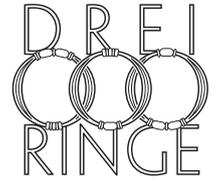


TEXTS

DAVID EAGER MAHER

www.davideagermaher.com



MERSEBURGER STR. 48
04177 LEIPZIG
WWW.3RINGE.COM
INFO@3RINGE.COM

The strange, unsettling world of David Eager Maher

Aidan Dunne

The Irish Times, Tuesday December 19th 2017

At the conclusion of John Fuller's novella *Flying to Nowhere*, set in a remote island monastery, there is a startling image: the wood, which has been felled, seasoned, cut and carpentered to provide the essence of a comfortable interior, a haven for prayer, contemplation and scholarship, comes back to life, swelling and sprouting, rebelling against the straight lines imposed on it, breaking through the boundary between culture and nature, tearing asunder the dream of an orderly world view, with God in his heaven.

Fuller's image comes to mind in relation to David Eager Maher's fine exhibition, *Locus* at the Oliver Sears Gallery, consisting of just eight modestly scaled paintings. In the paintings it is as if the orderly, often classical interiors are invaded by vegetation, usually trees, sometimes unruly copses, sometimes individual plants. It is only as if, though, because the status of the spaces we see is in fact ambiguous, either or both inside and out depending on how you choose to interpret them.

When Eager Maher completed his MFA at NCAD in 2011, the essential elements his work as it is now were in place, but in a less resolved, less cogent form. Drawing, still essential, was much more dominant. His own facility, and the ease of drawing as a process tended to lead to greater, perhaps fussy elaboration. Classical, rather grand interiors, apparently based on art-historical models rather than architectural-historical models, were even then in evidence, as was the eruption of nature into these havens of civilised order.

One major development is that Eager Maher is now much more a painter than he was. Not that he couldn't use paint – he certainly could – but now he is at ease with the medium, and able to use its characteristics in shaping his work rather than merely fleshing out an image. Witness especially *Annexe*, *Spool* and *Thicket*, all of which use the quality of brush strokes, the translucency of glazes, and selective colour to great effect. Add *Fruit Tree*, in which a resplendent interior is littered with felled trees, and you have the four best works in a consistently impressive show, a terrific quartet.

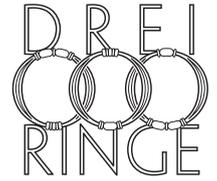
Retrospective quality

From the beginning a retrospective quality in Eager Maher's work has attracted comment. Somewhere along the way the description "a 19th-century explorer living in 21st-century Wicklow" became attached to him. Whether it was his or someone else's phrase is not clear, but it's accurate enough, though not in the empire-building sense of the term. Does the work express a nostalgia for an earlier era? Not quite, no. Tie it to history and there is a built-in critique of imperialism, with exotic jungles reclaiming the outposts of European colonialism. More than a critique is embodied in the paintings. There were many kinds of explorers active

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at the time. The Victorian era, especially the latter half of the 19th century into the Edwardian early 20th century, saw seismic shifts in almost every area: science, politics, religion and the arts. As old ideas became unmoored, everything was up for grabs. Ruskin bemoaned the geologists tapping away at the biblical account of earth's history; Darwin recast humans as a product of evolution; Einstein confounded our understanding of time and space; Marx had planted the seeds of political and economic upheaval; mystical and occult ideas flourished. Despite the recreational trappings evident in some of Eager Maher's paintings (a deckchair, a beach umbrella), they suggest not serenity and ease but a state of flux. The world won't stay still. Presumed meanings evaporate, certainties collapse. Civilisations apparent achievements are tentative and evanescent. Orderly pattern is symbolically shredded in *Awning*, as tropical vegetation bursts through the geometry of the tiled floor and the fabric shade.

Paper Trees

Ingrid Lyons

"It was a beautiful place – wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness".

Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*

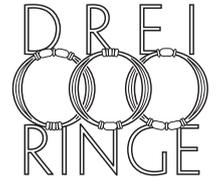
There are certain exotic trees; oriental ferns, castor plants and windmill palms that manage to flourish in harsh weather conditions and waterlogged soils. They appear strange and unfamiliar against the hardy perennials and steadfast natives. Large glossy leaves give a sense of opulence and decadence as lush fronds unfurl dramatically from furry brown stalks. David Eager Maher has often pictured these botanical specimens in his intricate arrangements-their leaves creating screens or casting shadows as they spring forth from dense indigenous foliage or sprawl in the corner of a plush interior.

In this recent body of work, Eager Maher has increasingly connected interior and landscape. Within these unpeopled scenes, architectural features merge with forests and imaginary plains collide with what appear to be backdrops of classical paintings. They are strange vistas that seem part autobiographical, part art historical. Leaves of paper are carefully placed, cultivating a faint variation of surface textures. Some areas are further embellished with motifs ranging from that of the orient to the family home; bright, bold, waxy red flowers in *Settle* are a throwback to the 1970s Irish kitchen – a pattern often accompanied with red Formica table tops.

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Transparent layers allow traces of underlying marks to peep through and some details have been lightly sanded away. Eager Maher's use of paper evidences a level of concentration, a delicate patience and understanding of its surface quality, how it can be imprinted or incised, how it responds to watercolour and how it becomes bleached, faded and otherwise altered over time. He acknowledges the delicate and ephemeral qualities of paper, celebrating its diversity as a medium.

The deceptively simple layering of paper belies the feeling of the work; which is intermittently meticulous and spontaneous. Compositions are refrained and controlled though there are hints at humour as visual ploys and illusions add an element of play. Some areas have received more attention and they contain more detail yet other areas have been left bare where the picture plain is interrupted only by preliminary pencil marks. There seems to be an underlying antagonism between that which is ornate and that which is plain.

Perspective in the landscape and architecture also appears disrupted as scenes overlap as in a dream sequence. Within David Eager Maher's compositions, boundaries between lived interiors and fantastical exotica are in constant flux. They exemplify a merging of worlds - natural and domestic, dream and reality, ostentation and reticence. Within them there is a conflation of living, collecting, and art making. In many ways Eager Maher's compositions describe dreams and follies, mediated through colours and contours in the surroundings.

The Pink Studio, (1911), a painting by Henri Matisse's of his own studio, pictures an array of artworks at various stages of completion. A screen draped with fabric obfuscates the view from the window, furniture and decorative rugs adorn the floors. It is the conflation of myriad motifs and patterns that form the surface of the painting. Portraits, nudes, and still lives share the canvas with furnishings and ornaments. This approach suggests that Matisse saw no division between art, nature and the interior of his studio-as though he regarded all as an experience of sensuality. Thus he surrounded himself with objects that appealed to him and made paintings that were an extension of his personal predilections.

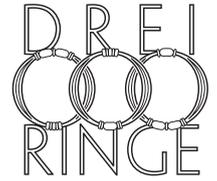
In a similar way David Eager Maher paints and draws after his own archive of fragmentary predilections. In his compositions there is evidence of a narrative but crucial details have been removed or hidden; fabrics, screens and foliage prevent a full reading and indeed memories of drawings and etchings from another time are hidden beneath and behind preceding layers. These collages constitute a miscellany of paper memories, gathered from domestic encounters or pursued through German antique paper purveyors. Within each composition the rare and the exotic co-exist alongside the familiar and the common, altogether emphasising the experience of assimilation or displacement.

Ingrid is a writer based in Dublin, she currently works as writer and researcher at Kevin Kavanagh Gallery Dublin.

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Vistas

essay to accompany Locus at Oliver Sears Gallery
by Séamus McCormack

In this series of oil paintings, David Eager Maher continues along a trajectory of previous works in which we are invited to enter imagined spaces that are at once exterior and interior. These intricate and detailed compositions combine fictional landscapes with realistic depictions of topographies and grand domestic spaces. The vistas include opulent architectural features such as arches, gables and columns; domestic furniture including empty chairs undressed tables; ornate urns and figurative carved sculptures; vacant parasols and unoccupied deck chairs.

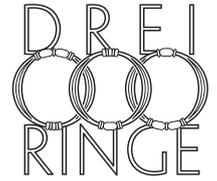
The series, and the title of the current exhibition 'Locus' is complex in its associations, definitions and meanings. The term locus can be defined as being an ambiguous site, a location that is determined by varied and specified conditions. The word also has a place within the fields of mathematics, medicine and science adding more meaning to the references in the works. 'Locus' features a series of paintings that depict liminal spaces, in which no inhabitants can be observed, confounding the sense of peculiarity in the in-between scenes depicted. There is a definite sense of isolation in the works, a want to be alone, to get away from modern day complications, an image of detachment, segregation and a want to visualize and create dreamscapes rather than be restricted by reality. From seeing the furniture and how each of the spaces are dressed and decorated it is evident that these spaces were either once occupied or are awaiting and inviting population. The inclusion of a deck chair, a parasol, and a pitched carnivalesque patterned gazebo, all what could be classed as paraphernalia used whilst on vacation, signal towards this sense of getting away from it all. The time period and geographic location of the scenes is open for interpretation, however the decadence of the residences suggests a very particular culture that of the upper echelon's of society. There is a sense of the theatrical in the scenes' compositions. The paintings could be vacant stages, with us the spectators awaiting the players to emerge from the wings into the proscenium. However the absence of the performers is perplexing, we eternally wait their entrance stage left, to tread the boards and demonstrate thespian talents.

Seeing images of the uncompleted works, at the mid-point of creation, for me there was a sense of ambiguity around the painted forms and contents within Eager Maher's mise en scene. A patterned rug, could also be become a colossal leaf; carved figurative sculptures could be enlarged exotic insects; patterned wallpaper and floor surfaces could be a floral undergrowth. In a brief discussion with the artist the works are described as an attempt to 'navigate basic visual quandaries' and artistic dilemmas. The problem with resolution is underscored by the fact that the scenes exist as a fluid dichotomy between two worlds, the imagined and the real, the domestic and the landscape. The walls of each of these interiors fade, and allow the outer world percolate the transparent barriers. Some of the surfaces are

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made up of chequerboard and zigzag patterns creating definite blockades to the encroaching landscapes. Ornamentation and pattern are consistent features and here exist within the architectural cornicing and coving embellished with baroque patterning and the decorated wallpaper and floor coverings.

There is an added complexity through the use of materials in the paintings. Oil paint, which is slow to dry, is here blended, providing a soft merging of tones. The artist also utilizes other qualities of the oil paint, layering and forming washes leaving an opaque and translucent effect creating a mysterious quality to the image. He is also acutely aware that in time the images will fade, like narratives, histories and the viewer's existence. The act of artistic creation is left bare for the viewer, a metaphor for our own place within this scene and completion of subjective readings. We are also reminded of the artist's hand when included in the paintings are an unfinished canvas leaning against the wall in one scene while in another scene, a microcosmic painting of a completed landscape, a meta work of sorts, hangs in a frame on the wall. Alongside the completed painting hangs an empty frame, the image is confounding as it creates a border around the wallpaper, but also could exist as a closed window to the outside vista.

In seeing the works as a whole, I am again drawn back to look at the varied complex and often contradictory meaning of 'locus' and how it might refer to a site or place where an activity is located or indeed might refer to our inability to pinpoint anything particular or definite. In either instance the environments and habitats that Eager Maher depict confound us with a sense of uncertainty in what is real, what is imagined, what is remembered and what we may foresee.

Séamus McCormack is a curator and artist based in London.