

Paper Trees, The art of David Eager Maher

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.

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 lifes 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 Lyons 2016.

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