

# Sue Hubbard

## Art Critic

[Home](#)  
[Poetry](#)

[Art Criticism](#)  
[Prose](#)

[Art Catalogues](#)  
[Links](#)

[Sitemap](#)

[Book Reviews](#)  
[Contact](#)

## Elizabeth Magill Green Light Wanes

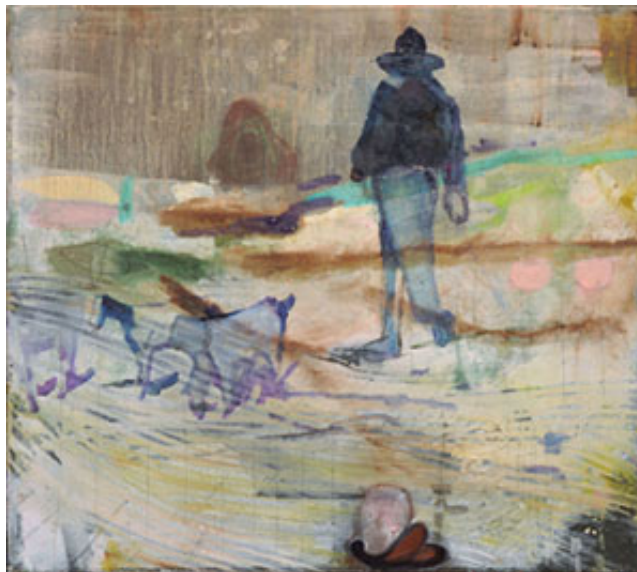
Kerlin Gallery, Dublin



*But when from a long-long  
distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after  
things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile  
but more enduring, more immaterial, more persistent, more  
faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering,  
waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear  
unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their  
essence, the vast structure of recollection.*

*Swann's Way*: Marcel Proust.

‘The vast structure  
of recollection’  
forms the subject  
of Elizabeth  
Magill’s paintings,  
though unlike  
Proust, what is  
broken and  
scattered is not  
recalled by taste  
and smell but  
through her  
dreamlike visual  
memory, through a



Turn, 2010

non-verbal language that equates not so much with a specific event but with an emotion or a mood, not with the facts of the past but with its essence. In her intense, jewel-like paintings meanings are suggested and memories stirred as if seen through a glass darkly. Each thinly diluted veil of poured paint creates yet another layer of the palimpsest, the dense ground that provides the screen onto which she can project her thoughts. Images are discovered and found rather than preordained. Although she has lived in London for more than twenty years it is the glens and coastline of County Antrim where she spent most of her childhood that constitute the landscape of her mind. Her paintings are, therefore, constructs, formed through an amalgamation of memory, photographs and a

poetic imagination. She has said that in recent years she has become interested in bringing things back to what she knows, to the mulch of childhood; those images that were unconsciously absorbed before adult interpretations were placed upon them.

Thought is not sequential. Joyce, Proust and Virginia Woolf all attempted to articulate the process of thinking and remembrance by giving texture to the looping, fractured nature of consciousness, to the series of images and ideas that run through the mind of an individual. Memories and half memories float up from the unconscious like stains of oil on water; shadowy, dark and often ill-defined. Forests have traditionally stood as symbols of the unconsciousness. Their bleakness in winter, their lushness in the spring, followed by autumn's brilliant display, renders them apt metaphors of renewal and change. As J.C. Cooper wrote in *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia Of Traditional Symbols*: "Entering the Dark Forest or the Enchanted Forest is a threshold symbol; the soul entering the perils of the unknown; the realm of death; the secrets of nature, or the spiritual world which man must penetrate to find the meaning."



Pencilled Love, 2010

In *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bruno Bettelheim argues that "Since ancient times the near impenetrable forest in which we get lost has symbolized the dark, hidden, near-impenetrable world

of our unconscious. If we have lost the framework which gave structure to our past life and must now find our way to become ourselves, and have entered this wilderness with an as yet undeveloped personality, when we succeed in finding our way out we shall emerge with a much more highly developed humanity." Dante, he notes, wrote in *The Divine Comedy* that: "In the middle of the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost." The forest, therefore, becomes a metaphor for a psychic death allowing for the possibility of rebirth.

Forests and trees feature heavily in Magill's work. A solitary pine stands broken and windswept in her painting *Tinged*. With its

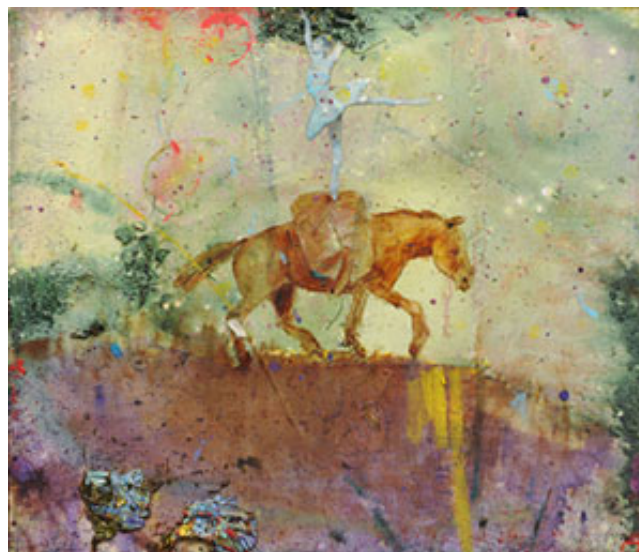
twisted trunk and branches like arms it suggests a desolate, bowed human form. Blobs of orange and green paint on the picture surface act as counter points to the figurative image pushing it further back into the depths of the picture space, creating both a physical and emotional distance between the viewer and the tree, thus increasing the sense of isolation. There is an intense feeling, here, of something being put to the test, of unknown perils and a dark loneliness. The universal religious significance of the tree is subtly conjured: the baobab under which the Buddha received enlightenment, and that used to construct the cross for the crucifixion of Christ.

In *Mending Wall* a crop of lonely blue pines thinly stains the canvas. Ghostly and evocative they seem unreachable, something far off in the distance and evoke Robert Frost's famous lines from *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

The poem, of course, refers to the final big sleep, while the woods beckon seductively promising oblivion.

A small figure emerges from the richly coloured paint, half hidden by dark, tangled boughs in *Sylvan Man*. He has a beard and wears a Victorian bowler hat. His likeness to Freud is uncanny, though Magill tells me, when we speak in her Hackney



Bully Mule, 2010

studio, that she had not thought of Freud but, rather, of Roger Casement and the isolation which surrounded him at the end of his life. In a companion portrait entitled *Casement*, (Magill talks of him as a great humanitarian) we see his shadowy profile lost in thought. A controversial figure who testified against human rights abuses in the Congo, a gay Irish nationalist executed prior to the First World War for his association with Germany, he takes on the mantle of the wanderer or outsider.

Surfacing out of an ethereal green light, like ectoplasm at a

Victorian séance, *The Ghost of Stephen* evokes Joyce's Stephen Dedalus as a young man. Here the phantom of his own youth seems to float up through the mists of memory to suggest that there is no such thing as a true or single recollection, only multifarious distortions that come to us from that other country, the past. These new paintings of Elizabeth Magill's are more populated than her larger canvases, which explored something of the sublime wilderness evoked by Caspar David Friedrich or the great 19th century American Hudson River School painters such as Thomas Cole and Frederic Edwin Church. To place a figure within a large picture space, she feels, attracts the eye too directly. In these smaller works they become integral to the whole surface of a painting. Though mostly rudimentary and featureless, these figures seem to suggest the trace of human presence rather than an actual person, what it is we remember of an individual's essence rather than their precise characteristics. In *Pencilled Love* an embracing couple, scratched in rough graphite marks beneath a row of pink raked blobs dotting the surface like Chinese lanterns, emerges from the movement suggested by the paint. Magill is interested in the enigmas that make a painting work, what it is that is suggested to the artist by the process of laying down paint on the canvas. In this sense her works become an ongoing internal dialogue, voyages of discovery to destinations unknown rather than precisely mapped journeys.



**Magick Car Pet, 2010**

The sense of reaching towards something not quite known is further explored in *Horsehoop*, where a white steed stands in an indeterminate landscape tentatively framed by a large hoop of spectrum hues; part rainbow and

part victory arch. Ghostly against the dark splattered paint the horse appears insubstantial and otherworldly, like some magical apparition conjured in a dream. Another horse makes an appearance in the humorously titled *Ballymule*. Here a pack-horse weighed down by saddlebags, its bowed frame recalling that of the statue of the forlorn nag outside the Basilica de San Francesco in Assisi that carried St. Francis, is bearing a pert ballerina. With her leg extended in pirouette she is not quite real but reminiscent of those little dolls that twirl on top of musical boxes beloved by small girls. The

image conveys something of the ‘unbearable lightness of being’, suggesting the dualities of despair and euphoria involved in the creative process. Sam Beckett’s artistic credo about failing again, yet failing better comes to mind. As the horse trudges on accepting the difficulties of daily life the imagination still manages to soar free.

There is a mantra beloved in the creative writing class about ‘showing’ and not ‘telling’. Good fiction, it is argued, does not report but creates a scene through close observation and the capturing of mood; so too with Elizabeth Magill’s paintings. The scenarios she shows us are not a slice of the real but evocations of darker, more complex responses. Pushing her paintings to the point of collapse she investigates, the half-remembered, the repressed that flickers on the inside of the mind like the movements of a Javanese shadow puppet. Like all good modernist painters she is not so much interested in perfection as in ‘some sort of tarnished beauty’ that mirror the vulnerabilities of the human condition. In a painting such as *Many Moons Ago* the single stilled figure stands forlornly in the landscape beneath a sky dotted with five moons. Not only do these moons work formally, giving balance to the picture surface, but they seem to suggest the very mechanism of memory itself. Was the moon there, or there or there, we ask ourselves when trying to remember a particular scene on a distant occasion. In *Vessel* a boatman emerges from the Turner-esque swirl of colours. The painting is of Venice but this Venice is no more real than that of Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*. Like the proverbial ferryman Charon, who rowed the souls of the newly deceased across the river Styx that divided the world of the living from the world of the dead, Magill’s figure surfaces from the mess of painted gloom hovering just out of focus like a memory we can’t quite retrieve. It is this insubstantial, shadowy terrain that Magill makes so entirely her own.

*Elizabeth Magill Green Light Wanes at the Kerlin Gallery, Dublin  
from 26 November to 23 December 2010*