

Darren Waterston's Filthy Lucre brings shock and awe to the V&A

Words: Pamela Buxton

Immersive reinterpretation of Whistler's controversial Peacock Room tells a dramatic story of beauty, arrogance and anger



Darren Waterston, *Filthy Lucre*. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Photo by Hutomo Wicaksono. Stalactite-like growths, smashed pottery and glistening peacocks contribute to the sense of disarray.

In the late 1930s, Le Corbusier famously daubed bright murals on the plain white walls of E-1027, the villa in the south of France villa designed by Eileen Gray. This seemingly aggressive act pales into insignificance compared with what the celebrated painter James Abbott McNeill Whistler got up to 60 years earlier when he created the Peacock Room in the London house of his patron, Frederick Leyland. The story goes that Whistler was unhappy with the interior design of the room where his painting *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* was hung. This room was being created at great expense by the architect Thomas Jeckyll to showcase Leyland's collection of Chinese porcelain. With Leyland away and Jeckyll unwell, Whistler was consulted on colours and seized the chance to instead spend months completely re-painting the

room to his own resplendent designs, to the astonishment of Leyland, who was left with a hefty bill from the money that Whistler had charged to his account. The two formerly great friends fell out irredeemably; poor Jeckyll had a nervous breakdown shortly afterwards and was destined for an early death in an asylum. However Leyland did keep the room, with its splendid golden embellishments, as it was – even if he didn't want to pay for it. The room's name refers to Whistler's wall painting of two golden peacocks representing the artist and Leyland, the latter with tail feathers showering coins.

It's a great yarn, and one which we can thank American artist Darren Waterston for shining a light on anew with his installation *Filthy Lucre* at the V&A, an immersive reinterpretation of Whistler's controversial *tour-de-force*. Briefly on show before lockdown, this atmospheric piece has now been given an extended run until the end of November.

When Waterston was commissioned to create a painted room by MASS MoCA in Massachusetts – where the installation was first shown – he immediately thought of the Peacock Room as his starting point.



Darren Waterston, *Filthy Lucre*. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, < 1 of 4 > Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Photo by Hutomo Wicaksono. Above the replace is Waterston's take on Whistler's *The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, which had pride of place in the original room.

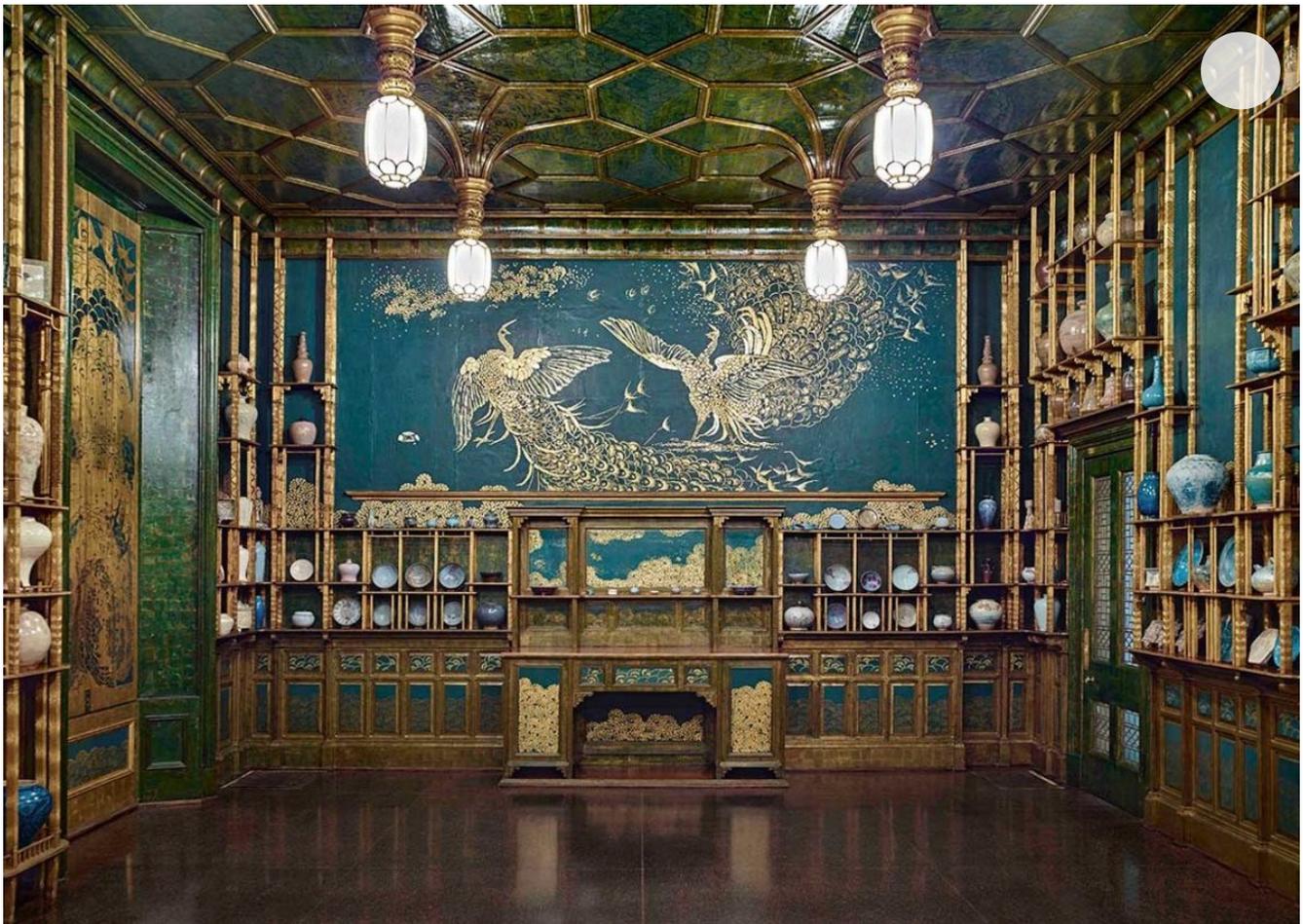
'It's a gesamtkunstwerk that brings architecture, sculpture, painting and design all together into one thing, which is very much my interest,' he says, drawn also to the resonance the story has with tensions between art and money in the art world today.

He was also interested in Whistler's provocative character.

'He was a bit of a troublemaker, very self-promoting, very cunning. He knew how to advocate for himself,' he says.

Waterston's approach was to re-imagine the sumptuous Peacock Room in a way that explored its emotional complexity. It is, he says, like 'a surreal fever dream' where things are destabilised and unsettled. After studying Whistler's design in detail – the room is now in the custody of the Freer Gallery of Art at the Smithsonian – he created his own eerie and unsettling version, built to a scale 10% smaller than the original to

give the space a sense of compression so that it felt 'a bit tighter'. With its collapsing shelves, smashed porcelain (Waterston painstakingly painted 200 pots before smashing many of them) and strong sense of decay, this room clearly conveys a sense of something gone very wrong indeed. Strange accretions sprout from the surfaces like some weird golden fungus. Stalactites hang down off the mantelpiece and some of the shelves. Crimson pots seem to seep as if bleeding, a golden stain spreads across the floor. A melancholic soundtrack of strings and whispered quotes from Whistler ramps up the atmosphere further. Two more subtle elements speak volumes. Waterston has created his own play on the artist and patron peacocks of Whistler's original. In *Filthy Lucre*, they are engaged in violent combat – and it's not only the feathers that are flying.



James Abbott McNeill Whistler's Peacock Room now at the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of Charles Lang Freer. The room was the inspiration for Darren Waterston's *Filthy Lucre*, now at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

'I wanted the peacocks to still have elegance but they are literally eviscerating each other – pulling out each other's guts. There's a violence to it amid all the shimmering decadence,' he says.

In his version, the Porcelain Princess is still present in her kimono – the original room was created at the height of the Japonisme craze. However her face is no longer visible. I thought this was because she couldn't bear to look at the state of the room, with its ruined pots and disarray, and so had turned her head so that we were looking at an elaborate hairstyle. But instead, Waterston explains, her face has morphed into a surreal organic bulbous form. It's all rather weird – and wonderful.

Waterston hopes that visitors to his Filthy Lucre Peacock Room will go away thinking about the volatility of beauty, and how one piece of art could have created so such beauty but so much destruction and heartbreak too.

He particularly enjoyed working with a multi-disciplinary team to realise the immersive room, which is built in modular sections and tightly choreographed to enable it to tour. Waterston is currently working with Seattle architect BuildingWork on another architectural installation, a modular Byzantine chapel called the Congregation of Tears.

Until 29 November 2020, Porter Gallery, Victoria and Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 2RL
