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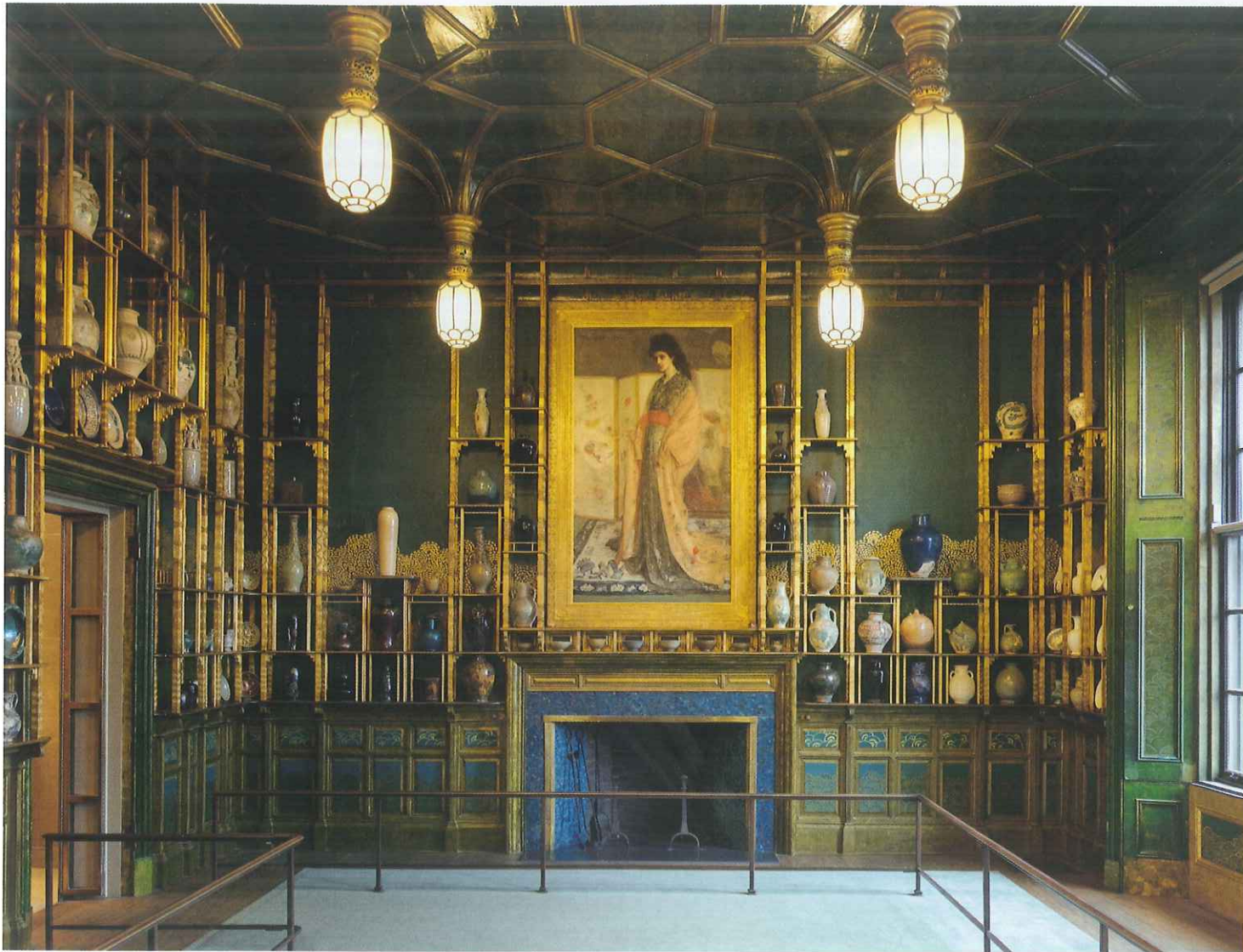
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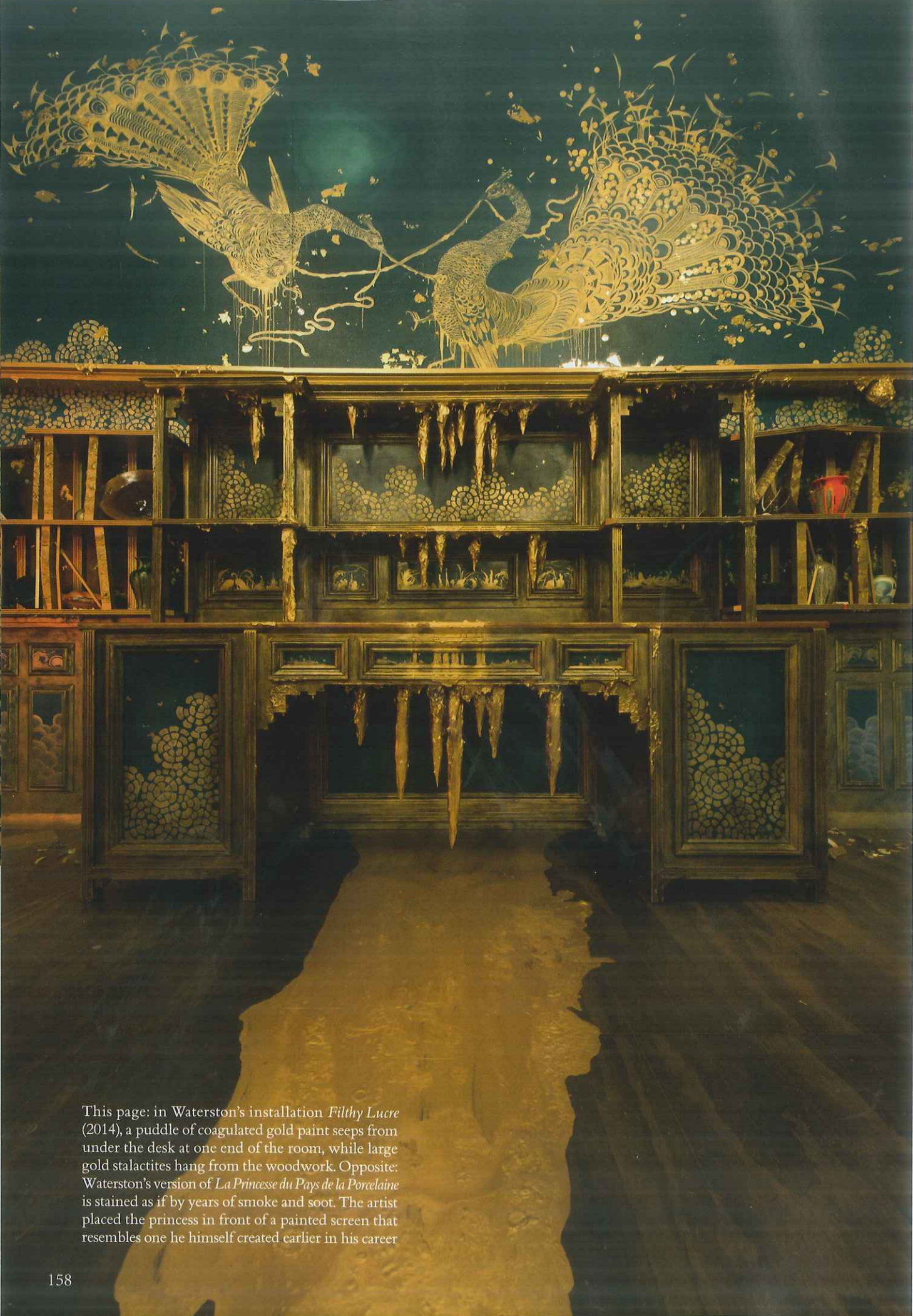


This page: Waterston stands below Whistler's *Art and Money* in the 'real' Peacock Room. The mural shows two peacocks fighting, the left one representing the artist, the right his patron. Opposite: Whistler's *La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine* (1863-65) hangs above the fireplace. The painting is a romantic confusion of aesthetic sources: the model was of Greek descent, the robe and screen Japanese, and the title a nod to China



# PEACOCK TALES

The Peacock Room is Whistler's most infamous work, and after its completion he and the shipping magnate who commissioned it never spoke again. Now Darren Waterston has created *Filthy Lucre*, an homage/critique of the masterpiece, reimagined as a diseased ruin. Jonathan Griffin learns how the installation, shown alongside the original, took flight. Portrait: Annie Schlechter

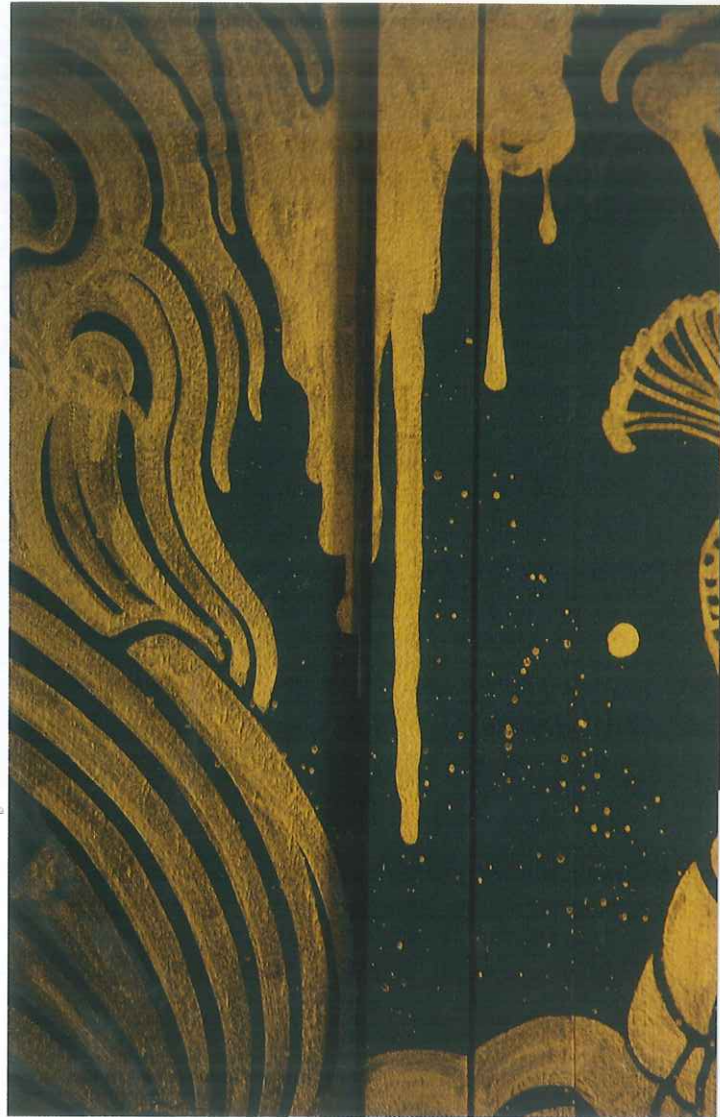


This page: in Waterston's installation *Filthy Lucre* (2014), a puddle of coagulated gold paint seeps from under the desk at one end of the room, while large gold stalactites hang from the woodwork. Opposite: Waterston's version of *La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine* is stained as if by years of smoke and soot. The artist placed the princess in front of a painted screen that resembles one he himself created earlier in his career





Waterston enlisted the help of Debora Coombs, an expert in restoring stained glass, to refabricate the Peacock Room's lamps, designed by Thomas Jeckyll to resemble Chinese lanterns. Coombs helped prepare over 300 pieces of glass for Waterston to hand-paint



Above left: most of the ceramic vessels in *Filthy Lucre* came from thrift shops, but some were specially thrown to conceal speakers that played a haunting soundtrack. Above right: Waterston added certain painterly gestures once the installation was assembled



**IN SEPTEMBER** 1876, James McNeill Whistler wrote to inform his friend and patron Frederick Richards Leyland that he had ‘*enfin*’ managed to complete the decorative scheme for Leyland’s London dining room, which he had been working on for the past several weeks. Leyland, a shipping magnate, had returned to Speke Hall – his main residence in Liverpool – in August, leaving Whistler at work on a few minor alterations. Initially designed at huge expense by the fashionable architect Thomas Jeckyll as a showcase for Leyland’s Chinese porcelain collection and two paintings by Whistler (one as yet unfinished), the room had a colour scheme that the painter did not quite approve of. Leyland had left him repainting some red flowers on the antique leather wallpaper – acquired for the stupendous sum of £1,000 – which Whistler turned yellow. Unsatisfied, he applied some gold leaf. Then it occurred to him that Jeckyll’s elegantly carved walnut shelves probably ought to be gilded as well. Leyland worried about hurting the designer’s pride, but acquiesced, wanting the job finished.

A few weeks later, Whistler sent his bill. ‘There is no room in London like it *mon cher*,’ he crowed. He omitted to mention that he had repainted the wallpaper and the pendant ceiling in Antwerp blue, covered all wooden surfaces in gold leaf, added gold murals throughout and painted magnificent gold peacocks over the three window shutters. The invoice was for £2,000. Leyland hit the roof.

*Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room* is Whistler’s most celebrated *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The title is ironic in that Leyland had Whistler inharmoniously ejected from his home and the two never

spoke again. Before he left, the artist added his coup de grâce; in place of the still incomplete second painting (for which he had been paid) he designed a mural of two male peacocks fighting, one with a pile of gold coins at his feet. He titled the scene *Art and Money*.

When the contemporary artist Darren Waterston was invited to show at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art – famed for its grand installations – his first idea was for a mural. During his research, he became fascinated by Whistler’s Peacock Room (as it is widely known) and visited it in Washington DC, where it is permanently installed in the Freer Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian. His ambitions for his own project quickly grew, and – as one curator remarked – like Whistler, his plans soon exceeded all initial schedules and budgets. The museum began fundraising, and assembled a team of assistants and specialist craftsmen and women. *Filthy Lucre*, Waterston’s career-defining installation, which opened to the public in 2014, is both an homage to and critique of Whistler’s Peacock Room.

A tornado appears to have swept through Waterston’s free-standing reconstruction. The scaffold of Jeckyll’s wooden shelving is in disarray, and vases lean perilously or lie smashed on the floor. On closer inspection, the gilded woodwork seems to be dripping, literally, with gold. Fetid stalactites and cancerous cysts hang from the fireplace and a desk at the end of the room. A pool of congealed gold seeps on the floor, and a demonic red glow emanates from behind the shutters. Above the fireplace, where Whistler’s painting *La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine* originally held pride of place,

It was not until *Filthy Lucre* was installed for the first time that Waterston realised, in order to complete the effect, he would have to smash some of the hand-painted ceramic pots on the floor. It was an experience that he describes as ‘terrifying and liberating at the same time’





Waterston's remake shows the kimono-clad princess in a similarly demure pose but with her head consumed by a seething carbuncular mass. 'The room is diseased,' says the artist.

Waterston, who lives in New York, never set out to make a parody, still less a replica, of the original. *Filthy Lucre* is, in many respects, analogous to his paintings, in which he abstracts historical sources such as Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece or Edo-period Japanese art. Behind the Porcelain Princess, he has even reproduced a screen that he himself painted earlier in his career, in place of Whistler's version.

Where the peacocks in *Art and Money* merely strutted, Waterston has portrayed the birds pulling entrails from each other's breasts. He tells me he aims to expose 'the monstrous side of beauty'. Despite his feud with Whistler, Leyland kept the room as the artist had left it, a sumptuously beautiful environment but a festering reminder of their destroyed friendship, its allegory emblazoned across one wall. When Jeckyll saw it, he had a nervous breakdown and was committed to an asylum. Whistler is said to have smiled when he heard the news.

Waterston says that in no way does he consider himself an advocate for Whistler, who he guesses was a 'nasty character'. But he does appreciate the complexities of the artist-patron relationship, and the resentments that can build up around money. (He is at pains to emphasise that his own patrons have been nothing but gracious.) In our gilded age, says Waterston, the excesses of the art market rival those of the late 19th century: in 2014 alone the global

art market did \$51 billion in sales. And just as they were in 1876, the associated levels of social inequality remain stark.

Despite his success, Whistler owed a lot of people money, chief among them Leyland, who had facilitated the design and construction of Whistler's famous White House, in Chelsea. He hoped, perhaps, that this 'gift' (as he called it) might get him off the hook. Instead, the Peacock Room stands as an enduring monument to the overreach of artistic ego, and to the contempt bred by art's reliance on money. When Leyland finally paid Whistler, half of what the artist had demanded, he wrote his cheque in pounds, not guineas. Pounds were the currency of tradesmen, and worth a shilling less than guineas, reserved for professionals.

When Leyland died, the Peacock Room was purchased by the American industrialist Charles Lang Freer, who shipped it to his home in Detroit in 1904, and then bequeathed it to the nation. In May, the Freer's sister institution, the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, will install *Filthy Lucre* in an exhibition titled *Peacock Room Remix*, which combines Waterston's research with Whistler's art, including the grotesque painting that inspired Waterston's title: *The Gold Scab: Eruption in Frilthy Lucre (The Creditor)*. Completed three years after Whistler last set eyes on his Peacock Room, it shows Leyland as a horrifying, Blakean peacock, all scales and talons, hunched over his beloved piano and sporting his trademark frilly shirt ■ *'Peacock Room Remix: Darren Waterston's Filthy Lucre' runs at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 1050 Independence Ave SW, Washington, DC 20013 (002 202 633 4880; asia.si.edu), until 31 Jan 2017*

Waterston's murals on the three window shutters are subtly updated from Whistler's fastidious originals. In places, gold paint drips like blood, or is splattered across the blue backgrounds. From behind the shutters, eerie red lighting adds to the room's portentous atmosphere