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ART REVIEW

Waterston on the pressures of patronage at Mass MoCA

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 15, 2014

DARREN WATERSTON AND DC MOORE GALLERY

Waterston's installation "Filthy Lucre" echoes a caricature James Abbott McNeill Whistler did of a former patron.

NORTH ADAMS — A visionary coup and the product of audacious hubris, James Abbott McNeill Whistler's "Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room" set off fireworks in mid-1870s London. Whistler's patron, industrialist Frederick Leyland, who commissioned only a small portion of the interior design work Whistler executed, banned the artist from his house. A slew of money problems ensued for Whistler.

Painter Darren Waterston examines the fraught relationship between art and money in his own version of the “Peacock Room” an ambitious installation at the center of his show at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. Several of Waterston’s own paintings add to the intrigue. Moody, bathed in thin veils of sometimes sickly color, they often feature discomforting forms, which might be flesh and might be landscape. These rise from mists like fantasies and urgings beginning to coalesce. Some recall Whistler’s shadowy nocturnes.

Whistler (1834-1903) was a dandy, a scalawag, and a self-promoter Andy Warhol would have applauded. He cozied up to wealthy patrons who supported his painting habit and stroked his ego. That was the game many artists had to play — and still do — in order to carve out a career.

The painter’s “The Princess From the Land of Porcelain” hung over the fireplace in Leyland’s London dining room. The shipping magnate intended to show off his collection of Asian porcelain on a latticework of shelves there. He invited Whistler to consult with architect Thomas Jekyll on the color scheme, a sumptuous Prussian blue. Then Leyland left town, and Jekyll stepped away from the project because of illness.

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A detail of “Filthy Lucre.”

Left to his own devices, Whistler took over the space. He covered the ceiling with imitation gold leaf. He painted each wall, including gleaming gold peacocks on the shutters. He invited visitors to see it, including the press.

When he charged Leyland 2,000 pounds for the work, the industrialist balked, offered half that, and told the artist to stay away. Whistler, in a fit of pique, did return, and painted a pair of battling peacocks on the pricey leather wall panels across from the fireplace. They likely represented the artist and his patron: One was spangled with gold coins; the other had a white crest, like the streak in Whistler’s hair.

Whistler ultimately went into debt, and is said to have blamed Leyland, although he courted other trouble in a libel suit against critic John Ruskin. Whistler won the suit, but was awarded a pittance.

The Peacock Room survived. Leyland didn't change it, and after his death, another patron of Whistler's, US industrialist Charles Freer, purchased the whole kit and caboodle and had it installed in his Detroit mansion. In turn, he bequeathed the room to the Smithsonian Institution. Visitors can see the room these days in the Smithsonian's Freer Gallery of Art.

The title of Waterston's installation, "Filthy Lucre," speaks to the sick weight of the ties between artist and patron. Then it echoes a later caricature Whistler painted of Leyland, now his chief creditor: "The Gold Scab: Eruption in Frilthy Lucre (The Creditor)." Tethering "frilly" to "filthy," the artist portrayed Leyland as a peacock in a ruffled shirt, sitting atop Whistler's own house, which was being liquidated after the artist's bankruptcy.

Waterston's Peacock Room has gone to magnificent seed. Gold stalactites drop from under shelves; gold drips and puddles on the floor. The poor princess of porcelain stands in the same posture in her portrait, shoulders back, draped in a kimono, but her face has been obscured by a bubble of lichen, like the creepy forms that crawl through Waterston's other paintings.

And the pottery! Some of it is cracked, broken in shards on the floor. Other pieces are nothing like Leyland's prized blue-and-white porcelain, but glazed in fluorescent and drippy tones. Vases crumple over themselves. Ugly, garish, and falling apart, the ceramics festoon the gold-painted lattice of shelves, which splinters and topples.

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Darren Waterston in his studio.

The peacocks glitter. But the two in a cockfight appear to have poked each other in the breast and drawn blood — skeins pass between them, and the outcome looks poor. Mournful music by the band BETTY pipes through the dim room, and the place feels not only haunted, but corrupt. Luxury has burgeoned to excess; the decay is physical, but feels moral.

Whistler might have had no career without patrons such as Leyland. Indeed, unless they're independently wealthy or don't give a fig about selling, artists still depend on patrons. Waterston himself moved to North Adams for eight months to create "Filthy Lucre," supported by the museum and its funders.

It's hard, then, for an artist to critique the very system that keeps him fed. But "Filthy Lucre" does more than that. It ghoulishly satirizes the extreme wealth exemplified by Gilded Age industrialists, and draws a clear line to today's one percent, buyers who snap up wildly expensive art on a whim and drive an overheated market.

Art will always be entangled with money. The best the rest of us can hope for is a chance to look at the art critically and examine its supports — which Waterston does here. "Filthy Lucre" will travel to the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in July 2015, where it can be viewed in conjunction with the product of Whistler's heady, if ultimately toxic, cocktail of deep pockets and artistic liberties.

Darren Waterston: Uncertain Beauty

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