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Magnus Gjoen: truth in beauty

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Magnus Gjoen's work has captivated many collectors and critics in recent months. Mixing a critique on contemporary society and culture with a striking, sympathetic eye on art's past, his creations across painting, digital media and sculpture have already enabled him to carve out a unique style and aesthetic.

His work, shown as part of group show *Flesh* at the Leontia Gallery in London's Fitzrovia gave us a chance to catch up with Magnus and talk about the past, the present, and, of course, the future.

Tell us about your journey prior to exhibiting here at the Leontia Gallery.

MG: I started my work when I moved into a new house, about 4 years ago. I used to work in fashion, which I quit 2 years ago, and my art became my work and my work became my hobby. There was a point when I wanted more time for my art, and to be making money from it. There came a point when I told myself that - regretfully - it was time to leave fashion, so for 2-3 years I have been a full-time artist.

I studied fine art and fashion, so it's essentially part of the same thing to me. My art is not someone else's... it's mine and mine alone, and that's part of why I wanted to do it. You feel completely responsible.

Are there elements from your past work in fashion which have crossed over?

MG: Probably more than I think, though what I did in fashion is completely different to what I do now. Also, working for other people is completely different to working for myself.

Producing my own art pulls out things that I couldn't when I was working for someone else. My art is a balance between fine art and digital, mixed-media. When I was in fashion, it was more about.. the punk element, as I worked for Vivienne Westwood for 8 years. You have the similarities with the skull, but she would never do anything like that as it's too polished. Maybe I took part of what I learned, but I have put my own touch on it.

How has fashion influenced the way in which you approach your artistic practice?

MG: What I have learned from fashion is to research before a piece. I undertake a lot of research on each topic. It's something which you do very much in fashion, for new collections, and it's something that I have always done before starting a piece. For the past 2 years I have lived between London and Italy, so Italy has been a big inspiration. I take inspiration from Renaissance paintings. Part of my process is to explore what lies beneath... research takes you in different directions. To find a path which you didn't actually think you would end up at. Small little things about churches, why a painting was hung or framed like that, or hung in that place, or who collected it, and why they were assassinated.

What you're trying to do is develop evidence-based art, in terms of the research leading up to product. Is this about gathering facts, ideas, or both?

MG: Both. It's the gathering of facts in order to learn. It's my thirst for more knowledge, but you have to think about what would look nice and the audience wants. You have to find a balance. Ideas and facts. People see a piece and when I tell them the story behind it, they are quite amazed because they have never thought about it - but I have, in order to reach the final outcome.

So, what you're doing is self-determination: the gathering of facts to reinforce your idea of a piece.

MG: Not only reinforcing, but changing my view on it completely. That's part of what I like to prove to the people who look at it. I make a comment with my pieces. It isn't forcing my opinions on someone else; it's quite important that others look at it and make their own opinions. Other artists with their "Fuck the state"-type pieces are forcing their opinions on other people. I am commenting on something that, I find, is relevant to society today, making people think that bit further with it. Pointing out something, to make their own opinions and to have their own thoughts.

There is a darkness to your work. How has this been derived?

MG: That's part of me. The dark side. It's also trying to find new meaning to old masterpieces. I have travelled so much around Italy and studied in contemporary and Renaissance museums, and part of what I try to do is to take something from the past and renew it for a more contemporary market. I don't feel that people should forget that we have these lovely pieces from way back, but, equally, I don't necessarily think that they would want them on their walls unless they have a contemporary touch or feel to them. That's part of the point - of some of the work. People don't want a dead Jesus on their walls any more unless you make it a bit more contemporary, and comment on it a bit more. It's still macabre but it has a touch of something else.

Are you reappropriating the concept of old works? Reinventing them?

MG: It's not that I'm reinventing them, but I'm trying to use them as part of a commentary on today's society.

To give new meaning?

MG: Yes. Many paintings in the Renaissance were produced for a similar purpose. Art has always been quite crude in the way that... for example, Adam and Eve hanging down there, they were painted as an allegory to the Bible. What I have done is to take them, modernise them, and comment on today's society and Christianity, and where we have come to with it. The comment between these two pieces is... if we were outsiders and saw Adam and Eve, would we break the glass and let them start populating the earth, or wouldn't we? It's part of a series called *Break Glass*. If we had the choice, would we have chosen the same path as that of the past?

Given your references to classical art, and classical art's multitudinous references to religious iconography, does modern art sufficiently reference contemporary society? Is there a sufficient amount of contemporary art with genuine social commentary?

MG: Yes, but a lot of it is very one-sided. With graffiti artists, they're commenting on the state; I'm commenting on the church.

Big topics.

MG: Yes, but more gentle - I don't want everyone to go out and hate religion. I'm just commenting on it. Are we in the right place? It's also about making people understand that religion is one of the major factors in most of the conflicts that we have in the world, which seems to be forgotten. States seem to hide behind this fact of different religions - "they're Muslim, they hate us." It's commenting on that.

Roses Are Dead, 2013

Talk about your process.

MG: Some pieces can take up to 12 months. It takes inspiration - often an image - a church, museum, or something online. Then, I gather enough information in order to finish the piece. I want to use an image... but to represent it in a different way. So, I want to find out how to represent it... it's a lot to do with Christianity, Greek Mythology, ancient Rome, to get to the final stage.

Why do you work with those topics in particular?

MG: It's beauty. Classical beauty. I find a lot of contemporary beauty as well, but it's a bit too close to now; you can't take something from 50 years ago without it being "Oh god, you're copying someone else". A lot of modern art... it's hard to interpret and make something better than 50 years ago. It's taking something further back and modernising it, re-inventing classical beauty. Adam and Eve are not the most perfect people. They might have been in the Renaissance, but not now. I'm showing people that this was perfection in the Renaissance, and now we have this V-shape body style. It's nice to see that they are also beautiful. Just because you are used to one type of beauty, there is also another type of beauty.

So there is a tension between the subjectivity and objectivity of beauty.

MG: Yes.

How has the exhibition been, and what's coming up for you?

MG: The exhibition has been great. I have also opened at the Hoxton Gallery at an exhibition called [Art4Peace](#), where I donated a tank with flowers in it. Tonight I have an opening at the Westbank Gallery for the [Amy Winehouse Foundation](#), where I have three pieces. One is a pop-art oil painting of Amy, and another references the Renaissance, where Amy is wearing a dress rather than tanktops and tattoos. She is looking up... she is being dignified, and regal.

Our thanks to the [Leontia Gallery](#). Further information on Magnus Gjoen is [available at his website](#), and he is [@magnusgjoen](#) on Twitter.

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