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Is that paint on the gallery rug? New show marks major shift at the Sackler.



Artist Darren Waterston works on the installation of his exhibit “Filthy Lucre,” a reimagined Peacock Room at the Smithsonian Institution’s Sackler Gallery in Washington on April 1. (Nikki Kahn/The Washington Post)

By Geoff Edgers May 8

The thick gold paint spilled onto the Sackler Gallery rug. The man who did it, kneeling and holding a brush, reminded himself that he had been given permission.

“It’s still making me nervous,” Darren Waterston, a trim man in an arm-hugging shirt, admitted as he swirled the goey mixture of pigment and glue.

Exhibitions conservator Jenifer Bosworth stood over him with a half-smile.

“This is definitely a departure from our usual *modus operandi*,” she said.

Isn’t that the truth. Here at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, a new contemporary piece by an American artist hasn’t been presented since the doors opened in 1987. Last month, Waterston arrived to change that. Gone were the inhabitants of the downstairs gallery — the ancient Chinese bronzes and decorative arts in line with the Sackler’s focus on Asian art. In their place would be “Peacock Room: REMIX,”

3901 MAIN STREET HOUSTON, TEXAS 77002 PHONE: 713.526.7800 FAX: 713.526.7803 INFO@INMANGALLERY.COM

which opens May 16. Waterston's installation, "Filthy Lucre," is the centerpiece of the show, which also includes paintings, sketches and other works.



The Peacock Room at the Freer. (Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post)

"Filthy Lucre," a roughly 12-by-30-foot room with 20-foot ceilings, has a strong connection to the building. It's a twist on the much-adored "Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room," the gold-leafed, 19th-century chamber created by James McNeill Whistler and on view since 1923, when the adjoining Freer Gallery of Art opened. Waterston has used Whistler's majestic icon of interior decoration as inspiration to tell a dark, alternative story of the clash between art and commerce.

Where Whistler's room speaks to a golden age of business titans, Waterston's space — with dripping gold, broken pottery shards and cracked shelves — is a surreal snapshot of the what-comes-next. Xanadu has nothing on this place.

"It's a bit like walking into a dream or a bit of a nightmare," Bosworth says. "Like coming home and finding your house broken into. A bit of a shock."

Waterston first installed "Filthy Lucre" last year at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in western Massachusetts. In a way, the path to its creation mirrors how Whistler's Peacock Room grew in scope.

In 2011, Waterston sent a letter and part of his portfolio to Susan Cross, Mass MoCA's curator of visual arts. Cross gets countless submissions, but the artist's package caught her eye: brown paper tied with a string and gorgeous calligraphy in fountain ink. She skipped the letter and went straight for Waterston's catalogue, intrigued by a series of works he created based on the life of St. Francis of Assisi.

In April 2012, Cross invited Waterston to the museum's campus in North Adams, where they talked about creating a mural.

Waterston says the visit was inspiring and tantalizing. Here was an institution known for thinking big — whether suspending cars from the ceiling or devoting an entire building to drawings by Sol LeWitt. And Waterston was just going to decorate a wall?



Artist Darren Waterston works on the installation of his exhibit "Filthy Lucre," a reimagined Peacock Room at the Smithsonian Institution Sackler Gallery, in Washington, D.C., on April 1, 2015. (Nikki Kahn/The Washington Post)

He also began to think of his own place in the art world. Waterston, 49, has a reputation for creating paintings and drawings with surreal flourishes of colors and symbols that are rooted in history. His works can be found at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Seattle Art Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. But he's far from a household name.

"I started thinking, 'I have one shot in my career to do a project at Mass MoCA,' " Waterston says. "I really want to do something that feels like an important work of art."

He had learned about Whistler's Peacock Room while doing research and, a week after his visit, wrote Cross to suggest a project inspired by the Peacock Room along with the mural. By late September, he had pitched "Filthy Lucre" instead.

"As you know all too well, give an artist a little time to simmer in their creative stew and behold! Hark! Visions of grandeur!" Waterston e-mailed her.

Cross took the pitch to Mass MoCA director Joe Thompson.

"It went from a couple of drawings falling out of a manila envelope, then it was a wall drawing, the next thing I knew he came in with a beautifully crafted 3-D model of the Peacock Room and had charmed the pants off the entire institution," Thompson says. "He had us — hook, line and sinker."

Except for one small detail: funding. Waterston would have to help offset the considerable jump in cost from a mural to "Filthy Lucre." In the end, that meant raising about \$90,000, roughly a third of the exhibition budget. "Lucre" would have been cheaper to build only once, but Waterston wanted the room to travel.

"I've raised money before for other causes, but never for myself," he says. "It became very humbling."

And the fundraising served a purpose beyond the practical — it connected Waterston to the challenges Whistler faced.

Today, the Peacock Room is one of the Freer's prizes. In its day, however, it was a house project gone mad. In 1876, British shipping magnate Frederick Richards Leyland hired Whistler, whom he had supported for years, to decorate his dining

room. Leyland's architect, Thomas Jeckyll, had proposed that the woodwork be white and yellow. "I wish you would give him your ideas," Leyland told Whistler. Did he ever. Leyland left London for vacation, leaving the artist unsupervised. Whistler worked 15-hour days, painting over leather walls, adding gold leaf and crafting four enormous golden peacocks. Even his mother began to worry about him.

Whistler didn't cut any corners or couch his excitement.

"There is no other room in London like it mon cher," he wrote Leyland.

The trouble began after the owner returned. He rejected Whistler's bill (2,000 pounds) and didn't like the peacocks. The falling-out would loom as Whistler soon faced bankruptcy, with Leyland as his main creditor. (The artist had been paid for some paintings that he had not delivered.) Whistler got his artistic revenge — a portrait of Leyland as a nasty peacock sitting atop the artist's house. That oil painting, "The Gold Scab: Eruption in Frilthy Lucre (The Creditor)" — after which Waterston named his piece — is being loaned to the Sackler for "Peacock Room: REMIX" by San Francisco's de Young Museum.

Waterston, who has little patience for some of today's best-known conceptual artists, says he hopes "Filthy Lucre" will inspire museum visitors to think about the modern-day art market, particularly as it relates to self-promotion. Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, scoring tens of millions for their steel balloon dogs and dead animals in formaldehyde, "drive me crazy," Waterston says.

"You can't underestimate the power that they have in the art world and the mark that they have made. They represent perfectly the culture of our time, our consumption-based society, the rigorous self-promotion," he says. "In so many ways, Whistler, he was kind of like the Warhol of his time. He worked really hard in always staying in the public eye and always staying controversial."

As much as Waterston felt connected to Whistler through this project, he had a much easier time raising money. He rounded up a group of friends and patrons who were eager to help, including Ann Hatch, the California-based philanthropist whose great-grandfather founded the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

"Knowing Mass MoCA, it was already vetted," says Hatch, who contributed \$15,000. "He was taking a huge leap into an historic interpretation, and when the Smithsonian said they would take it, that was like a home run."

Lee Glazer, associate curator of American art at the Freer and Sackler, got to know Waterston as he was building "Filthy Lucre" for Mass MoCA. The artist had never seen Whistler's room in person, so she sent him high-resolution images, information about its dimensions and background on the relationship between the

artist and his former patron. Glazer didn't mind Waterston's many requests. For years, she has been trying to find a way to refresh the galleries she oversees, which is no easy task because the Freer, opened in 1923, can't arrange loans or acquire works to add to its collection of American art. That's what donor Charles Lang Freer required. The Sackler, founded in 1987, can acquire new works but collects only Asian art, not American.

"So it was a total godsend for me to have a contemporary artist say he was interested in working on an aspect of our collection," Glazer says. "Almost instantly, I thought, 'We've got to have that. This is totally in line with what I'm trying to do.' Even if it turns out to be not that good, we should do it. But of course it turned out to be fabulous."

The room almost melts.

Golden stalactites hang off shelves, paint spreads on the floor, "resembling a fetid pool of urine," Cross says. Crumbling pieces of pottery line creaky bookshelves, shards are scattered on the floor. On one wall, Waterston has re-created the Whistler portrait "The Princess From the Land of Porcelain," but the face of his princess has been splotched out. Then there are the golden peacocks. They have been fighting, beaks ripping at each other's innards.

Waterston took stock of the progress on a recent weekday. He consulted with museum staff members over an intentionally broken pot that had been broken even more during installation, unintentionally, and then repaired. The work is closely related to the Peacock Room, but Glazer describes Waterston as "the anti-Whistler."

"Whistler was famous for making enemies and being very prickly," she says. "Actually yesterday, I joked with Darren, 'Can you just throw a tantrum and act like a contemporary artist? You're way too agreeable.'"

Which led to the paint on the rug. Waterston wanted museum visitors to see the gold bleeding out of the walls. He and Glazer talked about putting cut-out pieces of golden board on the floor, but agreed it just wouldn't look right.

So Glazer got permission for the pour. In one hand, Waterston held a tuna fish can filled with paint. In the other, his brush. He smiled and, in a half-whisper, confessed to enjoying the moment.

"I'm pouring paint onto the floor of the Smithsonian."

Peacock Room REMIX: Darren Waterston's Filthy Lucre May 16 through Jan. 2, 2017, at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 1050 Independence Ave. SW. Free. 202-633-1000. www.asia.si.edu.