



The agma Group

Exhibition Catalogue 2014

Griffin
Gallery



Introduction

A Restlessness Imagination

It's hard to imagine any artists' group apart from the circumstances that nurtured them, or the places that made them. In London, the YBAs were the dominant force of the nineties, though they were hardly a conventional group at all, outstripping their reputation as the art school gang writ large.

The Magma Group aren't a close-knit bunch of friends who've grown up together on the same course, but independent practitioners joined in alliance. They may share a grass-roots approach with the Stuckists, but tend toward open-mindedness rather than polemic. Their hands-on approach to materials fuses with an ardent spirit of enquiry to form a neo-romantic proposition that aligns them with the ethos of young galleries like Charlie Smith and Rosenfeld Porcini.

Neither running their own space, nor associated with a particular venue, The Magma Group embody the contemporary mode of the pop-up or takeover, surfing a wave of enthusiasm, camaraderie and collaboration that has seen them invited to show at the Griffin Gallery, the Vibe Gallery and The Other Art Fair within the last couple of years.

This mobility is in tune with the times, but also suggestive of a turbulence embodied in this exhibition's themes of instability and unrest - a restlessness of the imagination that could at any moment take flight.

Francis Lamb, May 2014

Magmatism, Quine and the Instability of Being

There's plenty of precedent for artists declaring allegiance to a shared direction (Pre-Raphaelites, Futurists, Surrealists...) as well as finding – like it or not – they're grouped together by critics (Fauves, Minimalists, YBAs...). That first move seems rarer than it was, modern day associations tending to be looser, and the explicitness of the programme behind The Magma Group is particularly unusual. The ten current members vary greatly in their practices but all aim, in founder Annie Zamero's words, 'to fuse expressive and conceptual qualities'. Moreover, any potential new members are explicitly recruited to fit.

So, are expressionism and conceptualism in conflict? Quite a few artists do combine them, and there's at least a case to be made for the dichotomy being false. Nonetheless, the explicit desire to combine those perspectives does make for an interesting and distinctive way of working.

In conceptualism, the idea tends to take precedence over the material and aesthetic aspects of making art. At its most extreme the art may take the form of words or instructions, with no physical making involved. The expressionist artist looks first to the inner world of emotion rather than to external reality, and typically generates that engagement through a hands-on encounter with materials – that's not incompatible with a conceptual approach: Tracey Emin, Matthew Barney and William Kentridge, for example, bring an expressionist tendency to the exploration of ideas. Or consider an apparently classic example of each tendency: Barnett Newman is labelled as an abstract expressionist, but his use of the 'zip' was driven by quite concrete ideas about humanity's place in the world; there again, Felix Gonzalez-Torres may have used clocks or piles of sweets which can be installed by anyone, but his work aches with emotion and loss. Martin Creed is an interesting case: he's driven by such conceptual ideas as exploring a refusal to make choices, but at the same time claims, quite plausibly, that his work is all about feelings.

So maybe conceptual-expressionist isn't such a clash of opposites, and nor should we be surprised if apparent contrasts shade into each other. Consider a parallel: plenty of philosophers have held that there's a sharp distinction to be drawn between analytical truths – statements such as 'all husbands are married' which appear to be true simply by definition of terms and cannot be denied without contradiction – and synthetic truths; those which depend on how things are in the world – such as 'Andy Murray won Wimbledon' – which might easily have turned out differently.

Yet some modern philosophers have denied even that. Willard van Orman Quine, for example, argued influentially that such claims build in the assumptions about necessity that they set out to prove. He preferred to think that our beliefs form a web, with the outer fringes connecting to experience. Revision at the edges leads to only smaller changes near the middle, but in principle there are no statements, however close to the centre of the web, which cannot be revised if enough changes are made elsewhere in the system. Everything, you might say, could be different: what one could call, as this show would have it, 'instability of being'.

If artists who might easily be seen on one side or the other of the conceptual / expressionist split do in practice contain aspects of both, then a holistic account may well be appropriate. Nonetheless, the Magma artists are different in that they set out to be holistic.

So how does that feed into their practices? Four of the group, I'd say, work with the apparent language of abstract expressionism but with a hidden set of concerns which take that beyond the formalism espoused by Clement Greenberg. If they express inner states, they're explicitly mediated inner states, not the artistic realisation of instinctual drives.

Conflict is at the centre of Zamero's own practice: the starting point for her paintings is the psychological opposites identified by Jung. They lead to images which are grounded in figuration but with strong abstract elements, which can be taken as depictions of states of mind. Eli Acheson-Elmassry, too, makes paintings interpretable as abstraction, landscape and idea. In her case the conflictual backdrops are between the Arab and western world views, while on a personal level she has recently explored the experience of pregnancy. Consistent with his wide-ranging oeuvre based in performance and installation, Kimbal Quist Bumstead builds interaction between people into the process of making his paintings, often by working them up from 'touch drawings' made blindfold through the intimacy of touch. Dagmar Dost-Nolden may be closest to the originating instinct of abstract expressionism, as – though she works very deliberately – her underlying theme is the expression of energy, and if one looks at, say, classic Pollock or de Kooning, their energy lies at the heart of what is often termed 'action painting'. Their work may not be about energy, in the explicit way of Dost-Nolden, but it is inseparable from it.

There's also room within Magma for more lyrical modes of abstraction. Purity of gesture drives Tess Rachel Williams' large canvasses, in which she draws parallels between her path through the painting and a path through life.

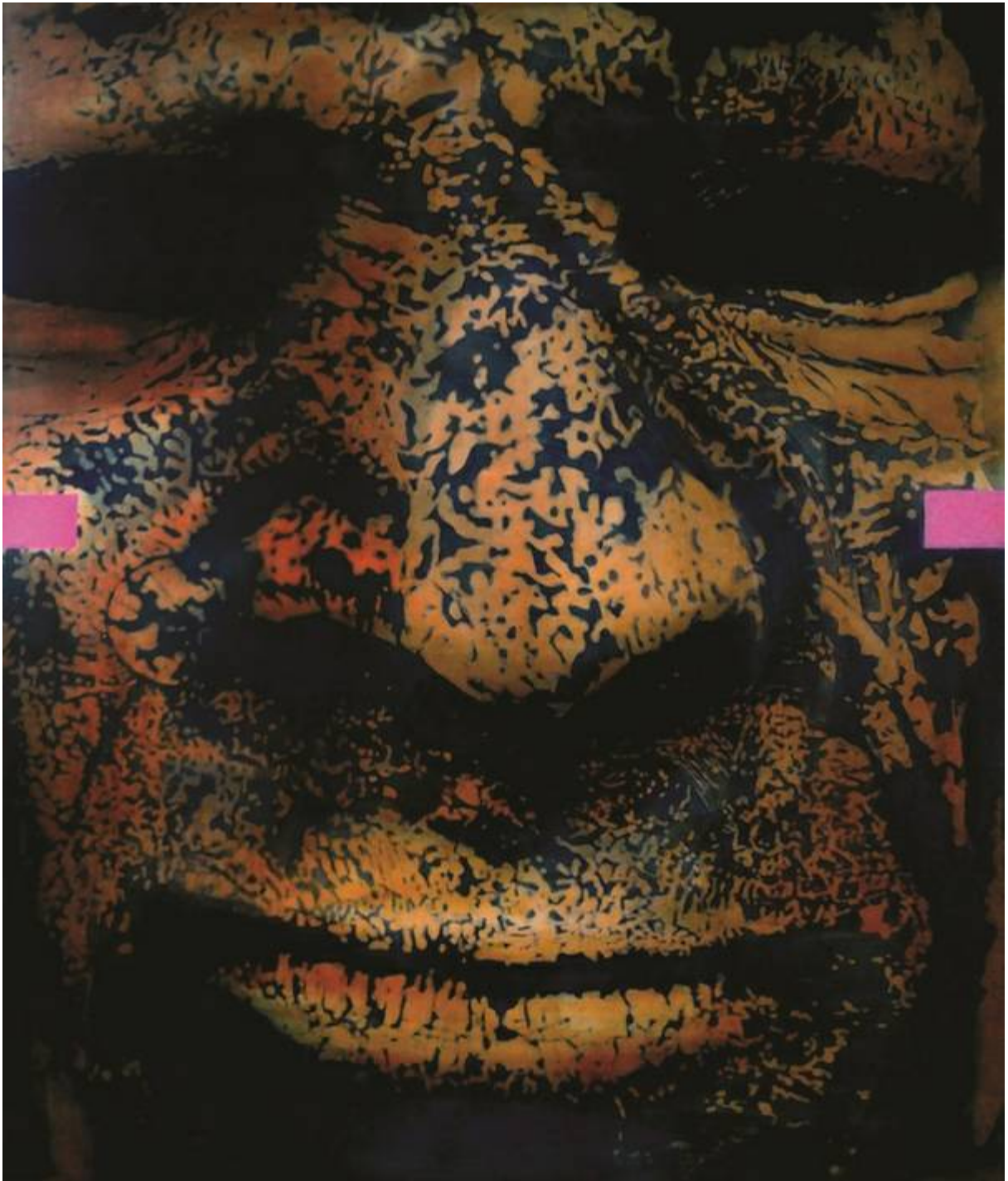
Carolina Khouri's work also appears meditative; indeed, she works meditatively via the Vajrajana School of Tibetan Buddhism, and says she receives blessings through light coloured as white, red or blue as intended for the body, speech or mind respectively' – so one can read her peaceful-looking works as portraits of the tensions we so often feel between our different possible ways of being.

Robert Meldrum might be seen as a bridge between those abstract-tending examples of Magmatism and the more figuratively-inclined group members. He's based in Sussex, and perhaps it's no coincidence that one of the most atmospheric depictees of the county – Ivon Hitchens – comes to mind in how he builds space out of colour and gives it a psychological edge.

Three Magmatists focus on the figure. Jean-Pierre Roffi sources his paintings in his own drawings, collages and alternative photographs of rituals, so that parallels emerge between the heightened states of perception which ritual can share with art making. Siro Carraro is an ex-actor who paints people as characters, and his use of wood grain as an abstract element might be seen as a theatrical presentation. Dylan Shields, the group's sculptor, renders the classical clunky by making paradoxically throw-away versions out of cardboard and packing tape – materials which generate a distinct and characterful aesthetic – or maybe anti-aesthetic – of their own.

If the image of conceptualism is of drily objective presentation of ideas, then the Magma artists don't fit that at all. Whereas at first sight it may seem they are simply expressive artists who take an interest in their materials, this belies the fact that they think deliberately about what they are saying in concepts which also stand separately from the work. And that's a rather promising place from which to explore the instability of being...

Paul Carey-Kent, July 2014



JEAN-PIERRE ROFFI – “*Old Spirit 2*”, oil and acrylic on canvas, 100 x 120 cm



CAROLINA KHOURI – “*Abstract in Blue No 6*”, oil on canvas, 164 x 121 cm



Tess Rachel Williams - 'F.M.N.' , acrylic paint on canvas, 152x183 cm



KIMBAL QUIST BUMSTEAD – “*After These Sheets*”, bitumen and varnish on canvas, 145 x 105 cm



DAGMAR DOST-NOLDEN – *“Maybe Being A”*, acrylic & mixed media on canvas, 200 x 230 cm



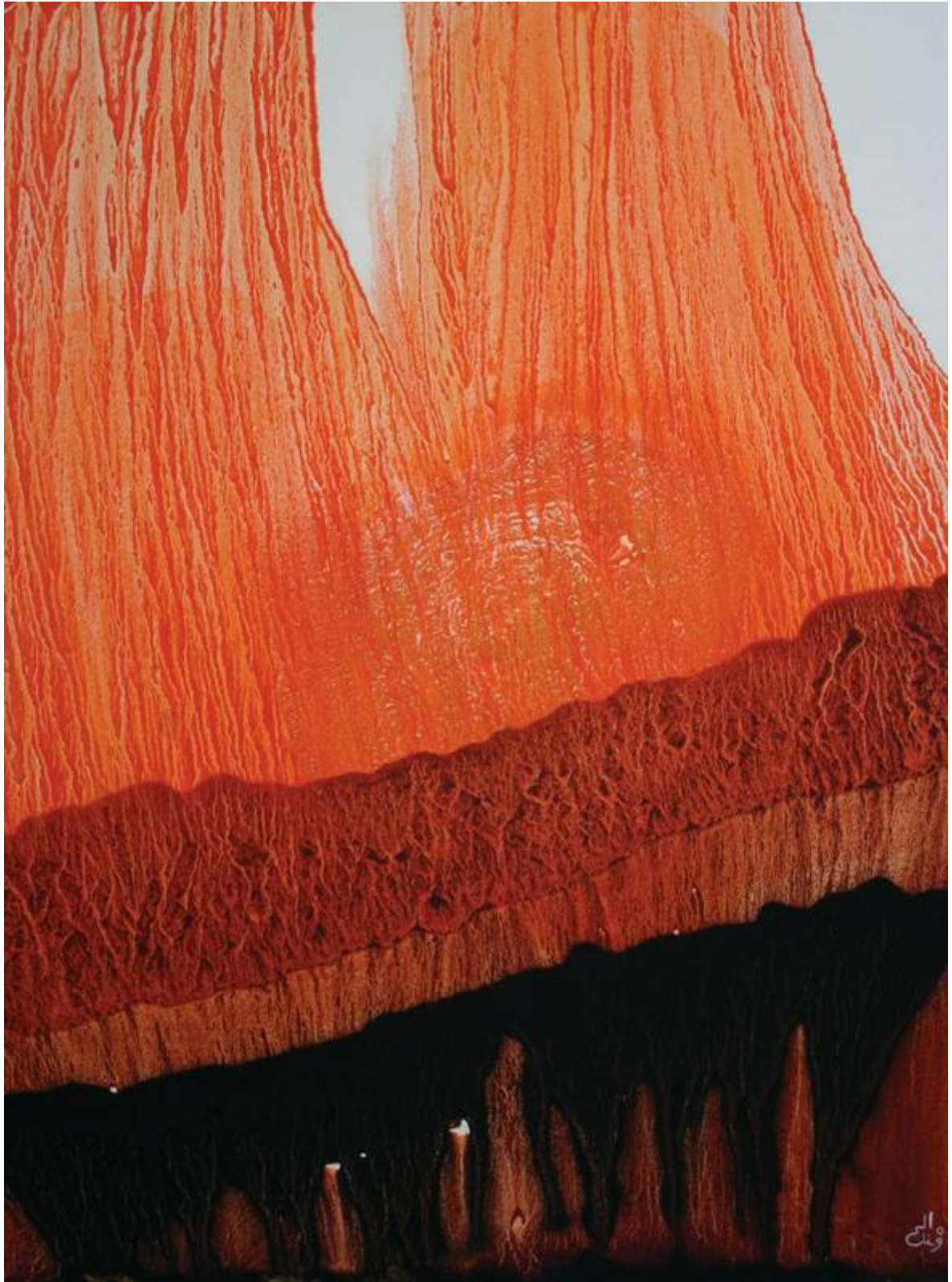
SIRO CARRARO – “*Viaggiatori del Tempo*” (Travellers of the Time), oil on canvas, 165 x 185 cm



DYLAN SHIELDS – “Sisyphus”, cardboard and packing tape, 70 x 40 x 40 cm



ROBERT MELDRUM – "*Hinterheubronn*", oil on canvas, 160 x 130 cm



ELI ACHESON-ELMASSRY – “*Arabia Rising*”, oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm



ANNIE ZAMERO - *'The Wounded Warrior'*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 107 x 153 cm

With Special Thanks To

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Panel Discussion Speakers

Ian Rosenfeld- Director at Rosenfeld Porcini
Paul Carey-Kent- Art critic, and curator
Nick Malone- Artist and writer

Artists' Talk

Carolina Khouri
Robert Meldrum

Guest Performance Artists

The London Bulgarian Choir
'Balabustah'- Dov Levitski, Chris Taylor, Paul Malloy, Andy Ruiz-Palma



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