

MARGARET CAHILL

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*Butterflies In Rain*

“There is somewhere an abandoned house  
scratched walls and a bending roof  
uncut grass in its courtyard  
unwiped dust unopened door...”

From intro to *Understanding Loneliness* by *Egrem Basba*

MARGARET CAHILL

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*Butterflies In Rain*

One of the main reasons I wanted to open an art gallery and curate exhibitions was to get the chance to work with artists like Margaret Cahill. She is a serious artist working in serious times. I was immediately drawn to her epic, cinematic landscapes. I kept wanting to return to their stillness and mystery. Margaret's paintings, like herself, have a quiet yet powerful integrity.

Her work for me is that of the human condition... decay, abandonment, loss, memory, beauty, violence, recovery and ultimately... hope.

*James Walmsley*, Director, Artland Gallery, 2009

*Butterflies in Rain:*  
the work of  
**MARGARET CAHILL**

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Although not crucial to her art, there is a back story that feeds into Cahill's current work that is worth foregrounding as a kind of proviso. Cahill was - in part - inspired by a recent trip to Kosova, a word loaded with the extreme polarities of hideous warfare and ethnic cleansing alongside renewal and hope. It is arguably the key story in Europe's recent past and it has led to the strange circumstance of a land in limbo, hosted or owned by Serbia depending on viewpoints, and poignantly expressed by a hyphenated line rather than a solid border on most maps.

Yet if there is a factual base to Cahill's current work it only provides for a factual resonance. This is art. Not a faux photo-journalism.

Many painters can paint yet do not know what to paint and vice versa, yet Cahill is a competent painter who is also confident about what she wants and her ways of delivery. One of Cahill's starting points for her work, past or current, is a painter's enjoyment of colour. It is evident in her paintings but also in her speech. It is revealed in a few choice sentences selected from discussions with the artist at her studio in Manchester's backstreets ahead of the Artland Gallery show (2009):

*"One of the first photographs I took in Kosovo was out of the window of the car as we drove from the airport. It was the sky. It was brown and bruised. And there were masses of crows - there are masses of crows in Kosovo."*

Brown and bruised is a lovely turn of phrase: two random words, juxtaposed in speech. They stick out like fireflies in the dark, not just for their poetic qualities - personalising a place with pathos - but also because they provide shorthand for Cahill's canvases.

Brown and bruised is the ground for these new canvases, threading together the current show. The artist says of her current work: *"the colours came through the experience of the place."* Brown and bruised is, arguably, the palette Cahill has conjured up for her current work. Swathes of reddish brown and golden hues cry out from one of the larger frames entitled *Burnt Grass*; a muted tonal range quietly hums off another large frame, *Rain and Ash*; a light, lemon yellow gauze seems to hang over the entire picture plane of *Smoke and Peeled Earth*.

A footnote here is the use of shellac: an old material belying an inside knowledge of painting's history, techniques and media. An almost onomatopoeic word, shellac lends a thickness to the oils in parts of the picture plane.

Cahill calls shellac “*earthy, visceral*.” Shellac allows a subtle enhancement of the canvases. Many who stand before these paintings will pick up on the extra resonance.

As stated, her visit to Kosova has only provided Cahill with some extra inspiration and unusual opportunities: randomly bumping into locals of whom she has taken an impromptu portrait; stumbling across atmospheric landscapes of which, likewise, she has taken photographs. That, and the title for the current work - *Butterflies in Rain* - a suitably bittersweet line lifted from a Kosovan poem *Marathon* by Rrahman Dedaj (1939-2005).

So Kosova is not her reason to paint in 2009 and beyond. Just as post-Soviet Estonia or the Normandy beaches, and all that those two places stir up, have not been her reason to paint in the past despite having made pivotal trips to each. Indeed, having first reviewed her work a decade ago, I can vouch for a separate continuum.

Cahill has stuck to her own guns: her spartan style of painting; her signature idiom of minimal photographic elements and much paint within any painting’s surface; her palette of a few select colours. Perhaps most telling of Cahill’s consistency is the unerring fact, as solid as a signpost in the whimsical weathercock ways of contemporary art, of her themes: absence; loss; isolation; memory. These are the *universal* terms that Cahill’s work conjures up.

*Place* per se (not specifically any nation) is evidently of significance to Cahill and, arguably, a sense of place is what she is dangling for any viewer. Many who stand before these paintings, and spend due time with them, will gain a sense of more than one place... known and unknown... remembered and imagined.

Why? Instead of a clear cut representation of reality, Cahill’s paintings always convey a co-existence of reality with imagination. Discernible objects, like cars or buildings, or indeed human subjects, are pictured in the current paintings mid-ground or towards a horizon and largely in *silhouette*.

Things are hinted at rather than fully described. It lends ambiguity: is the figure of a man and his dog in one painting that of a man returning to his derelict, perhaps war torn, homestead? Or is he just a man walking his dog who is not batting an eyelid at the defunct property he passes? And does the lone figure strike a chord in the viewer no matter the context? Such an endgame is a

conundrum and an intriguing joy for viewers who spend time with these pictures.

The paintings imbue a subtle sense of place rather than a definitive picture of anywhere. Cahill’s painting is about evocation, appealing to each viewer’s memory in an open-ended way rather than invocation, appealing to a particular emotion and leading the viewer by the hand. There are competing narratives at work, sensed in the various layers of paint and photographic elements. Indeed her painting has an incomplete feel. It feels right given that Cahill sees places that she has visited (Estonia; Kosovo) as being “*in transition*”.

Uncertainty is the only certainty in Cahill’s work. There are silhouettes of discernible subject matter; suggestions of stories. In one larger frame a small dark, empty truck is pictured with an open door – a small detail yet one that may gnaw, begging the question of how much time has expired since a human hand opened it?, and whether this vehicle is parked up or abandoned? Throughout the larger pieces, swathes of indiscriminate landscape (perhaps birds and horizons) carry most of the picture plane – not the conventions of the category of painting known as *landscape*. While in a current installation complementing the larger pieces, and consisting of 15 smaller scale portraits, faces of people are purposefully obscured with colour; with marks; even with found text in *Man of Letters*. In summary Cahill only offers nondescript shards of people and places.

This incompleteness, or interference, of the surface and the seeming insignificance of elements included, all signpost us to a core driver for Cahill and one that lends intrigue to her work for all viewers: *Memory*.

Memory is arguably the main theme that roots all of the current works together – 9 large paintings; the installation consisting of 15 smaller frames; and a 3D piece including tiny photographs pinned into a cabinet like butterflies.

A particular quirk of memory - its tendency to *fragment* - has held Cahill’s interest over time.

This will have resonance for many visitors. Memory, for many of us, does come in flits and starts and is maintained in shards rather than whole forms.

So the subjects for the installation, the 15 smaller frames, are men: obscured, forever out of reach. They have no names, ages, occupations; uncertain ethnic origins. As with the larger pictures, there is a quiet unease

about these anonymous men whose gaze directly engages the viewer. Are they ex-soldiers? Are they a rogue’s gallery of war criminals? Cahill says they are “*just men I met out walking, crossed paths with*” ... of course the random, ad hoc, act of the artist asking to take pictures of strangers and later transferring elements from the resulting pictures into paintings has transformative power: these are timeless images that invoke the universal notions of isolation, pathos, empathy.

The obscured portraits of men are signature Cahill: the omitting or deliberate muddying of information or even fresh insertions of seemingly unrelated information such as birds. ‘Crows’ may make for a chilling landscape in the mind: an aerial dead zone hanging heavy over the killing fields. Yet, as has been established, this is art not photo-journalism.

If there’s a certain unease coming off Cahill’s picture plane, it is a quiet unease. Cahill even shies away from simplistic punchlines – her crows have often been reworked, with outlines altered so as not to appear so crow-like.

The *processes* that Cahill proactively enacts, and reactively engages with, tell more of Cahill’s work and her continued, career interest in memory as the key driver.

Though not making a Photo-Realist representation, nor even indulging in a kind of painterly photojournalism, Cahill does overtly use photography – long since the medium of choice for anyone wishing to ‘capture’ elusive memory. So photography can be seen as one starting point behind Cahill’s obscure portraits of nameless men and the atmospheric landscapes of desolate beauty depicted on the larger frames.

The photographic elements become quite obvious when you stand before these painted pictures. *Man of Letters* for example, starts with a photo of an old Kosovan gentleman who Cahill had come across on a random stroll. Cahill recalls the man’s polite introduction, “*I am a professor*” he said. There is something professorial about the way he stands to attention for her picture.

Photography is most clearly evident in a small 3D installation that accompanies the current work: a glass case of tiny, passport scale, portraits of men. They are pinned in the box akin to a butterfly case. This box has a double effect: providing a peg to root the entire show as well as acknowledging the significant place of photography in Cahill’s work. It is a somewhat brave declaration since

- for some - the use of photography in painting remains a stumbling block or sore point.

Of course, there is so much more here than photography.

Cahill works up each painting. And re-works, more randomly than uniformly layering in order to help transmit Cahill’s core idea: what she calls “*fragmented memory*.” Indeed the paintings encourage in viewers an awareness of universal truths: turning time, changing landscapes, competing narratives.

Cahill is candid about her processes, admitting that she often goes with the flow of happenstance: expressed by the hardly noticeable folds in the ultra fine photographic paper used to transfer photographic elements onto her canvases. These accidents have been left in the final edit as it were.

This is not the same as carelessness. Cahill has invested due time and diligence. So it is worth recounting what can be known of the processes from discussion with the artist:

–Photos have been taken, often in a place that is so far off the beaten track that it clearly does not matter where the particular place might be;

–Time has passed allowing for a critical disengagement with the place and memory to fragment;

–The photographic images have been printed onto fine paper and transferred to canvas (both stages that are fragile: where accidents can and do happen);

–The pictures have been painted over and surfaces re-worked up;

–The materiality of the paint (including the use of shellac) has evidently been important;

–The application of paint has involved a play with nature: gravity has taken its toll on some of the layers and colours have been allowed to run into other areas...

Cahill is evidently serious about her work, and the processes behind it: *travel* and the surprising, life-affirming human reactions of random engagement with *peoples* and *places* for whom ‘off the beaten track’ will never begin to describe; and the various processes and actions of *painting* itself.

Perhaps this is why so much surface space of the larger canvases is a minefield of memory and moment: a palette that may have come to mind in the artist through

fragmented memory of a natural place; some discernible subject matter hinted at rather than fully formed and albeit lifted from the chemical memory of photographic print; much paint that has been merged either by the artist's hands or in a few cases slightly streaked by gravity.

In short, only a small percentage of the canvas is taken up by 'something' – that which is barely recognisable. The majority of the canvas plane, though full of artwork, is ostensibly 'empty', leaving space for viewers to metaphorically fill in the blanks. For sure, there is the possibility for the viewer to put meaning into the work. Nothing is definitive; everything is permitted.

Though as complete as Cahill wants for a particular show, her paintings can often seem to hover in a fragile state of transience. To pick up the idea of whether Cahill's atmospheric landscapes are of particular places, real or imagined, it might be a better articulation to say that her pictures express a destination postponed rather than reached.

This, too, gives us a shorthand way in to Cahill's art. For it is not about a particular pay-off. It is about a sense of place, about unsolicited empathy with an unknown stranger, about an evocation of emotion. In such ways, Cahill's painting has abject qualities rather than subject-object conventions.

These are slow burn paintings that softly startle you more the longer you spend with them.

*Tim Birch*

Spring 2009.

Butterflies in Rain

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## List of plates

*Rain and Ash*

122 x 122 cm

oil, shellac, photographic component on canvas

*Burnt Grass*

122 x 122 cm

oil, shellac, photographic component on canvas

*Black Crows*

100 x 100 cm

oil, shellac, photographic component on canvas

*Butterflies in Rain*

various sizes

oil, shellac, photographic component on canvas

*Stalks*

60 x 60 cm

oil, shellac, photographic component on canvas

*Pick - up*

130cm x 90cm

oil, shellac, photographic component on canvas

*Charred Leaves*

122 x 122 cm

oil, shellac, photographic component on canvas

*Smoke and Peeled Earth*

91 x 91 cm

oil, shellac, photographic component on canvas

*Quarry*

60 x 60 cm

oil, shellac, photographic component on canvas

*Lines on the Horizon*

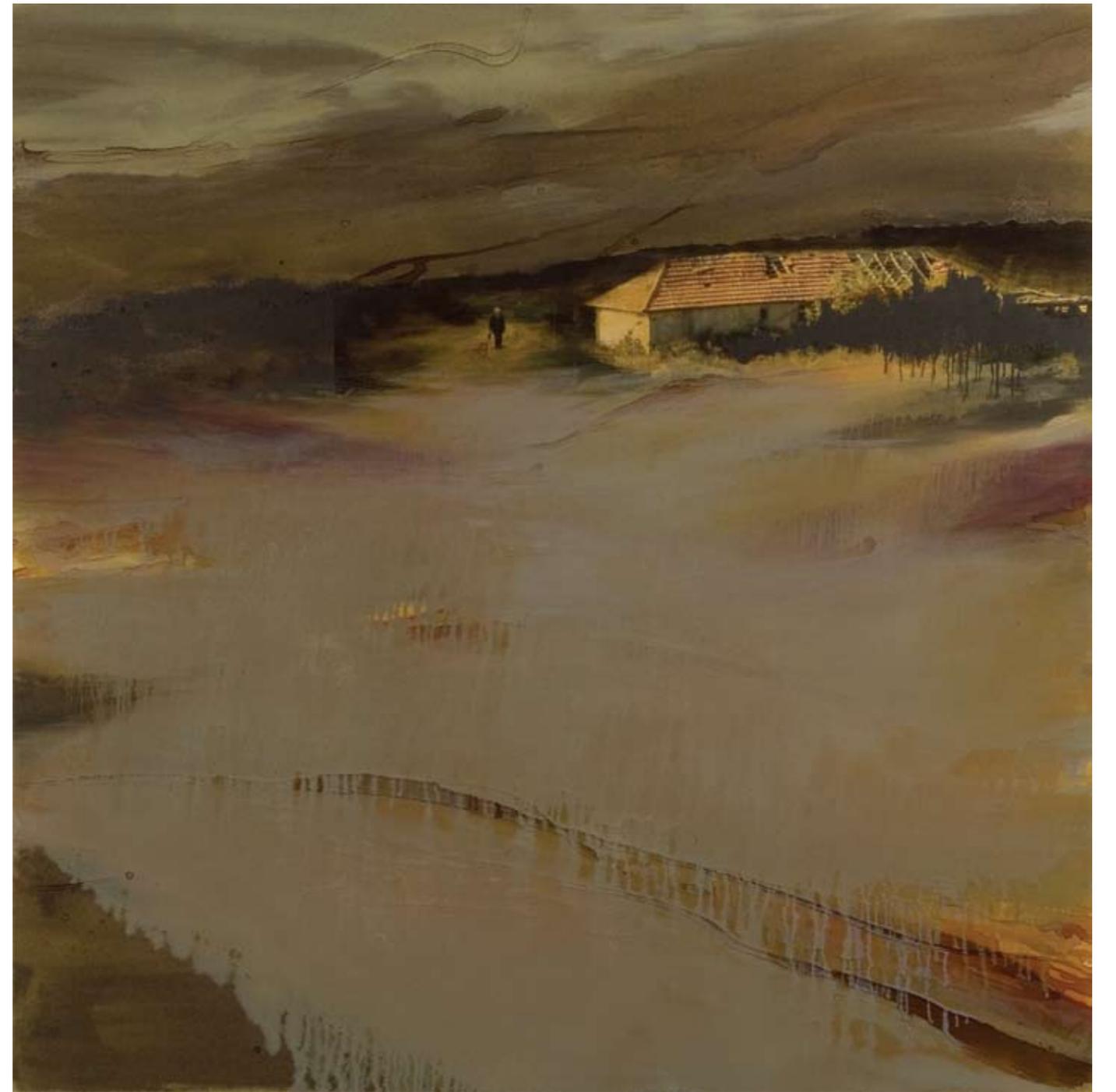
92 x 71 cm

oil, shellac, photographic component on canvas

*Untitled (Butterflies)*

45 x 45 cm

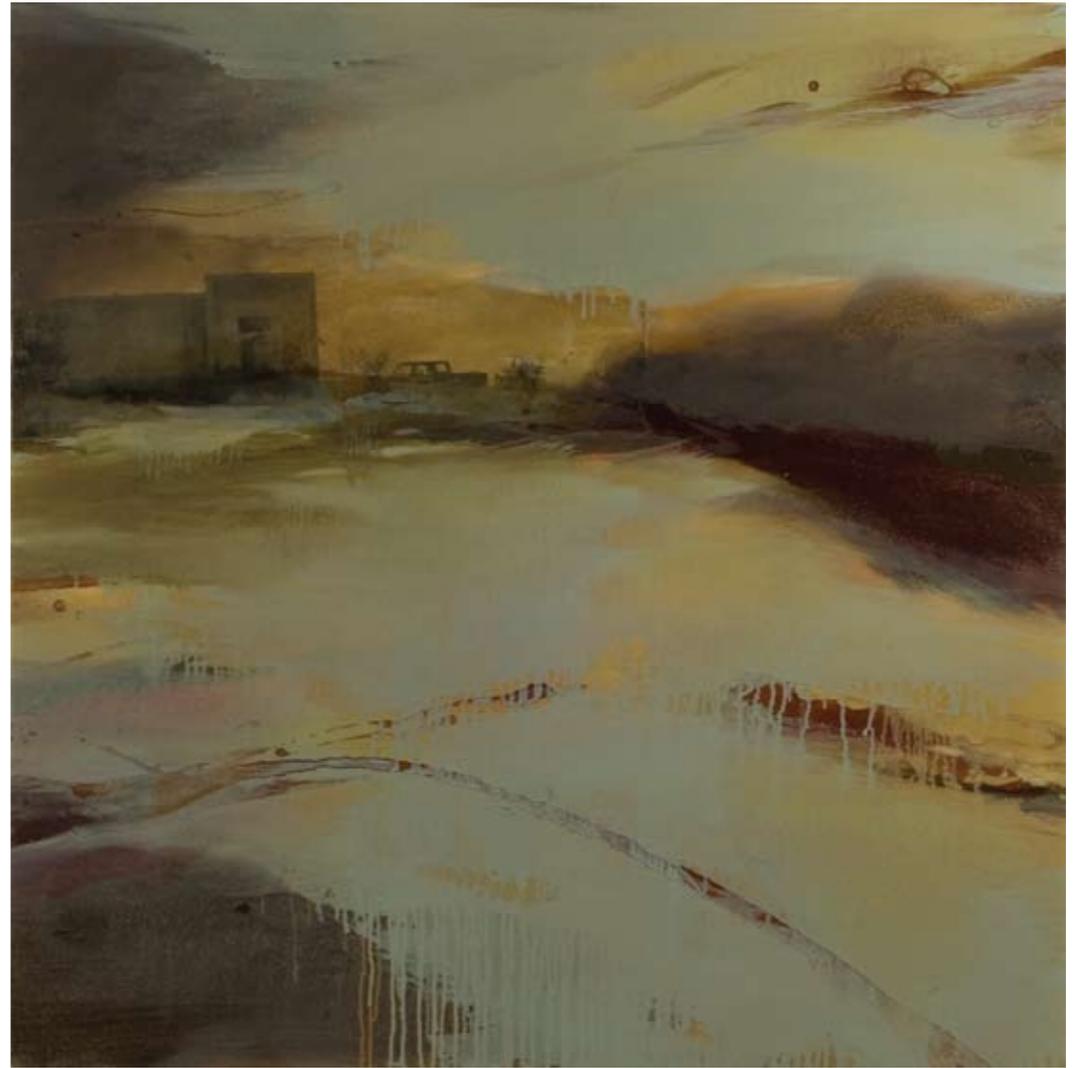
glass, photographic component, pins

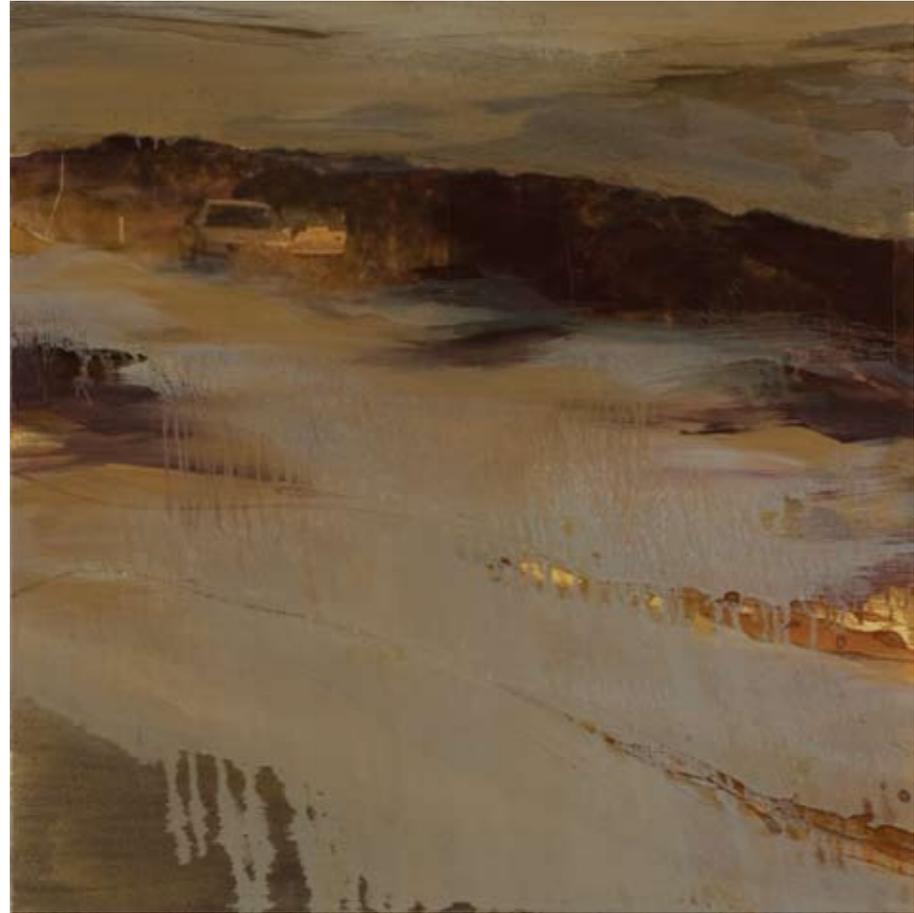


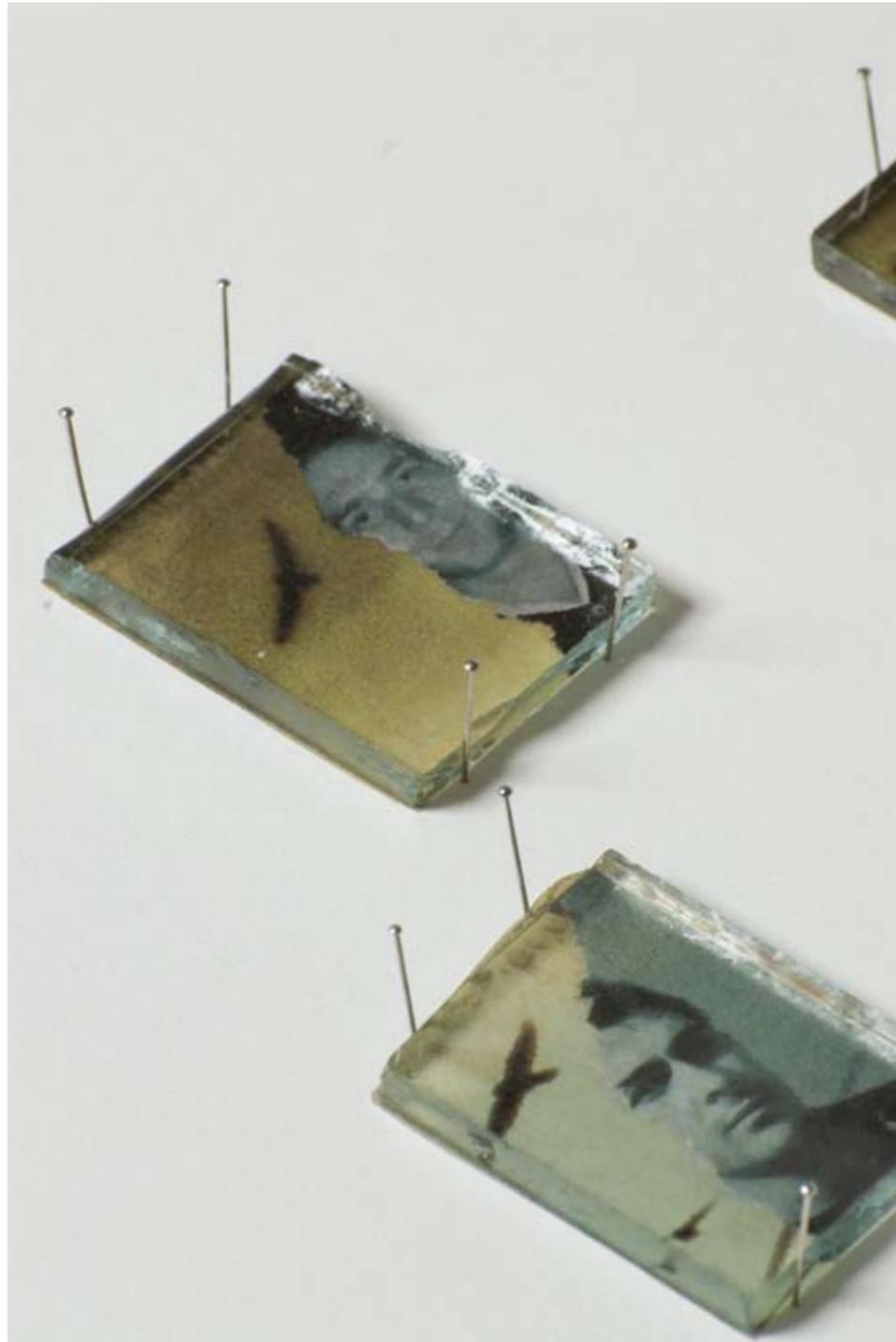












## Margaret Cahill

### Curriculum Vitae

1992 - 1995 BA Hons Fine Art (Painting) Manchester Metropolitan University  
2003 - 2008 Part time lecturer in Fine Art University of Bolton

### Selected Solo Exhibitions

2009 *Butterflies in Rain* Artland Gallery, Manchester  
2006 *All The Empty Places* Cornerstone Gallery, Liverpool  
2006 *A Place Apart* Lowry Hotel, Manchester  
2005 *Cold Front* Atkinson Gallery, Southport  
2004 *Letters Never Sent* Timber Wharf Gallery, Manchester  
2002 *In a Room* Chorlton Mill Gallery, Manchester  
2000 *Dreams and Visions* Wythenshawe Hospital, Manchester

### Selected Group Exhibitions

2009 *Art Territory Project for Capital of Culture*, Vilnius, Lithuania  
2008 *Edgecentrics* Williamson Tunnels Heritage Centre, Liverpool  
2008 *Timescapes* BA Dept, Blackpool  
2006 *Manchester - So Much To Answer For* Warsaw Project, Manchester  
2005 *Mind Where You Look* Gallery Oldham and Fairfield Hospital  
2005 *On the Shelf* Compartment, Manchester  
2005 *Conversations On The Subject Of Feminism* Cornerhouse, Manchester  
2004 *Ritual Bodies* The Walker, Liverpool  
2003 *Starting a Collection* Art First, London  
2003 *Imagined Realities* Philips Contemporary Art, Manchester  
2001 *Paperworks* Bury Art Gallery  
2001 *Corpus* Storey Gallery, Lancaster  
2001 *Cobweb Archive* Holden Gallery, Manchester Metropolitan University  
2000 *Beginnings* Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester  
1999 *Secrets And Lies* Kirkby Gallery, Merseyside  
1999 *Networking* P-House Gallery, Tokyo and New York  
1998 *Past Impressions / New Perspectives* Salford Museum and Art Gallery  
1998 *Bible of Networking* Konstakuten Gallery, Stockholm  
1997 *Intalinka* Lannemaa Gallery, Estonia and Chapman Gallery, Salford  
1997 *Opening Exhibition* Philips Contemporary Art, Manchester  
1995 *Canvassing Perceptions* The Gallery, London  
1995 *The New Contemporaries* International Convention Centre, Taipei, Taiwan

### Collections

Salford Museums and Art Gallery permanent collection  
South Manchester Hospital Trust  
Halliwells Manchester  
Private Collections Great Britain, America and Europe

### Bibliography

2006 *Metro, A Place Apart* Steve Pill  
2005 The Guardian, Cold Front Jessica Lack  
2005 *Flux Magazine, Cold Front* Robert Cattelan  
2004 *MEN, The Questions Are More Important Than The Answers* Rachel Pugh  
2004 *Ritual Bodies*, Liverpool Biennial ISBN 0-9539367-4-0  
2004 *Painting is Dead, Long Live Painting* Hastings Museum and Art Gallery Catalogue  
2001 *City Life, In a Room* Tim Birch  
2001 *Metro, In a Room* Rob Haynes  
1997 *Intalinka* Exhibition Catalogue  
1997 *Eesti Paevaleht Postimees, Intalinka* Triin Parts  
1995 *The New Contemporaries* Art and Design Exhibition Catalogue

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