

Sweet doing nothing

Cian O'Neill views the JW Waterhouse exhibition
Royal Academy of Arts, London

John William Waterhouse was born to two English painters based in Rome on the very day in 1849 that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood issued their manifesto on what proper painting was, and that publication was borne of an misunderstanding of what a manifesto normally is: something novel, a statement of how things should be brought forward. The male, bourgeois painters who constituted the collective [Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Millais, William Holman Hunt, Edward Burne-Jones and, subsequently, Waterhouse] were as forward-thinking as stone and their work inflected with the mystical whimsy so popular amongst the Victorian art-buying public, i.e. the Upper, and newly formed Middle Class. Matisse, who came after them, admitted to a purpose of providing the tired businessman with a respite or solace in his work, yet he challenged pictorial convention. The PRB thought that painting, post-Raphael, had lost its joy in the aesthetic. Theirs was a vision all nymphs, narrative, glades and rich interiors. They challenged nothing, and the Victorians loved them for it. Indeed, had they issued their own brand in drapes, we would not, even now, be insensible to the logic of it, because this is drawing-room painting from a deeply conservative culture. The RA would have us believe, the exhibition tagline makes clear, that Waterhouse was a 'modern' pre-Raphaelite, but this isn't true. One steps into the show, and so into some nicer, overtly 'painterly' version of the past, where the alabaster girls are all twenty and even the dunny resembles the foyer of a bank.

If you can make them out for all the armpits, cleats and jousting 'hatches' of the thong [this is a popular show], there are two good, hard paintings in this first room, as are reminiscent of David. This lucid, classical style is perhaps unsurprising given that he was a graduate of the RA School who had initially fumbled around in search of his sense of line, yet around 1879 Waterhouse decided to soften the solid straight-edged

brush modelling in his work by making eyes and hair a little feathered at the edges, and established a gently pleasing formula of poetic / mythic themes, pretty maidens, beautiful settings and rich costumes that would give him a very healthy practice based in Primrose Hill and full membership of the RA by the age of 46, in 1895. Two 1880 canvases entitled, 'Dolce far niente' ['Sweet doing nothing'] encapsulate the formula, and they are unchallenging, but nice. The larger even includes a chaise longue, the better to aid the viewer in the business of being at their ease; and there are two pigeons on the end of that chaise longue, to aid in the clearing of crumbs.

Room two brims with paintings of the style and palette that we best recognise, meaning that the men have largely disappeared from view and the works are become vehicles for the artist's ardour for female beauty, dressed up in romantic froth. One might class this rapturous treatment of the female as one-note, but would the heinously misogynous approach of Picasso to, say, Dora Maar, be better? In any case, the female models are undoubtedly well-painted, as they are also identical: red or raven-haired, pale, interesting and possessed less of fringes than arboreta under which their eyes smoulder quietly. Decorous restraint is, for measure, applied to their very choreography e.g. one can detect re-painting in, 'Eulalia' [1885] as closed the legs of the prone and murdered saint, to save us, and the crowd gathered at her feet, something of the special mystery of the Holy Spirit.

As for the weaknesses, two are foremost in this period of Waterhouse's career: he painted every figure as if in the same light and he had no fear of the casual historical anachronism. 'Consulting the Oracle' [1884], resultingly, has a cast of beauties day-lit though indoors who are clad in towelled cotton of unvarying texture or transparency and surrounded by decor more Moorish than Delphic. One can also see something very like Tower Bridge through the window. It is important to



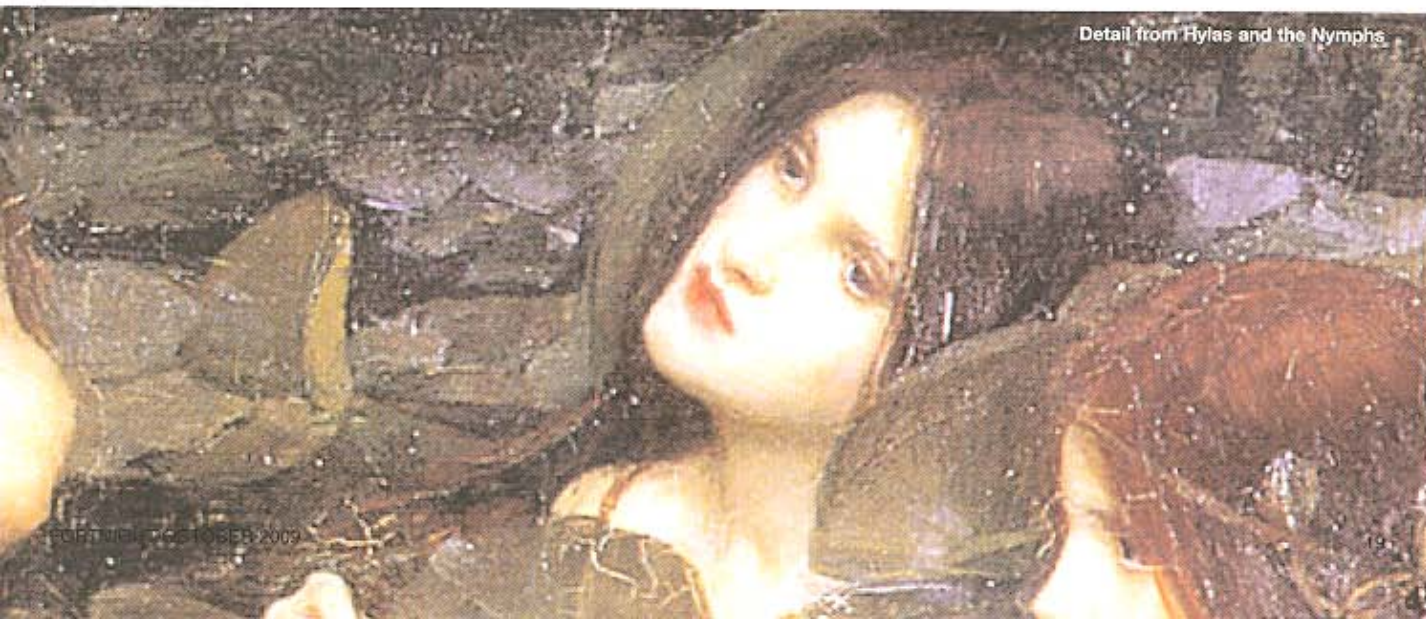
remember that this is commercially spirited rather than playful, or plainly ignorant, ahistoricism. Many 'nouveau riche' members of Society were self-made men probably more up on industrialisation than Homer, so they were less likely to pick over the details if a painting fitted their ideal home. Even the more bookish Victorians loved to mix up their sources and mythologies like fruitcake, for fruitcake did, after all, go very well with a nice cup of tea.

'The Magic Circle' [1886], which does not by the mercy of God include Paul Daniels, is a prime example of this 'potage' approach. The backdrop is Egyptian, the protagonist Caucasian, she brandishes a Celtic boline or knife and her skirt is cut à la mode d'Arthur, despite having a few Greek warriors skirmishing on its surface. It's daft stuff, but was hugely popular at the time, and at least there is more truthful light and dress upon the figure than in the earlier work. This is one of the first canvases shown by Waterhouse in the RA, and the paint is extremely well-handled, heralding his mature period, the product of which fills the third room, including three of his most celebrated pieces - 'The Lady of Shalott' [1888], 'Circe offering the cup to Ulysses' [1891], and 'Marianne' [1887]. They are all finely coloured and modelled. The lovelorn dame of the first work, for example, is clad in virginal white, her hair is like a torrent of dull fire, and the quilt atop which she is perched, with a rod back, is still vibrant in its matt corals and dancing gold. The impressionistic brushstrokes on the water give it some life too, despite the rather shallow sense of perspective; a fault as never left his work. Other paintings fail on multiple, basic grounds, such as, 'Ulysses and the Sirens' [1891], where the cunning voyager's boat is about the size of a dinghy, he is attired in a manner too effete even for a warrior king and his mariners have not as much blocked their ears with beeswax as made a grand millinery experiment in linen with which they hope to distract the hovering sirens, who look vaguely interested in receiving some explanation as to why they would be outdone for scariness by the dodo. The angel to the left of frame in, 'St. Cecilia' [1895], for her part, has wings cut from tracing paper; the wicked sorceress Circe, in the aforementioned work, offers her cup of potion to Ulysses with pose so prim it screams finishing school; and in, 'Circe Individiosa' [1892], she is to be observed, stern of gaze, 'poisoning' the sea with crème de menthe.



'Dolce far niente'

Faults, it must be said, do abound in the fourth and fifth [final] rooms of this exhibition, and they go to limited technique as well as bad judgement. Yet it didn't matter then, really, and few would care now, for this is frothy, pretty, academic painting, and it doesn't make claims to gravity. 'Psyche opening the golden box' [1903] may crackle with all the suspense of a waitress peering into a toasted sandwich maker, but the colours and skintones are fresh. 'The Echo in, 'Echo and Narcissus' [1903], is just lovely. So the faults are pardonable, though the achievement falls shy of great. By the end of his life, Waterhouse was an esteemed irrelevancy, and his, 'The Decameron', depicting Florentine youths passing the time of Plague away in a country retreat, has a whisper of poignancy about it, being as it was painted in 1916, while the youth of nations were being minced at Verdun and the painter dying of cancer. There is scant political sentiment in the work of this flawed stylist, and what self-reference there is, if at all, is found in some of his later titles, such as, 'Listening to my sweet pipings' [1911], or, "'I am half-sick of shadows', said the Lady of Shalott' [1915]. Perhaps he was half-sick of shadows, but it seems unlikely. The Lady, in this last painting by the door of the gallery, sits back from her too-modern loom, hands on red-maned head, looking like Maud Gonne, at odds with the Camelot behind her in the window, and she looks gently sad, yes, but beautiful. She has only half a thought in her head of sadness, and Waterhouse only half a thought in his head about painting as something more than fine, fine decoration. He illustrated poems and myths, kept it light, made them appealing. In short, what slight art he made, he made sweetly, and only a churl would say otherwise.



Detail from 'Hylas and the Nymphs'