

# ‘Filthy Lucre’ and the complicated relationship between artist and buyer

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By Philip Kennicott May 19, 2015

In 1840, the great British historian Thomas Macaulay predicted that the Roman Catholic Church would outlast all its skeptics and even the city of London, and he used a striking visual image to underscore his point: The Roman Church “may still exist in undiminished vigour when some traveller from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul’s.” That vision of ruins, made literal in a famous image by Gustave Doré, became something of a cliché in 19th-century writing. Though Macaulay’s New Zealander is mostly forgotten today, the delight in imagining our own world in ruins lingers, in movies that show Washington incinerated by aliens or New York inundated by apocalyptic floods.

At first glance, Darren Waterston’s “Filthy Lucre,” on view at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, seems in the tradition of ruin art. The artist has meticulously created what appears to be a perfect facsimile of James McNeill Whistler’s Peacock Room, an 1870s fusion of painting and design now permanently installed in the Freer Gallery nearby. But something has gone desperately wrong: The shelves are broken, the walls smeared with paint, the famous painting above the fireplace has morphed into a dark, faceless form, and shattered vases are strewn on the floor. An icon of 19th-century art has been trashed.

Except it hasn’t. Look carefully, and you realize that Waterston’s installation, first seen at MASS MoCA in 2014, isn’t a facsimile at all, and it hasn’t been subjected to violence. It is, rather, a carefully built up image of a room corrupted, not destroyed. No one wielding an ax could transform the real Peacock Room into what one sees in “Filthy Lucre.” Waterston gets at his vision of brokenness not by breaking something, but by parodying it.

Journalists were invited to view the Sackler’s Peacock Room REMIX, of which “Filthy Lucre” is the centerpiece, along with paintings and drawings related to the history of the Peacock Room, on the morning after an overhyped Picasso sold in New York for \$179 million, setting a record for a painting sold at auction. In an interview that morning, Waterston told the crowd that while working on his installation, he marveled at how similar the art world of Whistler’s day was to the art world of today. “We are living in our own gilded age,” he said.

The feelings evoked by the astronomical amount paid for the Picasso canvas include impotent rage (the amount of money is obscene, and now another painting has likely disappeared into the insular realms of the super rich) and something deeper, an

unease about the ways and doings of the larger art world. These feelings parallel the distinction between breaking up a true replica of the Peacock Room (rage), and creating an ironic parody of it in broken form (anxiety). If Waterston's work is about the art world, it is about the deeper, structural corruption of it, not simply a visceral protest against its absurd excesses.

The original Peacock Room was created during a fundamental shift in how artists built their careers. The old era of academic salons, in which individual works were juried into large group shows, receiving the imprimatur of establishment approval, was giving way to a more directly commercial approach to selling art. The artist made work for a gallery, and the gallerist did much of the work of promoting and displaying it, in exchange for a commission. The old-style model of aristocratic patronage, in which artists directly served wealthy clients, was yielding to the system that is essentially still in place today.

But this evolution favored certain kinds of artists, those blessed with the temperamental ability to be self-promotional, the skill to manipulate the press and the critics, craft a brand or an identity, and sell their work to the money-laundering arrivistes of the nouveaux riches.

Whistler famously overstepped his bounds as an artist when he undertook the decoration of the Peacock Room, going far beyond what his client desired or expected. He offended and feuded with a patron who had once been a friend, Frederick Richards Leyland, and Leyland refused to pay the artist the sum he demanded.

A rupture ensued, and Whistler stewed in anger, producing in 1879 a grotesque caricature of Leyland, hunched over a piano, surrounded by bags of money, and half-transformed into a peacock. The title of the painting, "The Gold Scab: Eruption in Frilthy Lucre," made the reference to Leyland — who liked frilly shirts and was filthy rich — explicit with the rather juvenile portmanteau "frilthy."

Waterston clearly sees the ugly back story to the original Peacock Room as a means to explore the complicated and corrupting relationship between those who make art and those who buy it. His refusal to create a duplicate of the original room, then destroy it, signals the artist's understanding that he is no more free of this relationship, or the market, than is any other artist. The "artsiness" of the project — the care with which he has crafted the image of brokenness — reminds us that art about the corruption of art is still art, still part of a career, still inscribed in the market. A few of the pots Waterston has placed on the broken shelving of his version of the Peacock Room explicitly recall the painted pots of the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, who has also explored the idea of destruction as a creative act: And this is yet more of the honest artsiness that makes "Filthy Lucre" far more compelling than an act of visceral anger.


But is there a way out of this room? Waterston's "Filthy Lucre" is slightly smaller than the original Peacock Room, and it feels a bit claustrophobic, as if the walls are closing in on the visitor. The disorder of the space feels oppressive, and it asks us: Is there any outside to the sickness of the art world, its meretricious excess, its tendency to extend the winner-take-all economy of the real world into the art world itself, which extravagantly rewards a small coterie of often not-very-talented superstars?

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Its power is limited to prophecy. In the mid-1960s, Edward Ruscha painted his cheeky “The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire,” a sun-drenched comic twist on the history of ruins in art. Waterston’s “Filthy Lucre” is a far darker vision, extending the sense of decay into the inner chambers of the art world. This isn’t about a chink in the facade — it’s about the ruination of the last, sacred, safe spaces for art. You can’t limit its critique to safe platitudes, that sometimes, perhaps, the relationship between the artist and the collector is unpleasant. It seems to say that this relationship is itself the fundamentally corrupting element of the entire art project, with inescapable consequences for all involved.

*“Peacock Room REMIX: Darren Waterston’s Filthy Lucre” is on view at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery through Jan. 2, 2017.*

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