

March 2014

art talk

Whistler's Other

Two years ago, curator **Susan Cross** invited **Darren Waterston** to paint a mural in the lobby of MASS MoCA. After visiting the museum, located in North Adams, Massachusetts, the artist had a different notion. Instead of doing a wall mural, Waterston wanted to build a “freestanding architectural structure that was one big ‘painting,’” he says. Cross signed off on the idea, and the result is a reimaging of **James Mc- Neill Whistler's** *Harmony Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room* (1876–77).

The original room was designed to showcase shipping magnate **Frederick Leyland's** Asian ceramics in his London home, with Whistler's *La Princesse du pays de la porcelaine* (1863–64) over the mantle. Whistler had painted peacocks on the room's leather panels while Leyland was away, and upon his return the incensed collector sued the artist. Whistler, in turn, painted an unflattering portrait of Leyland. There is a happy ending, though: *The Peacock Room* was later acquired by **Charles Lang Freer**, founder of the Smithsonian's Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where it resides today.

Waterston's project, called *Filthy Lucre*, envisions *The Peacock Room* as a crumbling Xanadu where the golden peacocks on the walls are fighting and hundreds of hand-painted ceramics sit on precarious shelves. From underneath the installation, gold oozes onto the floor and out into the gallery space. It's both filthy and rich.

Waterston was drawn to the story and opulence of *The Peacock Room* as well as its historical resonance. “It felt so relevant again to revisit it as a site of all these contradictions—the accumulation of wealth and objects and esthetics at the height of the Gilded Age, while there was so much deprivation and hardship,” Waterston says. “We're in our own gilded age, especially in the art world, where there's so much of this kind of frenzy to collect and commodify art.”

Filthy Lucre is the center- piece of “Uncertain Beauty,” an exhibition opening March 8 that includes more than 30 of Waterston's recent paintings and works on paper related to the project's main themes: the coupling of beauty and the grotesque, the apocalyptic and idyllic. He has been in residence at MASS MoCA since last summer, collaborating with glassmakers, carpenters, and other fabricators to build the installation. And fortunately for Waterston, his *Peacock Room*-inspired undertaking has had a more auspicious start than the original.

The artist worked with MASS MoCA to ask patrons to support the project. “I had never been in that position before, and people were incredibly enthusiastic,” Waterston says. “It brought the themes of art and money right in front of me—and those often complex and contradictory relationships that have to do with capital and art.”

Cross says of the project, “Darren joked he was reenacting a bit of Whistler.”

—**Kimberly Chou**



Darren Waterston working on his installation *Filthy Lucre*, 2013–14, at MASS MoCA. 26 March 2014 ARTnews