



Utah's Art Magazine

## Public vs. Private: Who Owns the Light?

Sean Slemon at CUAC

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by Geoff Wichert

From ten feet away it appears that in *Tied Up/Tied Down*, Sean Slemon has filled a shadow box with bits of leafy foliage and then overlaid lengths of orange ribbon in Xs in front to enclose the space, interrupt the gaze, and rupture any Romantic connection between viewers and this bit of Nature. Slemon, whose medium is the installation, has placed this work in an alcove in the CUAC gallery, so that one approaches it straight on, rather than walking along a wall where the initial view is close up. As the viewer draws near, the illusion collapses into a digital photograph of a tree bound by the plastic tape used



in urban settings to support and control trees planted in concrete surroundings: the work not of gardeners but of architects and engineers for whom plants are versatile ornaments compromised by high maintenance costs.

Upstairs in the gallery's mezzanine, Slemon has hung nine stills from a video in what amounts to a narrow hallway, so they must be viewed close up and in a sequence that simulates the narrative encounter in the film. The contrast between these two installations makes clear that while he emphasizes the cerebral content, the social and political issues that preoccupy him, Slemon understands that visual art must first engage the eye. So he brings something of the Baroque era's sense of theatricality and illusion to works that intrigue the eye but also demand active exploration by the body. As his drawings and sculptures demonstrate, in order to make viewers' think urgently about how we exploit light and nature it is first necessary for us to truly see these materials. We need our senses to convince us they are real, and this is one place where the acquired skills of art can still find employment.

# MAGNANMETZ GALLERY

An example present here only in drawings simulates light rays using enormous wooden beams painted black. In his accompanying lecture, Herman Dutoit quoted the artist as saying he would have made them of concrete had it been practical, in order to make their ephemeral presence as substantial as possible. In *Solid Light, crossed*, Slemon confounds both reality and the conventions of representation by using charcoal to stand for light, leaving the surrounding white paper to stand for dark. In a different but equally bold statement of this theme, *Potential sunlight mapped* uses orange surveyor's tape to postulate the path of light entering a window, crossing the room, and falling across the floor in an animated photo-graph of the source.

Installation demands a fertile imagination; even the small and sympathetic space of the CUAC defeats many attempts. Slemon imbues each work and its allied space with a separate identity, so that instead of seven similar paintings he sets up seven adventures, each requiring a unique response from viewers. *The artificial light at night* frames a view of the lawn next to the gallery, where the artist has staked out the pattern of electric light that would fall there from the window if it were dark outside. The view from upstairs is a revelation that mandates a



stroll through the sculpture garden to view the pattern of light while standing on the ground.

In *The ambiguous relationship between man and nature*, four photographs of dead trees standing near structures weave across the gallery, hung not on a wall but freely in space. Each is sewn with dozens of orange threads that recall the fall of light while retaining the ambiguity of the title. Some of the threads are as straight as the ribbons, while others curl through space: Slemon points out that light is both a natural *and* a man-made material. A similar ambiguity enlightens the climactic work, a pixilated video of a tree that seems to gasp for breath as it grows to maturity and then is cut away. We might be less inclined to consider trees private property, more inclined to recognize them as public resources—or even as living creatures with some autonomous existence—after seeing ones entire life in captivity collapsed into two minutes and sixteen seconds.