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Darren Waterston's *Filthy Lucre* Is Whistler's *Peacock Room* on Acid

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In the spring of 1876, British shipping magnate Frederick Leyland—and, more specifically, Leyland's celebrated interior designer Thomas Jeckyll—had just barely finished an exquisite renovation of the dining room in his Knightsbridge mansion. A year later the room was unrecognizable, Leyland was sitting on a £2,000 bill, and Jeckyll had been institutionalized after a mental breakdown that contributed to his early death four years later. The culprit? James McNeill Whistler. The American-born, London-based Whistler had taken the liberty of reimagining Leyland's new dining room as his first self-proclaimed masterpiece, *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, an orgy of gilt ornamentation conceived and executed

without the permission of Leyland, Whistler's friend and first serious patron. Leyland refused to pay for the exorbitant work he had never commissioned and the two had a falling out, but not before Whistler decorated one wall with a mural of extraordinary gold peacocks lunging at each other in a duel, talons flashing. Even without knowing the title of the mural—*Art and Money; or, The Story of the Room*—the symbolism is clear: the *Peacock Room* was a battleground.

Nearly 140 years later, and open to the public starting tomorrow, New York City-based painter **Darren Waterston**'s own reimagining of Whistler's scandalous tour de force is on display at the Smithsonian Institution's Freer Gallery of Art, just a few halls down from where the *Peacock Room* is also exhibited under the direction of curator **Lee Glazer**. "In my own work, I've been preoccupied with paradoxes of the grotesque and the beautiful," Waterston said over lunch at Cookshop last month, "and how quickly something beautiful can become something horrific." *The Peacock Room* was, he says, perfect inspiration. "But I didn't want my work to be a parody of *The Peacock Room*," Waterston continues. "I wanted it to have autonomy. Whistler was a point of departure to create something with very different intentions."

Filthy Lucre, as Waterston has titled his room, was originally built at MASS MoCA with the support of curator **Susan Cross** (Waterston calls her his "fairy godmother") and a team of fabricators—glassblowers, gilders, wood carvers—over the course of eight months during the winters of 2013 and 2014.

Waterston's creation replicates *The Peacock Room*, but also reimagines it in a dystopian alternate reality. "Nothing's quite right," Waterston says. "There are all these golden stalactites and cancerous cysts and sores. The surfaces of the walls have these kinds of bruises on them." In Waterston's cover, the gold decor is melted down and oozing across the floor. Pots are broken and shards are strewn. Most tellingly, Waterston has elaborated on the mural of the combative peacocks: His birds are tearing out each other's bowels. "There's definitely a corporeal element," Waterston says diplomatically.

It's auspicious not only that *Filthy Lucre* is being exhibited a stone's throw from its inspiration in Washington, D.C., but also that it comes when, notes Waterston, the patron-artist relationship has never been more fraught. "*The Peacock Room* came about in a time when new industrial wealth made collectors posture as if they were erudite," he says of the Gilded Age. "The story feels so fresh and so relevant to our particular time." Coming off a week of billion-dollar sales at Christie's, it would be hard to disagree. "Stories of Art and Money" will be the theme of a discussion held at the Freer tomorrow and moderated by NPR's **Scott Simon**, but not before an opening night gala celebration this evening.

<http://www.vogue.com/13261269/filthy-lucre-is-a-beautiful-nightmare/>