



OF MARY MACLEAN

From what fabric are these compliant but quietly troubling images woven? How is it that we are ready to believe that we have, at one level, been there before? Perhaps these traces of apparent familiarity are left from a short story half remembered, or a film - remnants of moments just before or just following the dramatic act. Maybe they flow from pictures from family stories, frequently retold, or else from transitory incidents in our personal past that we no longer credit as fully real, so merged and mediated have they become through the flux of memory.

Unusual circumstances bring us to occupy these spaces and, especially if we are alone, we become particularly sensitive to the details of furnishing and to the specifics of the light and the view from the window in these paces provided for the intimate acts of sleeping, or taking a meal. We are intensely aware of the artificial state of this ambience; this is not our bedroom, not our 'sitting' room because there is nothing of the accumulated random detail that reflects the myriad facets of a personal history. Instead, there is that frisson of suppressed acknowledgement that we are merely transitory 'guests' in rooms that have borne, without remark, the traces of a hundred previous occupancies.

This is the material and the associational territory of much of Mary Maclean's work. Take the case of *Cushion*, a piece that deserves absolutely the description, 'still-life' in its silent presence and denial of any expectation of change, or of movement; The cushion has been used and will be used again, it will take on the impress of new bodies and, then, just as readily cast it off again, it is mute, offends no-one and offers no grounds for affection; it is only the artist's perceptive attention that allows it to be noticed at all.

The *Cover* is even more mute and objectively functional, decently reticent about the previous usage of the bed that it disguises, of the human presences it has known and overlooked. All this takes place under the sign of nature, rendered through a comforting commonplace of entwined ornamental pattern.

Nature overlooks, (and over-looks), it filters out troublesome particularities, it is something bigger than the sum of mere human presence and its constant cycles of renewal put into shade the insignificant incidents of personal dramas. How appropriate then that it should have been universally taken, across many cultures, as the basis for pattern design applied to furnishings and the nets and voiles that veil the windows of Maclean's guest house rooms. The mechanical process of the woven fabric ensures two effects, repetition and abstraction which supply a grid of control and mediation between the dark containment of the rooms and the random and half-tamed guise that nature assumes in suburban landscapes of garden and arterial road. The 'real' nature beyond is visually interwoven into the soft grids of these illuminated curtains that reveal and conceal at the same time. We are offered visions of escape which are, however, frustratingly ungraspable on account of the ambiguities of distance presented by these images. One of the quiet but impressive achievements of the window images is this fascinating uncertainty of plane; it is an aspect of a painter's conflict with the lens and its mechanical attraction to perspective and to lines that 'vanish'. The matter of scale crops up here too, these works are the size and format of cabinet pictures, moreover they more or less simulate the perceived size of the objects that would be experienced in the original room.

It might at first be pointed out that the computer images seem to occupy a very different emotional space from that of the guest rooms yet, on reflection, that distance might not be quite so great. These computers are given the pictorial placement of the still-life genre. They appear as ambiguous objects, actually rather curiously and oddly shaped; for the most part, computers rarely trespass into our emotional lives and scrupulously resist taking on any affective role and yet our experience of them is shot through with a sense of their manifold contradictory status.

They hold out the promise of unlimited access yet are often encountered in institutional contexts of public control, their physical object-hood is corrupted with a sense of immanent obsolescence and suffused with our melancholic intimation of the surfeit of redundant information that the computer proposes.

The pictorial qualities, the choices and sensitivities and the stored experiences of looking, applicable to a painter are quietly dominant here and should be further considered. Notice first, the precision of compositional design and cropping. In *State*, for example, the overall impression of an abstract composition of planes played out through subtle shifts of tone and texture, contends in forming our reading of it with such specific but minimal clues of a fore-shortened chair arm and a fragmented lamp standard. How fittingly this visual encounter matches the reality of these institutional placement of things within an interior environment which belongs to everyone who comes to use it - but to nobody in particular. The iconography of art is recalled, whether intentionally or unconsciously, by the presentation of *Table Top*, where an object of domestic ordinariness is endowed with an almost sacral quality through the combined strategies of lighting and tonality playing on the drapery and the placement of the table within the framing of the image.

But also, let us bear in mind what these pieces owe to the proper qualities of photography. Firstly, there is the unflinching accuracy of objective vision, picking up those forensic details of architectural design, allowing us a knowledgeable reading of the minutiae of window catches and the framing of the small panes of glass, or the shaping of a bed-head and the turning of a lamp standard that allow us to make informed references within our own archive of memories - as Maclean puts it, "to return something known to the viewer". Only a photographic recording could satisfactorily replay the regulated structures of pattern in fabric and wall paper that provide the unregarded comforts of repetition and spurious reminder of nature in these transitory environments. For most of its history, photography has made its mark on the world without colour. Originally, when the existing discourse of criticism was dominated by the idea of the comparability of the medium with painting, the absence of colour was often held out to be an unfortunate limitation of its appeal but nowadays, when colour photography predominates in our general visual culture, it is evident how positive that original limitation can be. The flushing out of colour effects a major act of abstraction, of reduction of redundant information, of abatement of incidental evidence. We gain by this process a more direct access to the essence of things represented and an invitation to engage with the aesthetic of the majestic range of greyness, of degrees of density and filtering of light. By examining the surface of these pieces closely, a pleasing discovery awaits the careful viewer of the often rather chaotic and aberrant marks through which the photographic form emerges. The unique quality of the works exhibited here depends on the enhancement of this aesthetic of greyness by the potent effects of the aluminium surface on which the photographic emulsion is deposited. This adds a subtle yet pervasive luminescence to the image which takes its presence from the ambient (ideally natural) light of the room in which it is displayed. The substantiality of the metal also adds a satisfying sense of permanence and stability of these images as material objects, perhaps aligning them more with the fixed presence of a painting than the paper-thin vulnerability of a photograph.

Despite what might be suggested by a mistaken reading of the exhibition title, it is obvious that we are not looking here at any form of "quick art". It is slow and painstaking in the making and, above all, it is rewardingly slow in the means by which it is fully realised to the viewer. It affords the differing experiences of the immediacy of first encounter and the revelations released by longer acquaintance. Its culminating value lies in the nature of its content, allowing us to share the stillness of the occupant of these borrowed spaces, immersed in a probably melancholic contemplation of what brought them to be there at that time.