

MATT MAGEE: CIRCA 1994
Hiram Butler Gallery, Houston
2 November, 2013 – 4 January, 2014

Circa 1994 assembles a group of Matt Magee's paintings executed nearly twenty years ago. The early 1990s marked a shift in Magee's oeuvre, from a predominantly sculptural practice to a painterly one. It was at this time, too, that the artist developed a visual vocabulary in earnest and set the precedent for his continued practice today.

Magee is an archivist both of the mind and of the world in which we live, and the pictorial language he employs includes things observed and imagined. His background informs his art making. He worked as an archivist for Robert Rauschenberg for eighteen years and before that, as a young adult, using a seismic truck in Laredo, Texas, recorded vibrations sent into the earth to collect data about underlying geologic formations. The structure of arranging information to be found in these professional and formative experiences nestles comfortably in Magee's artistic practice; his works often resemble charts and graphs of collected information or tablets on which an arcane language is transcribed. Given the formal structure of Magee's paintings, it can be difficult to resist the temptation to categorize and organize his work accordingly.

Many of the paintings in Circa 1994 are painted on thick slabs of wood that Magee found, on the streets or in dumpsters in Brooklyn. He cut them down to roughly the same size and covered them with simple images using irregular and thick applications of paint. The earliest of these record archetypal forms, such as birds, arrows, letters, numerals, trees, meandering paths, and crescent moons. Magee renders recognizable forms as purely abstract, while simultaneously conjuring charms and talismans of a personal nature. *Red M*, 1994, for example, can be read abstractly as three black triangles on a red ground or, alternatively, as the letter M, which is most likely a reference to the artist himself.

Crescent moons are a predominant motif in a small group of paintings that develop one of the artist's personal cosmologies. Magee often repeats the crescent shapes in succession, creating a rhythmic vibration that pulsates visually. *Djinn and The Sound in my Head*, both 1994, appear to describe implicit life radiating from within figurative or totemic forms. *Alpha II*, 1995, is pure hard-edge abstraction, but it also resembles tally marks of the passing of time – many moons.

In the late 1990's Magee began to organize numerous and varied forms within a painted ground. Usually arranged in rows and columns, Magee's shapes are both familiar and foreign; they are modernist pictograms that can be read from left to right, top to bottom. The modest scale and hard surface of these works reinforce their relationship to written language – they become tablets, pages, stelae.

Magee came to Houston with Rauschenberg in 2007 for the opening of the latter's Cardboards exhibition at The Menil Collection. It was at this time that Magee and I met, and I became familiar with his work shortly thereafter. Circa 1994 is our third exhibition of Magee's work. Our first two exhibitions surveyed recent paintings. I became aware of his earliest paintings in 2011, when Magee was relocating works from a storage space to his Tribeca studio. Reassessing artworks that had been unseen for years, Magee arranged them on the floor of his studio and sent us a snapshot. Here was a mature body of work from twenty years ago that captures the artist's visual, conceptual, and historical trajectory. Taking a cue from his arrangement on the floor, we installed Circa 1994 in a cluster; a colorful paragraph of Matt Magee's visual language.

JOSH PAZDA 2013