

Mahala Magins
Post Iceland

Essay
Kezia Geddes
Curator Lismore Regional Gallery



In 2013, Mahala Magins undertook an artist residency at the Baer Arts Center in Skagafjordur, Iceland. It was an experience that changed her painting, so that when she returned to Australia she felt the influences everywhere. The transformation that took place connects to a different way of seeing and exists in a purist's pursuit of Abstraction and Painting. Put simply, Magins found a new "template" for thinking about painting, although this word denies space for the nuances that are integral to her work. Ultimately, what the trip did was provide her with a place to soak in the idea of being an artist, giving her conviction that she is a Painter.

When Magins first arrived at Skagafjordur she could not work. The landscape was too different, too vast, too brilliantly green and blue and overwhelming. Her daily view was already a painting - a perfect colourfield with a flat expanse of a grey/blue lake set within a hillside and framed by a grid of windows. But after three weeks of being immersed - walking,

swimming, being there - she began to paint. When she did she was conscious not to let herself be confined by habits or preconceived ideas, and the place became infused in her work without her forcing it.

Magins did not try to replicate the landscape around her but let it in through thoughts and the edges of her vision, until the paintings found their own life and direction, separate from but informed by their initial inspiration. Working in the studio, memories floated in and out; the lines of the swimming pool where she took her daily swims, the size and shapes of the windows in her bedroom, a particular shade of green, a mood.

Being in a completely different place, many of Magins' usual "go tos" for painting were less available to her, and the costs and complications of freight to Australia helped release her from concerns about producing finished work. She could not afford or access her preferred brand of paint, brushes or stretched canvases,

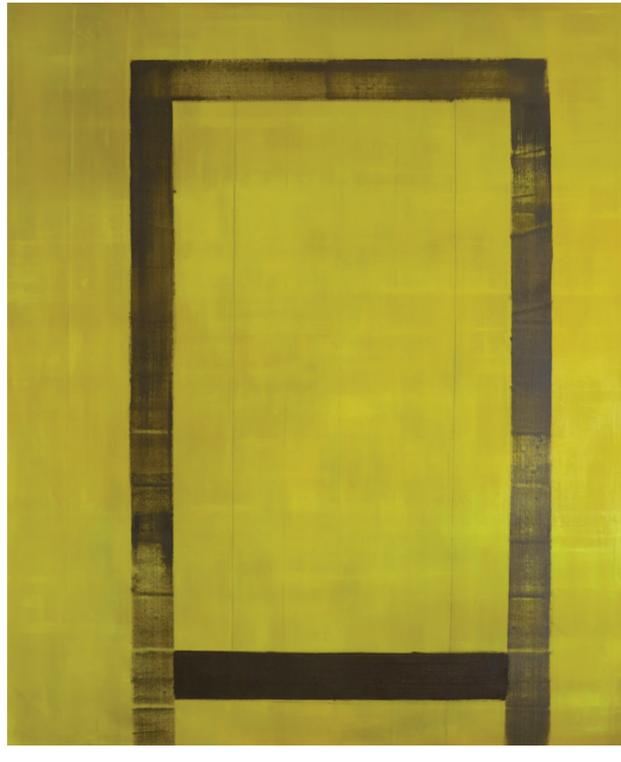


image above:
QLD Art gallery Two 2014
oil and graphite on canvas
117 x 116cm

image left:
QLD Art gallery Interior 2014
oil and graphite on canvas
195 x 168cm

and the familiar conditions of her home studio were absent. Magins pared her work back to colour, form, and simple materials, resisting the urge to overwork or decorate it. She started to work on the ground on unstretched, unprimed linen, and discovered a new relationship between her body and the act of painting. This informed a new physicality in the way she worked, as she responded to such details as the hardness of floorboards against linen.

When Magins returned to Australia, she was faced with an immense contrast between the two places, but rather than experiencing a disjuncture between here and there, she reapplied the logic she had learnt. She found she painted all the time, not in the studio necessarily, but in her mind - whenever she was in the right headspace to let inspiration drop in. Looking out the car window, visiting art galleries, in a café - when life was slow enough, she found the seeds for paintings, and held them in her memory for later. Travel honed a habit of finding inspiration in her daily life by writing down thoughts and collecting source materials such as photographs, found images and swatches of colour that struck a cord. Art was no longer something she did; it became part of who she is.

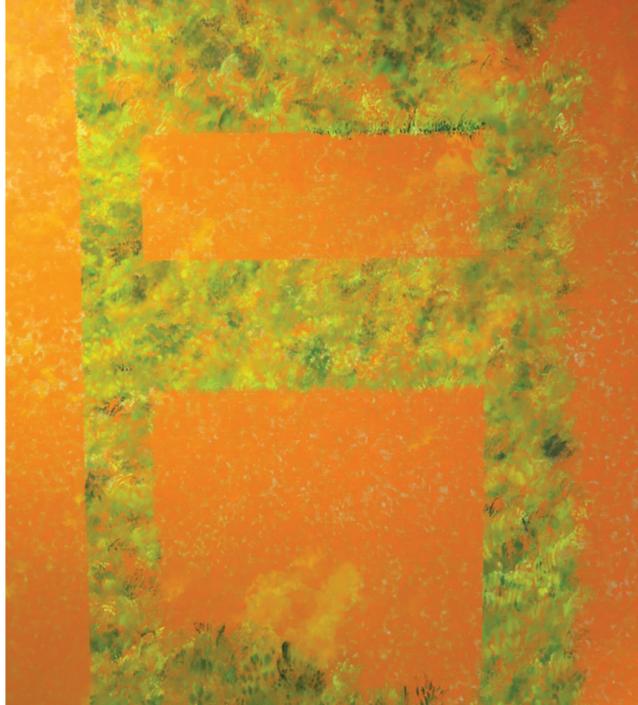


image
QLD Art gallery Lines 2014
oil on linen
191 x 168cm

It is important to note that the paintings in *Post Iceland* are not of Iceland. Magins felt compelled to call the exhibition this because she believes that without her residency they would not exist. But if you ask Mahala what triggered them, she will say, quite distinctly; "a trip to the Queensland Art Gallery". Her conviction that they have Iceland in them is mainly due to what it taught her about her processes of painting, showing the very abstract place she has come to with her work.

Although she cites a distinct vision from which they begin, once Magins starts painting, their content is layered, and they are not about any one thing, time or place. One element of a work can have multiple influences. For example, horizontal lines could be a visual tool to animate space as well as referring to that window in Iceland, architecture at the Queensland Art Gallery, the lines of the weatherboards of her studio walls or the horizon. But returning to that initial vision that the paintings stemmed from, Magins described descending the escalator at the Queensland Art Gallery.

"I noticed how it cut through space, creating different viewpoints." Magins continues; "I responded to the architecture of the building, layered with soft greenery inside and out. And the interplay of light and tone." This experience is translated in the strong sense of weight against light, architecture against air.

QLD Art Gallery Two is an early work informed by this visit to the Queensland Art Gallery and it could be seen to connect most directly to that initial vision. In this work perspectival graphite lines create a depth of field, layered, and drawing back to the centre of the painting, which flattens out into a glassy pane. In *QLD Art Gallery Lines* and *QLD Art Gallery Interior*, the initial subject matter is broken down further, but the geometric form remains. This is most assertive in *QLD Art Gallery Interior*, with its concrete form set in long, controlled brushstrokes, and in complete contrast to the yellow ground. One returns to Mahala's studio in Skagafjordur, and her revelations about minimising the components of painting to their barest elements towards sublimity.

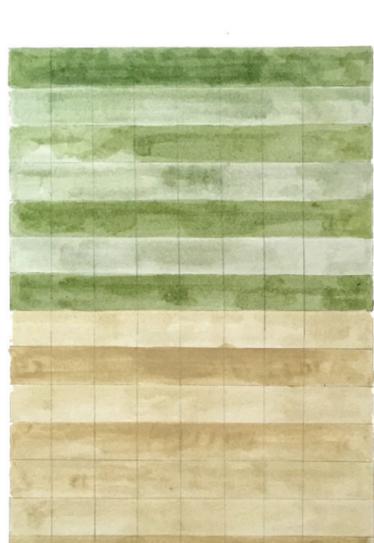


image left:
QAG Lightest 2014
oil and graphite on paper
58 x 39cm

image right:
QAG Light 2014
oil and graphite on paper
58 x 38cm

So something as plain as how the movement of her arm is reflected in brushstrokes is beautifully austere. *QLD Art Gallery Lines*, is a very different painting again - forms of green and apricot are separated only by colour, and they hover between stating a relationship of contrast, and dissolving into atmospheric dappled light.

One of the things that drew Magins to Iceland and which holds her in the Northern Rivers is the length of the horizon. This simple line, and the way it divides the landscape, is essential to her daily vision. It is also central to her understanding of the robust way of painting, and the gap between the world and non-representational painting. Like the horizon, Magins' paintings are places to let thoughts wander. They are sites of gentle reflection.

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