of the Lake*, is a place called 'Paradise'. It is a gloriously open lakeside setting, a place of apparent peace and natural perfection. But it is also a haunted and contested terrain: a site of tragic past events and present-day disputes. For all its overt magnificence, 'Paradise' is a strangely uneasy location — and in this way it is entirely typical of Campion's richly un-reassuring vision of landscape. Travelling beyond the troubled grandeur of the lake, Campion leads us to a variously dreamy and disturbing diversity of forest hideaways — homes to assorted escapees from the constraints of modern life. And though Campion consistently pictures these forest havens with a luminous, high-definition beauty, the aesthetic immersion in nature offers no simple consolations or straightforward lessons. Rather, these woods — like 'Paradise' — are envisioned as densely contradictory landscapes, accommodating uncomfortably coinciding perceptions and expectations of place.

A similar kind of concentrated ambiguity regarding the natural world — a disquieting *density* of potential atmosphere and allusion — characterises the paintings of London-based Northern Irish artist Elizabeth Magill. Over the course of her thirty-year career (she graduated from the Slade School of Art in 1984) Magill has been repeatedly drawn to woodlands and wild places — and she draws from them a gorgeous and engrossing multiplicity of visual and sensory 'description'. From time to time — such as at points in *Quasi-Real and Branch-Like*, her 2013 exhibition at London's Wilkinson Gallery — Magill's art appears lovingly alert to the precise, actually-existing details of forest landscapes. There are so many studied groupings of entwined trees in her paintings, so many acutely observed

convolutions of interlocking branches. *Dendriform* (2012),



'Dendriform', oil on canvas, 214 x 277 cm, 2012-13.

one of several such works featured in the Wilkinson show, employs a title (meaning 'tree-like form') that pits generic categorization against the unruly idiosyncrasy of uniquely configured natural relationships. The painting goes close-up on the intimate, entangled togetherness of a busy stretch of forest: a dozen or so thin, twiggy, wind-bent trees, endlessly overlapping and interconnecting, none standing entirely alone as a separate, emblematic entity.

*Betula Pendula*, also from 2012, takes the Latin name for the silver birch tree as its typological title — as if the sampling and analysis of a distinct species is of critical artistic importance. But backlit with a pallid yellow glow (an edge-of-suburbia sort of illumination, perhaps) each slender, silvery trunk assumes a spectral insubstantiality. In this instance, the trees seem to be disappearing

from view, just as Magill carefully singles out their skinny forms for special attention.



'Betula Pendula', oil on canvas, 168 x 198cm, 2012.

If Magill's art often involves, then, an embedded but offbeat style of botanical scrutiny — undertaken, no doubt, with intensifying environmental threats to such wild places prominently in mind — a spirit of disconcerting ghostliness is also persistently present. Magill frequently creates woodland scenes with apparently exacting, conscientious fidelity to the given conditions of reality — her paintings are insistently attentive to infinitesimal visual detail — but there is also an abiding and stirring sense of these places as not quite real, or as only *Quasi-Real*. For all the intensity of the artist's gaze, it might be that no single, stable place is fully, objectively 'there' to be pictured. Rather, place sometimes emerges in these paintings as a convulsively beautiful amalgam of sensory affects, visual impressions and imaginative possibilities. These landscapes — maybe like all landscapes — are the products of slanted and enchanted perceptions: formed and transformed under the influence of personal memories, potent myths and artistic conventions, as much as from

any tangible physical properties. The vital focus of *Sighting* (2012),



‘Sighting’ oil on canvas, 168 x 198cm, 2012.

for instance, might be the long-beaked, white-plumed little bird that sits on a raised branch in the upper part of the picture — a glimpse, perhaps, of a rare but crucially *real* part of the forest fauna. But the key subject might also be the strange, uncertain material substance of the forest itself. It is a space somehow both inchoate and decomposing all at once. These woods combine organic solidity with other strains of near-translucent, phantasmal growth: we see thick, firm branches twisting around the trunks of other, eerily ethereal and semi-invisible trees, as if this were a meeting not just of different species but of different realities. The declaration of ‘sighting’ here hints at supernatural access: a usually unseen dimension of space is potentially opened up, or the imprint of another moment in time is made evident within the anxiously-held present. Such tentative connections and unlikely proximities bring to mind an observation made by the writer

Robert MacFarlane in his book *The Wild Places*: “within the stories of forests, different times and



'Rope', oil on anvas, 153x183cm, 2006.

To contemplate the co-existence of multiple stories and perceptions of place might also, of course, require us to consider occasions when such visions clash. And, indeed, the enlivening sense of visionary capaciousness in Elizabeth Magill's paintings — the world as we recognise it becoming radically *other-worldly*



'Grayscale'(2), oil on canvas, 153x 183 cm, 2005

— is accompanied by ongoing implications of territorial tension. Particular places are not often identified in any reductive, literal way in Magill's art, but the assumption tends to linger that wherever we are — and however alien and absurd the content of these pictures becomes — we are not very far from the formative world of her youth in the 'divided landscapes' of Northern Ireland.



'Cross Country', oil on canvas, 51x46cm, 2013.

The recent painting *Cross Country* (2013) centres on a towering telegraph pole standing in outlandish, isolated splendour against a spectacular, psychedelic sun: so offering an extravagantly expanded natural context for an everyday structure. But the evident Christian over-tones of the picture — beams of sunlight radiate outwards around the centrally-positioned 'cross' at the top of the pole — surely also point to the lasting problems of religion-defined geography in Magill's home 'country'. Any such message, however — any obvious telegraphing of guaranteed meaning — remains indistinct. There is no strong definition to these suggestions of political discontent, no clarity to the marks of conflict on the landscape. The 2010 painting, *Mending Wall*



'Mending Wall', oil on canvas, 38.6x43.6, 2010

(featured in an exhibition at Dublin's Kerlin Gallery that same year) might be exemplary in this regard. Here is a mostly pale and hazy view of partially forested hillside: an ostensibly 'open' space that is hard to bring into perfect focus within a barely penetrable painterly miasma of scratches, strokes, smears and heavy impasto smudges. It is landscape as aesthetic hallucination rather than measured representation. And yet once again the title offers an antithetical insinuation — referencing Robert Frost's memorable poetic rumination on the ongoing business of maintaining boundaries between neighbouring lands. (A poem, incidentally, that featured for many years on the school curriculum in Northern Ireland). Against the painting's sublime sense of "unfenced existence" (to borrow a phrase from another poet, Philip Larkin), is an unexpected allusion to the probable presence of lasting, if not always visible, lines of division in the landscape.

A case could be made for Elizabeth Magill's work as an assiduous and, in extreme moments, artistically turbulent attempt to eradicate all such lines, social and psychological. And in this way, perhaps, her aspirations are against the odds, against logic. Her paintings mix worlds — and words — in ways that intentionally confound sense. A ballet dancer pirouettes on the back of a mule in *Ballymule* (2010):



'Ballymule' oil and collage on canvas, 38.6 x 43.6, 2010

producing from this invented Irish place-name a preposterous, punning collision of situations. As with all of Magill's later work, this painting's dizzying effects also arise from a collision of techniques: bewitchingly refined accomplishment combining with more aggressive, excessive gestures. (Martin Herbert, notably, has written of her penchant for "painterly rough-housing"). Undoing a painting's expected composure and coherence seems an essential part of the process. She refuses to let her scenes 'settle' — thus leaving us permanently suspended (as another of her titles suggests) in a "passage between estrangement and attachment."



'Passage Between Estrangement and Attachment' oil on canvas, 51x46cm, 2012.

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