

James Hyde: *Midas (Magnasco)*

20 Albert Road, Glasgow, 14 Sept-19 Oct, 2024

The centrepiece of this exhibition is James Hyde's painting *Midas (Magnasco)*, 2018. This was made by applying acrylic and urethane dispersion, house paint, metallic and earth pigments and powdered glass to a stretched vinyl print. The print, almost wholly obscured by Hyde's application of materials, is of a greatly enlarged photograph of a small detail of a painting by the eighteenth century Italian artist Alessandro Magnasco¹. Juxtaposed with Hyde's work is a small oil painting of a praying monk, possibly a fragment of a larger work, attributable to Magnasco himself.

*According to [Walter] Benjamin, consciousness of history occurs with the sudden juxtaposition of two discontinuous events, one a present moment, the other belonging to a past, each giving meaning and fulfilment to its new-found semblance. Until this present moment of juxtaposition, the past event remains incomplete, its implications unrealised: the present gives to the past a form it otherwise lacks. Yet the present requires some fragment of the past to provide its own direction.*²

Midas (Magnasco) is part of a series of paintings which Hyde began in 2014. Ten years earlier he had painted over small prints of details of paintings by Alessandro Magnasco that he had been photographing in American museum collections. Having always liked the results, he returned to them and decided to have enlarged details of his original photographs printed onto billboard vinyl. He then spent a year experimenting with the application of different painted marks and colours over the prints. At first he was dissatisfied with the results - painting at that scale required something different he felt - and he started to use a crusty old black acrylic paint and that seemed right. More prints were ordered and the series began. Hyde later came to see these paintings as billboard advertisements for Magnasco's painting that had been simultaneously defaced and resurfaced (there is a strong relationship in Hyde's work between surface and the performance of making, a balance between assertion and negation). The billboards advertised the materiality and tactility of Magnasco's painting but were oblique to his imagery.³

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MAGNASCO, ALESSANDRO, called IL LISSANDRINO owing to his small stature (1667-1749). Italian painter of Genoese birth who spent most of his working life in Milan and Tuscany. He painted melodramatic scenes set in storm-tossed landscapes, ruins, convents and gloomy monasteries, peopled with small, elongated figures of monks, nuns, gipsies, mercenaries, witches, beggars and inquisitors. On a darkly primed coarse canvas he used violent brush-strokes and rich deep blues, greens and browns, very often flecked over with white. [*The Oxford Companion to Art*, ed. Harold Osborne. Oxford University Press, 1970]

In art historical terms Magnasco's working life in Italy coincided with the end of age of the Catholic baroque and the beginnings of the Enlightenment. Commercially successful in his lifetime, his style of painting fell rapidly out of fashion after his death with the rise of Neo-Classicism. Although there was a brief revival of interest in his work during the 1920s and '30s, it has remained largely unrecognised outside specialist circles ever since. (The one significant painting by him in a public collection in the UK can be seen at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. Coincidentally, this work includes a figure of a praying monk very close to that in the painting in this exhibition). Magnasco's paintings deserve to be better known today.

² Richard Shiff, *Critical Reflections*, Artforum 34 (October 1995), p.83

³ Hyde included images from his *Magnasco* series in his catalogue *James Hyde: Public Sculpture*, published with Nick Lawrence in 2020. This illustrated, and placed in context, a wide cross section of Hyde's recent practice in a variety of different media and explored the idea of 'public sculpture': its nature, context, psycho-social role and occupation of *place*.

Fragments of experience.

James Hyde's work is an investing in, and investigation of, painting. How and where, he asks, does it take place? Of what is it constituted? For Hyde, parts and wholes, fragments and restorations are part of the poetry and tradition of painting. How these elements are expressed and performed, Hyde believes, goes a long distance to defining a painting, its programme and its maker's attitude.

"For myself— all paths lead to painting. In some paintings those paths are more looped and in others, tighter. I wonder - to bring the world into a painting - isn't that a process of fragmentation?"

*'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;
All just supply, and all relation:
Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot,
For every man alone thinks he hath got
To be a phoenix, and that there can be
None of that kind, of which he is, but he.
This is the world's condition now...⁴*

Like the antique torso or ruined cathedral, the fragment can refer back to a whole that has passed away, and more specifically, to parts presumed to have been more in possession of a now lost whole (e.g. Antiquity and the Christian Middle Ages). At the same time, detached from its original context, the fragment now stands also isolated from its present, thus constituting in some sense a self-enclosed and complete whole. The signs of its rupture, the accidents and particularities of its broken profile, become marks of its individuality and therefore autonomy.⁵

This interplay between part and whole makes the fragment ideal for articulating the idea of painting as project rather than realisation, a process of gradual becoming, not an end in itself. It is also experiential - painting must be experienced both by maker and spectator. Experience takes you out of yourself, it compels, disrupts, disorientates:

Consciousness of the action of a new feeling in destroying the old feeling is what I call an experience. Experience generally is what the course of life has compelled me to think.⁶

⁴ John Donne, *An Anatomy of the World*, lines 213-219. The preceding lines of this work of Donne's are incorporated in a poem written by David Dixon for the publication which will be published by A-M-G5 on the occasion of James Hyde's exhibition at 20 Albert Road.

⁵ Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*. Reaction Books. Second, revised edition, 2009, p.32.

⁶ Charles Sanders Peirce, letter to Lady Victoria Welby, October 12, 1904, *Collected Papers*.