



Artifact, ©1999 Alan Magee, acrylic on panel, 24 x 30"

Alan Magee

The Mystery of Form

Hollis Taggart Galleries through April 29
BY MAUREEN MULLARKEY

G O ON, ADMIT IT. Be honest with yourself. You really do enjoy *trompe l'oeil*. There is something disquieting, almost voyeuristic, in witnessing such intense, obsessive love of illusionistic detail. When it is good — and in Alan Magee's hands, it is wondrous — it packs a particular frisson. The pleasures of *trompe l'oeil* are ingrained and enduring. Depictions of things standing still, things at rest, things that suggest their history, remain as appealing to moderns as they were to the ancient Romans. However much our codes of viewing might have changed since Vesuvius covered over Pompeii, we live out our lives surrounded by belongings no less now than ever. Even more now, some would insist. Discarded items are the artifacts of our own past and remind us of personal and cultural progress toward obsolescence.

From the clutter of the world, Magee isolates a few homely objects, much of it detritus, for intense scrutiny of their worn surfaces. Like Buddhist brush painting, his artistry is as much a contemplative act as it is an exercise of skill. His paintings are meditations on the mutability of things, stand-ins for mortality. A spark plug or a wrench, salvaged from the junk heap, becomes an eloquent *memento mori*.

Protocols of appreciation among trendy, moisturized bratpackers are likely to classify Magee as an illustrator. Yet all art illustrates something, if only an artist's pretension to ideas. Do not let preconceptions get in the way of your seeing the exhibition. It is a small treasure that does not come around

often. Magee has not shown in New York since 1990, at the now-defunct Staempfli Gallery. George Staempfli represented a particular sensibility — precisionist, modest, often tender — that has been largely exiled from the contemporary scene. Hats off to Hollis Taggart for giving New Yorkers this opportunity to see Magee again. While Magee's motifs and compositional approaches are distinctly modern, he works within a long American tradition of realist clarity. He shares with John Peto and William Harnett, no less than with Raphaele Peale and John James Audubon, an emphatic physical realism and convincing spatial atmosphere. We could pick up the spark plugs and the wrench and put them in our pockets. Their architecture, offered to us for its own sake, is stunning. How could we have not noticed before the conceptual elegance of an ordinary bolt, a stretch of chain?

Magee's palpable, naturalistic renderings place a high premium on technical finesse. It is this insistence on ability that places it outside the fixed idiom of so-called contemporary art. It also makes the work accessible, removing it from consideration by *bien pensants* who prefer theory over actual works of art. Magee's preternatural precision challenges the chattering class' preference for free-associative dead ends that require the services of said class to make sense of it all.

His painting of a timeworn, outmoded drill, *ARTIFACT*, 1999 is a good case in point. The tool rests within the arabesques of its electric cord, the weathered steel a relic of industry that no longer exists and, by extension, a requiem for the era that sustained it. A metal plate incised with the manufacturer's name and serial number functions similarly to the tombstone inscription in Joshua

Reynolds' famous double portrait of two women examining the phrase: *Et in Arcadia Ego*. With the title as a cue to understanding, Magee's elegiac panel possesses greater and more accurate social reference than whole square miles of the pseudo-critical MacArt that winds up in places like the Whitney. No one needs a press release or a wall text to grasp either the sculptural beauty of the image or the poignancy of it. All the casual viewer needs is perceptivity and memory.

Magee's visual wit is subtle and informed, shaped by art history with a certain enthusiasm for surreal gaming. Never merely descriptive, his work is quietly sympathetic to Marcel Duchamp's intention to put painting "at the service of the mind." Viewed without bias toward traditional pictorial means, the paintings yield what Magee himself terms "a certain mischief." Eight bosc pears in *HARMONIC*, 2000, are arranged, stems curving upward, like the staves of musical notes across a page. In *COUPLET*, 1999, hardware items take on figurative qualities, their curves and indentations suggestive of human anatomy. A discarded iron bucket, still standing in spite of rust and bullet holes, becomes an exquisitely realized emblem of endurance. I love Carl Little's comment: "It is, in a manner of speaking, an 'Ode on a New England Urn.'"

Do not miss this exhibition. Exceptional dexterity and powers of observation are the first things that greet you. But give yourself time to reflect on what you see. Magee's precisionist temper is combined with a grace of mind that is more remarkable — and more significant — than his expertise. The uncommon gravitas he brings to his art is given its due in Carl Little's knowledgeable and discerning catalogue essay.