

# November 2015 Sculpture Magazine - Darren Waterston

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The Art of Corruption: Darren Waterston's *Filthy Lucre*

by Twylene Moyer  
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*Filthy Lucre*, 2013-14. Oil, acrylic, and gold leaf on wood, aluminum, fiberglass, and ceramic, with audio and lighting, approx. 146 x 366 x 238 in.

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They face off across a dim room: in one corner, a cultivated gentleman poses in elegant evening attire; in the other, a depraved monster, hunched over a piano, recoils at the horrible metamorphosis that sends feathers erupting from his flesh and turns fingers and toes into talons. Portraits of one and the same man, these two canvases—the first an exquisite harmony of gradated tones and controlled brushwork, the second, a shrill parody of painterly technique—mark the beginning and end of a sordid saga as rehearsed and circulated by one of the 19th century's most contradictory and maddening artists. James McNeill Whistler may have boasted that he squashed this former friend turned enemy, relegating him to oblivion as a footnote in some future dull Vasari, like the anonymous patron who paid Correggio in pennies, but history played him for a fool. Whistler will never be free of Frederick Leyland. Nor should he be. In a perfect Dantesque twist, the punishment suits the crime. For the mere man of money is not just the artist's foe, a Jekyll who devolves into Hyde; he represents the artist's own Hyde, a frightening manifestation of the philistine lurking within the maker—a dissolute pimp who prostitutes his muse.

The catalyst that transformed *Arrangement in Black* (1870-73) into *The Gold Scab: Eruption in Filthy Lucre* (1879) came in 1876-77.<sup>1</sup> Leyland would have considered it the dining room of his London house, a functional space designed to showcase his collection of blue and white porcelain and two paintings by Whistler—*La Princesse du pays de la porcelaine*, already in his collection, and *The Three Girls*, originally commissioned in 1867 and still not completed. For Whistler, however, who was called in to consult on color and execute some minor decorations, it evolved into a full-blown work of art, as much his creative property as a painting in his studio. In the owner's absence, he treated Leyland's room as his own, both workspace and canvas, putting in 15-hour days, continually expanding his scope, constantly adjusting hues, adding layer after layer of gilding and glazes; by the time he finished (close to a year later), he had covered almost every surface—walls, shelves, ceiling, and shutters—in shimmering patterns derived from peacock feathers. In Whistler's proud words to Leyland, *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room* was alive with beauty—brilliant and gorgeous.



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*Filthy Lucre* (detail), 2013-14.

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But that beauty harbored corruption. Born of vanity, nurtured by obsession, and feeding on injured pride, greed, and a thirst for revenge, it has lain festering within the Peacock Room's opulent surfaces, sealed into the skin of its seductive finishes. You can't see it—mere historical facts can't break the aesthetic spell—but it has been there from the beginning, gnawing away like woodworm. Perhaps only an artist would recognize the signs, instinctively sensing the behind-the-scenes battleground of competing interests and conflicting motivations, and only an artist working today could unleash that reality in full visual and conceptual form. Darren Waterston is that artist. A painter who conjoins extremes of time frame, mood, and style into stunning atmospheric

synthesis, he is a keen observer of the disturbances that break through unguarded gaps in human consciousness and understanding. To his gothically inclined eye, only the smallest distance separates the beautiful from the grotesque. Looking past the sumptuous façade into the Peacock Rooms decadent heart, he found ruin.

The blank exterior of Waterstons Filthy Lucre gives little away, though something shiny and nasty seeps out from under its walls. But even this dread warning scarcely begins to hint at the scene that awaits. The doorway opens into a room that seems familiar in every aspect: bespoke shelving filled with pottery, fireplace with sunflower andirons, the princess hanging in her artist-designed frame, Jacobean-style ceiling ribs curving down into pendant lamps, and the famous peacock murals painted on the shutters and over the sideboard. Everything is there, yet it is all wrong.

To cross the threshold is to enter a nightmare of reversal in which glorious harmony gives birth to chaos. The marks of degradation have left nothing untouched: shelves splinter and collapse, floorboards creak and buckle with every step, pots slump, warp, and shatter, insects invade, and mold blooms over walls and masks the face of the princess. The perverted details register first, but other, more insidious forces make their presence felt. Whispering voices, faint echoes, and startling crashes rise and fall away, winding through the space like specters sounding their own dirge. The unresolved dissonance begins to oppress: this is not a finalized scenario, where violence, once committed, resides safely in the past, but a work in progress, still active in its degeneration. Stately proportions contract, and the ceiling softens and sags under its own weight, melting ever lower as this uncanny doppelgänger shrinks into itself, ravaged by an all-pervasive decay worked in tandem by sin and time. Subtle coloration sours, and a lurid red light leaking between partially cracked shutters picks out the glittering trail of a viscous substance that hemorrhages from behind the walls, oozing, dripping, and puddling over every available surface.



Using art as a subjective mirror, Waterston has captured not only the outer reflection of another work of art, but also its true inner reflection and that of its creator. If the Peacock Room is Dorian Gray suspended in the artifice of its original beauty, its appearance unsullied by the crimes of its making, *Filthy Lucre* is its soul. And it is blackened. Together, the two rooms, following the lead of Whistler's two portraits of Leyland, reflect the Janus-faced duality of an artistic ambition tainted by gold.

As Waterston's title suggests, he has no interest in the decorative or symbolic value of this incorruptible, but all-corrupting metal. In the hell of *Filthy Lucre*, gold is stripped of all pretensions to elevation and divinity; it means money and nothing more. The phrase itself underscores the baseness: the question is just where exactly to focus its implication of ill-gotten gains. Waterston devotes particular care to his version of the Poor Peacock and the Rich Peacock, the mural that Whistler added over the sideboard in a fit of pique after Leyland refused to pay him the full 2,000 guineas (offering only 1,000) for work that had never been contracted and that exceeded the remit.<sup>2</sup> With this publicity stunt, Whistler also had the nerve to open Leyland's private home to journalists and the public, he abandoned all artistic integrity, as well as the moral high ground, issuing, in effect, a thinly veiled broadside in which the poor artist (on the left, a submissive bird sporting Whistler's silver forelock) suffers at the hands of an ignorant and close-fisted patron (on the right, a belligerent, coin-shedding bird, neck feathers raised in mockery of Leyland's signature frilled shirt.)

Though Waterston seems to escalate the violence, he follows the cue of ironic self-awareness signaled by Whistler's decision to portray both himself and Leyland as birds of a feather. Waterston's battling birds bear no marks of identity. No longer a particular artist and a particular patron, they have become barely distinguishable personifications of art and money. Though they appear to be tearing each other's guts out, their antagonism is a sham. Each one grasps the other's lifeline in its beak, and in the space between their bodies, the lines cross. Bound together by Clement Greenberg's umbilical cord of gold, a connection that cannot be severed, art and money are twinned; they may play at animosity, but in reality, they feed off each other.

Whistler introduced an innovative new move into this elaborate choreography, just at the moment when the art market was detaching itself from traditional patronage models. His step not only survives, it now dictates the dance.<sup>3</sup> A self-declared rebel genius, the driving force of Aestheticism who threw off the confining stays of pedantic Victorian narrative, Whistler epitomized rising avant-garde aspirations in the second half of the 19th century. He strove for ambiguous beauty, not pictures to be read, not windows onto reality, but paintings as objects in themselves expressing nothing more or less than perfect formal harmonics. In true Greenbergian style, Whistler's works could not be judged by familiar standards; they achieved validity purely on their own terms, nor could they be valued on the same scale as ordinary, run-of-the-mill academic pictures.

Though advanced, Whistler's formal explorations were not nearly so precocious as his shrewd understanding of how to create a market for these rarefied products. Pitching his works as expensive objects of luxury that could be appreciated only by the initiated and owned only by the very wealthy, he cultivated not just an audience, but a following. More than an artist, he was a personality; the well-known Whistler forged in part through painting, but mostly through social shenanigans. His outrageous behavior, style, and actions might be emulated or mocked, but he got notice in the press and he backed that attention up with his writings. Acting as his own public relations firm, he twisted the threads of art, fashion, and status into a powerful (and entertaining) sideshow that heightened the desirability, and exclusivity, of his work, then played coy with his postulants, except for the selected few. Though he introduced trends, he disdained the popular and carefully curated his coterie, just as he did his exhibitions. He saw himself as a rare bird, a veritable peacock, and like the peacock, which became the emblem of Aestheticism, he was a man divided: beauty, glory, immortality, and wisdom commingled with pride, luxury, arrogance, and vanity.




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*Filthy Lucre* (detail), 2013-14.

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When Whistler started working on the Peacock Room, he was heavily in debt, having completed only a handful of major canvases in the preceding five years. Ideal beauty may have been slipping from his grasp, but pride and arrogance never abandoned him. The more difficulties he faced in the studio, the more he invested in the foolery—the public quarrels in the press, the self-published pamphlets, and the social gadflying that he called the vicious art of butterfly flippancy, aka branding. The decorations may have started as a way to break the creative block, but as Whistler got increasingly carried away, the Peacock Room grew overwhelming in its import: taking on a life of its own, it was to be his two-fold salvation—his just reward, artistic and remunerative (for his lifestyle did not come cheap). In Frederick Leyland's unfinished dining room, Whistler's warring impulses collided, as the grandstanding art world/society impresario faced down the hard-working, committed painter. If he had to subvert his principles, alienate his allies, even deal dishonestly, the price would be worth paying.

This internal devil's bargain—Whistler was fond of posing as the devil incarnate—explains why Waterston chose to re-portray the Peacock Room, the apotheosis of Aesthetic decoration, and why he did so in such a devastating, iconoclastic way. Only by going to the extremes of gothic excess is it possible to expose what he calls the underbelly of beauty. And behind the bare facts, this is a strikingly gothic tale. The Peacock Room destroyed everyone it touched: the architect Thomas Jeckyll, whose work Whistler defaced and claimed as his own, ended in a madhouse tormented by visions of gold; Leyland lost his wife, who in turn lost her children; and Whistler, maniacally pursuing a masterpiece that would win him the buzz of publicity and pots of guineas, lost his friend and patron, the libel suit against John Ruskin in which he sought to recuperate the £1,000 that Leyland refused to pay, then the new Chelsea house that he had begun despite his debts, and finally his reputation (at least for a while).<sup>4</sup> All this resulted not because a rich patron stiffed an innocent artist, but because the artist succumbed to his own public relations fairy tale and let the sideshow overrule the art.

A fragmentary, three-part refrain surfaces from the discordant soundscape that haunts *Filthy Lucre*: I am a thing of beauty, a profitmaker, forever. As the words overlap, they lose all sense of order and exact relation to each other.<sup>5</sup> Uttered by Waterston's disfigured princess in the guise of an avenging spirit, this paradoxical refrain accuses Whistler, the creator of her original. This is the real crime lurking within the Peacock Room, and the final key to Waterston's devastating cautionary tale. Though the meaning of filthy lucre has since been generalized, it originally referred to a specific kind of ill-gotten gain—those accrued by unruly and vain talkers and

deceivers who teach wrongly for the sake of money (Titus 1: 10, 11; King James Version). The vain talker is none other than Whistler in full Barnum mode, the fairy godfather of today's art stars. And his wrongful teaching the step that he introduced into the dance of art and money is the same one that dictates our movements today: the elevation of Art World over art. This Art World, as originated by Whistler, defines our contemporary condition. A realm where style trumps substance, it thrives on hype and publicity, fashion, the fetishization of big-brand objects, and, above all, money.

By reducing the Peacock Room to ruins, *Filthy Lucre* lays bare the necessary hypocrisy shadowing Whistler's achievement, as well as the dubious nature of his legacy. It is impossible to know where the posturing showman ends and the serious artist begins. No doubt there was a serious artist, and in many ways a heroic one: Whistler created some breathtakingly daring paintings, defended the artist's right to interpret his work against the babble of ignorant critics, and most importantly to everyone now laboring in the ghetto of culture work, introduced the idea of payment, not for time spent on execution, but for a lifetime's worth of knowledge. And yet, though he may be condemned for it, his true genius might have more closely resembled Leyland's. Whistler, too, was a ruthless man of business, one who seized opportunities in a changing market and manipulated them to his advantage. His dual nature inflected everything he was and everything he did even his love of Asian art. In the 1860s, he promoted the elite taste for blue and white (export) porcelain (and all things Oriental), just when he was looking to sell paintings like *La princesse* inspired by his personal collection thereby driving up the prices of the pots while increasing the value/appeal of his own works. But what is admired in Leyland is abhorred in Whistler. In *Filthy Lucre*, Waterston strips those valuable pots of their status, replacing them with bastardized, mass-produced kitsch scavenged from flea markets and deliberate distortions of ceramic quality.<sup>6</sup>



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*Filthy Lucre* (detail), 2013-14.

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This whiff of the deal, the scam artist, and of swindling quackery, as Dante Gabriel Rossetti called it, explains why Ruskin the champion of late Turner did not trust Whistler and why he attacked the nocturnes at the 1877 Grosvenor Gallery exhibition. The high prices attached to the paintings were outrageous not because those paintings were abstract, atmospheric, and devoid of recognizable subject matter, but because they were created by a coxcomb, who served and profited from the modern system of accumulating wealth. Ruskin's harsh judgment, written shortly after Whistler had become a full-blown celebrity thanks to his Peacock Room publicity blitz, stems from deep-seated misgivings that foreshadow objections to today's art market: How could such works have anything to do with art as a craft, as a calling, as a unique conduit for human expression, when they appear to have been manufactured purely for gain? Then, as now, the sideshow renders the work, and any claims made on its behalf, dishonest and suspect. Like Ruskin, we want art to be pure, disinterested, and above all financial interest, but even the most anti-commercial art has its market, indeed relies on that very status to sell. We act as though the two sides of Whistler are incompatible, and yet filthy lucre in the general sense must be made. If all is fair in love and war, why not in art?

In today's world, every artist must emulate Whistler in order to succeed: the artwork no longer speaks loudly enough on its own, and self-promotion is not optional. By reflecting the past, the mirror of *Filthy Lucre* also reflects the present, and we can see ourselves and our vanities clearly within it. Though it is a lament, it is also a redemption. Like a *memento mori*, it lifts the veil of deception so that we can recognize beauty and art for what they really are: neither timeless nor noble, but of their time and firmly rooted in this world, and always serving human ends. Art is not

a mystery, but a part of civilization, and civilization, as Whistlers contemporary Anthony Trollope observed, comes from what men call greed. And like civilizations, artworks, too, will rise and fall, wither and decay, even their ruins driving progress, cultural and otherwise, until nothing remains.

Twylene Moyer is the Managing Editor of Sculpture.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As installed at the Smithsonian's Freer and Sackler Galleries, *Filthy Lucre* (2013/14), which Waterston originally created in collaboration with MASS MoCA, is preceded by a small exhibition that brings together the two Leyland portraits and other examples of Whistler's works related to the Leyland family. The Freer houses the Peacock Room. *Filthy Lucre* is the centerpiece of Peacock Room REMIX, a larger program of rotating installations organized by Lee Glazer, associate curator of American art at the Freer; it remains on view through January 2, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> For a full recounting of the development of the work, see Linda Merrill, *The Peacock Room: A Cultural Biography* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, 1998), pp. 207-33. There is nothing new about artists and patrons fighting over money: most surviving documents in the history of art record such struggles, nor is there anything about Leyland in particular (Whistler's aspersions notwithstanding) to warrant the degree of *Filthy Lucre's* deconstruction. Leyland, the self-made man who pulled himself up from dubious origins to become a shipping magnate and collector, hater of upper-crust society, music lover, and supporter of the burgeoning avant-garde, is not under scrutiny. Whistler, however, is.

<sup>3</sup> Traditional patronage still existed, and both Whistler and Dante Gabriel Rossetti enjoyed just such a relationship with Leyland, but Whistler saw an opportunity to work both systems to his advantage, taking commissions and advances from Leyland and other patrons on works delivered years later (if at all), while cultivating a wider following through self-produced exhibitions and participation in select group shows. Such a strategy required a skill set and division of energies completely foreign to traditional artistic business models, and some artists, including Rossetti, preferred the relative safety of patronage: thanks to 20 years of Leyland's support, Rossetti had no need to show his work or find an audience. Whistler, on the other hand, had to be constantly on the make.

<sup>4</sup> Technically Whistler won the 1877 suit, but the jury only awarded him a farthing in damages. Ruskin's famous invective directed against *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*, declared that he had never expected to hear a coxcomb ask 200 guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face. For a full discussion of the trial and its impact, see Linda Merrill, *A Pot of Paint: Aesthetics on Trial in Whistler v. Ruskin* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> The vocal and cello soundscape composed and performed by the activist alt music trio BETTY can be heard at [www.asia.si.edu/filthylucre/betty.asp](http://www.asia.si.edu/filthylucre/betty.asp).

<sup>6</sup> The wonderfully slumped and melting pots on the shelves of *Filthy Lucre* were created by North Adams, Massachusetts-based ceramic artist Diane Sullivan.

Watch these videos on Darren Waterston and his work

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For more information on Darren Waterston [click here](#).

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