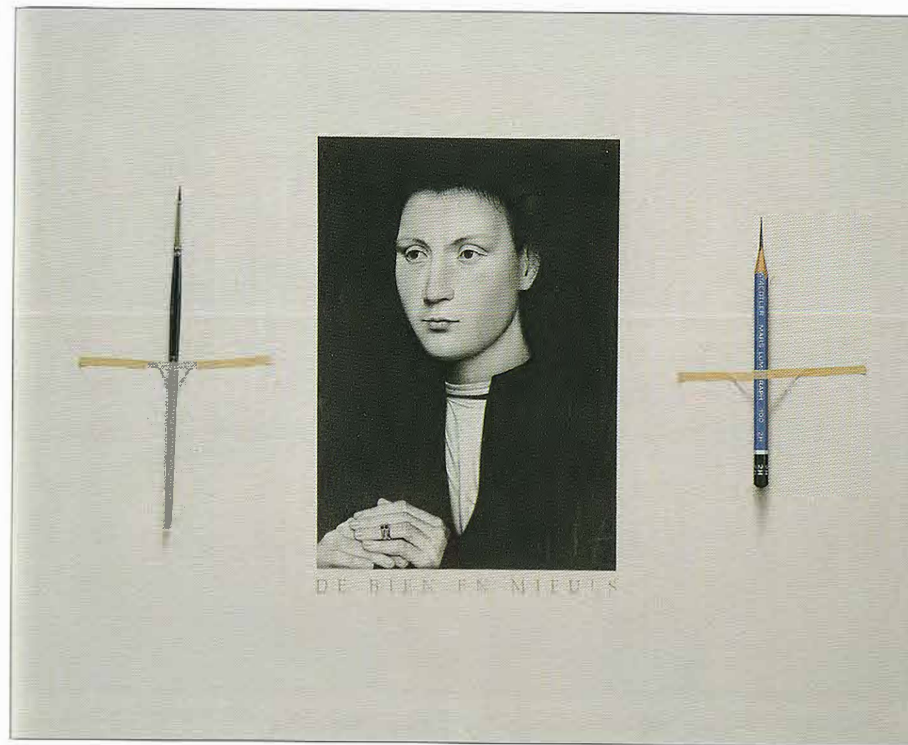
Alan Magee

by John B. Yellott, Jr.

Maine artist Alan Magee (b. 1947) has been enjoying the spotlight of a thirty-year retrospective, organized in 2004 by the Farnsworth Art Museum of Rockland, Maine, and traveling to the Michener Museum in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, the Museum of Texas Tech in Lubbock, and the Frye Art Museum in Seattle, Washington. The Forum Gallery of New York City participated in publishing an attractive book to accompany the exhibition, *Alan Magee: Paintings—Sculpture—Graphics*. During the summer of 2005 a selection of his paintings and a promising new venture in tapestries were exhibited at Edith Caldwell Gallery, Sausalito, California, at Elan Fine Arts in Rockland, Maine, and at the Davistown Museum in Liberty, Maine. The Forum Gallery is hosting a one-man show in New York in October 2006.

Trained as an illustrator but venturing well beyond, Magee is capable both of exacting precision and romps into the bizarre. His work is both modern and anti-modern. The duality invites pondering the perennial and probably unanswerable question—what is art for? Magee grew up in 1950s Bucks County, Pennsylvania. His father ran an Esso gas station, and his mother, a devout Baptist, was, Magee says, "a passionate drawer." Echoes of his childhood recur in his paintings: tools, spark plugs and rusty bolts are mementoes of his father's garage; beach rocks recall the masonry of Pennsylvania's stone farmhouses and barns. Even Magee's darker and more abstract work traces its genesis to his youth, specifically to late-night horror films. He admired Bucks County's ubiquitous Pennsylvania Impressionists, who he says, "opened the possibility of a life in art to a boy." That and his artistic mother's encouragement sent him in the mid-1960s first to the Tyler School of Art and then to the Philadelphia College of Art. There, disappointed in the fine arts offerings, he transferred to the illustration department. "Fine arts was not a place to find realistic drawing," Magee observes. "The 1960s was about the expression of freedom, and everybody was free to do anything—except to draw carefully." Only in the illustration classes could Magee find like-minded friends dedicated to craftsmanship. Magee thinks there should be no significant distinction between illustration and fine art, though he acknowledges: "there is a belief in the art world that a fine artist is a poet, while an illustrator is just making money."

Magee spent his early days in New York doing book covers and working for publications such as *Time*, the *Atlantic*, and the *New York Times Magazine*. "Illustrations have to grab your attention" he says, but he has always preferred work which is "contemplative rather than punchy." Client commissions drove him frenetically from one subject to the next with no time for engagement or reflection. Magee hoped to explore the possibility of striking out on his own.



Alan Magee, *The Lost Memling*, 2000 ©Alan Magee COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

In the 1970s Magee and his wife fled the bustle of overdeveloped Bucks County, seeking isolation and artistic congeniality in Cushing, Maine (not far from where fellow artists Andrew and Jamie Wyeth spend their summers). Strolling the beach at Pemaquid, Maine, Magee was struck by the complex beauty of the beach rocks, called shingle. Contemplating the smooth, flecked and striated stones brought him tranquility, the perfect tonic against harassing deadlines. The beach shingle captivated him through long hours of meticulous rendering, to produce paintings such as the acrylic-on-canvas *Stones* (1991). In 2004 Magee completed work on a commissioned seven-by-nine-foot tapestry reproducing one of his paintings of rounded beach rocks, for the Great Room of the Riverview Psychiatric Center in Augusta, Maine.

There is another side to Magee's work, though, which can only be described as alienating, frightening. The monotype *Tumultus* (1990)—a word that Magee points out is Latin for "commotion, disturbance, a surging up"—is an expression of angst. Magee warned his dealer at the time, George Staempfli, that his forthcoming work was "doing something different." He had turned aside from serene rocks and bright postage stamps and familiar, familial tools. Disjointed, fractured, almost Cubist faces were beginning to appear: death

Alan Magee, *Luftpost*, 1998 ©Alan Magee COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

masks, broken dolls, brooding totems. A specific event brought about the change, the first Gulf War. While Magee does not have a political or partisan axe to grind, he does fear and hate the carnage of war as a human tragedy, no matter what its reason, excuse or presumed justification. Magee was expressing a generalized frustration, with surreal images reflecting the broken reality and horror of conflict.

That is Magee's explanation. But in fact these paintings may well spring from a deeper source, one not tied to a particular event, one of which Magee himself is dimly aware only as a generalized feeling, what he calls "the sense of dread." These works look very much like the kind of art that became frequent in the twentieth century: nonsense, jumble and incoherence. It was a time when art simply stopped attempting to be rational, purposeful or beautiful. War was perhaps the catalyst that stripped away his sense of comfort, that pointed Magee away from the conventional and familiar and pretty, and toward a darker place. But the dread, the darkness and confusion were there all along.

Possibly the best explanation for modern art is not modern itself in the sense of recent. It may be an analysis nearly 200 years old, Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.[1] After touring our young country in 1830, this French thinker and jurist wrote a classic treatise exploring the principle of equality. Equality dominates our laws, customs, conventions, mores, table manners, literature, opinions and art. In a chapter called "In What Spirit the Americans Cultivate the Arts," Tocqueville points out that artists and craftsmen in the old days of European aristocracies concentrated on the original and the excellent. They had to meet the expectations, the refined taste of a small group of rich patrons. But in America they must find ways to sell repeatedly and cheaply, to the crowd. For example, "[w]hen it was only the rich who wanted watches, they were almost all excellent. Scarcely any but mediocre ones are made any longer," Tocqueville says, "but everyone has one."[2] Still sometimes even today, Tocqueville says, "excellent workers who penetrate to the furthest limits of their profession are formed," if they can find a buyer, though in ordinary service to the middling and the common "they rarely have the occasion to show what they know how to do."[3] The pursuit of excellence is suspect, and artists who devote themselves to it must maneuver carefully in a time and place which is indifferent, perhaps even hostile to their enterprise. Such a one may well be Alan Magee. His work is not easy, or instant or cheap. True, he is not averse to selling his hour more than once, as artists have always sought ways to do. Albrecht Dürer's prints, for example, targeted an emerging middle class, as did the lithographs and engravings popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Today, Magee sells books, cards, posters and archival inkjet prints through his Website http://www.alanmagee.com/. Still, mass marketing is antithetical to the patient production of the one-at-a-time originals which are Magee's first love.

If the tenor of the time calls for ever more, cheaper, faster, in the nineteenth century the camera answered the call. Ever since, artists have been fighting to protect what is left of their turf. Perhaps it would be over-simplifying to reduce modern art to paroxysms of fear about photography; on the other hand, that did have a lot to do with it. The Impressionists, for instance, strove to shift the battle to terrain where the literal-minded camera could not follow. Realists, too, looked for ways to beat the camera, even those who themselves used it extensively, such as the early twentieth century's most-reproduced illustrator, Maxfield Parrish. His fabulous dreamscapes, though founded on projected photos, went far beyond simple appearances because, he said, "[t]he colored photograph can do that better."[4] In fact, it is not true that a camera can do it better, as Alan Magee's work shows us. The human eye takes in and the human mind parses and records a variety of visual information that the snapping shutter inevitably misses, or muddles to the point of invisibility, if the eye and mind belong to a trained and diligent artist.

Magee looks, looks carefully and looks again. Magee's painstaking observation seems contrary to the spirit of our time, almost something out of another century. Maine art expert Carl Little, a fan of Magee's work, traces its genealogy back to nineteenth-century trompe l'oeil, citing the example of William Michael Harnett (1842–92),[5] though that may not go back far enough.

Magee's work is not tricky or clever like Harnett's Victorian parlor tricks (Magee says he respects trompe l'oeil for its craftsmanship). Instead there is a reverence about it, serenity, a sense of devotion, which we associate with the contemplation of the sacred. Magee perhaps owes less to the American nineteenth century than he does to European art of the fifteenth and sixteenth, the perfection of accuracy and beauty of color seen in the Renaissance. Certainly his work often alludes to the old masters, for instance incorporating the photo of a portrait by Hans Memling which the Nazis looted in 1944 and which is still missing, in his acrylic-and-graphite *The Lost Memling* (2000). A postcard of Dürer's severed bluebird's wing appears in his graphite-and-colored-pencil *Luftpost* (1998).

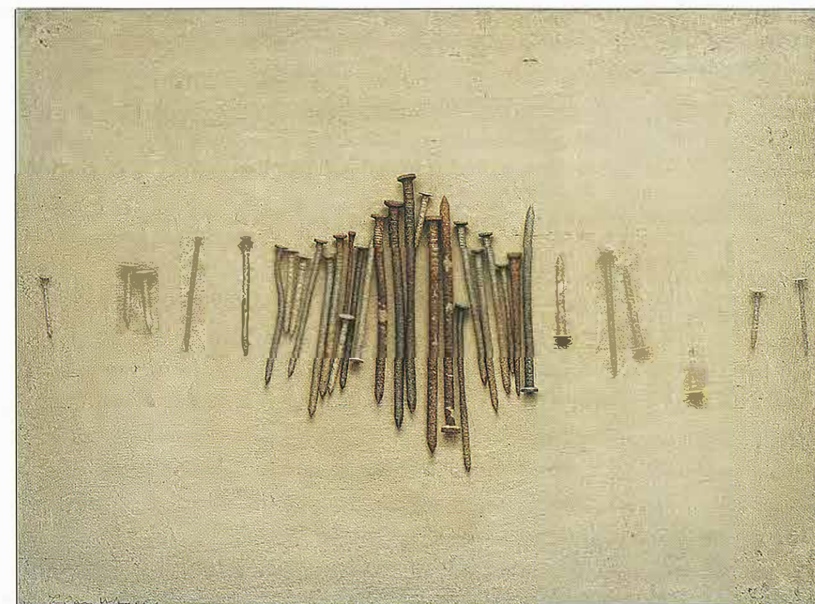
Magee puts the patient fidelity of a Renaissance artist in the service of a splotched box of watercolors in *Tryptich* (1997), or an envelope with a scribbled address in *An Exact Anatomy of Man* (1997). They are undeniably beautiful, but in their stark ordinariness, the images disturb us. Exacting attention lavished on the feathers of an angel's wing would make sense, at least to a Renaissance artist. It is unnerving to find it in a group portrait of rusty junk like *Nails* (1997). This perhaps is how Magee defers to the age of equality, even as he tweaks its nose. Tocqueville cautions that the worst offense is putting on airs. All of us, artists included, must show ourselves to be friends of equality, humble, safely cynical. It would be laughably pretentious to depict heroes, gods, classical mythology, a story from the Gospels, without irony.

Still, in the age of irony Magee undeniably holds himself to an astonishing standard. In this regard, he is a subversive in the ruling regime, for at its extreme—and art if nothing else is fond of going to extremes, pushing out to the wildest frontiers—equality renounces standards, abjures ambition, deplores measure and ranking, hates the very notion of hierarchy. Reason itself is suspect, as too judgmental. Equality invites indulgence in nonsense, jumble, the random, the ugly, the obscene, the jarring or shocking for the sake of shock, the very opposite of the keenly observed and the beautiful. This has been very much the tide running in twentieth-century art.

It may reflect a tension within Magee's personality, or perhaps the despotic expectations of today's art market, that some of his work is found adrift in these turbid waters. At first glance, surreal work such as *Tumultus* may seem to conform to a leftover fashion from the 1950s or 1960s. Disparaging such art as a quirk of history may underestimate its significance. The unappealing prospect is that Magee's forays into the absurd may more accurately hold up a mirror to the time in which we live than his realism.

In Tocqueville's day there was little like modern art, unless one counts as precursors William Blake and J.M.W. Turner, but Tocqueville does perhaps anticipate this development, when he speaks of the egalitarian penchant for generalities over specifics. God—Tocqueville speculates, though he does not call it that—has no need of general ideas, because "[a]t a single glance he sees all the beings of which humanity is composed."[6] He can perceive and comprehend each and every one of us, in all our similarities and diversity, all at once. Only the human mind in its comparative languor must resort to generalities, to boxing up the world in categories. We cannot cope with the immensity of details and are forced to simplify.[7] Extrapólating from this, twentieth-century art is perhaps the extreme of simplification, art renouncing all specifics, art becoming utterly general. If abdicating the very effort to comprehend and depict were just a twentieth-century phenomenon, the fad should be over by now, and it isn't. Even Magee ventures this way. Tocqueville might have seen in it something fundamental, powerful, even despotic, the intellectual stew in which we steep. Equality (again, pushed to the edge) levels all to a flat emptiness. We are reduced, Tocqueville reports, to "a sort of an intellectual dust that is blown about on all sides and cannot gather and settle."[8]

Modern art reflects modern perplexity, modern angst. These attitudes can have unfortunate socio-political consequences, Tocqueville warns. He has proved prescient. It was the prevailing bewildered angst of the twentieth century that nurtured its totalitarian regimes, according to Hannah Arendt, who writes in her book *Origins of Totalitarianism* that the "modern chaos of opinions" left open the way. Leaders discovered an opportunity in the "helpless seesawing between opinions and the 'conviction that everything is balderdash,' knew to adhere to one opinion with unbending consistency, fanaticism."[9] Magee understands the egalitarian era, understands its power and ubiquity. He



Alan Magee, *Nails*, 1997 ©Alan Magee COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

pretends to bow to the contemporary, much as Galileo placated the Inquisition. Granted, Magee must curtail himself, turn his acute perception to the celebration of small things. "The painters of the Renaissance," says Tocqueville, "ordinarily sought great subjects above themselves, or far from their times, that left a vast course to their imaginations." But "[o]ur painters often put their talent to reproducing exactly the details of the private life that they have constantly before their eyes, and they copy from all sides small objects of which they have only too many originals in nature." "Finally," says Tocqueville, "in place of the ideal, they put the real." [10]

Magee cannot give us gods or heroes. But he does find something divinely beautiful even in a manila envelope, something worth holding onto, worth contemplating. He seeks relief from the anxiety of our time in careful attention to the little things. His response to the events of 9/11 was to retreat to his studio and paint a set of paintbrushes, in exact detail. He remarked to writer Jonathan Weiner: "Focusing on small occasions for beauty does seem appropriate somehow." Certainly we can credit Magee with the one virtue agreeable to a democratic age—work, hard work, scrupulous observation, marvelous rendering. We are left with the feeling that here, at long last, is a contemporary artist who need not blink and blush at the question, what is art for?

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NOTES

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Mansfield & Winthrop, eds. & trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), Introduction, p. 3.
2. *Democracy in America*, pp. 440–41.
3. *Democracy in America*, p. 441.
4. Alma Gilbert, *Parrish and Photography* (Plainfield, New Hampshire: Alma Gilbert Inc., Publisher, 1998), p. 7. Parrish projected photos as the foundation for virtually all his illustrations. Some of Parrish's illustrations for Edith Wharton's *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* are not paintings at all, but retouched photographs, p. 14.
5. Carl Little, Introduction, *The Mystery of Form: Alan Magee* (Hollis Taggert Galleries, 2000), p. 3.
6. *Democracy in America*, p. 400.
7. *Democracy in America*, p. 441.
8. *Democracy in America*, p. 406.
9. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973), p. 305, n. 1.
10. *Democracy in America*, p. 443.