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Ruins – Saad Qureshi and Richard Stone at ArtEco

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An unavoidable dichotomy inhabits the term ruins. Ruins capture our imaginations through their inescapable structural disintegration, but it is their seductive, transformative power that lies at the heart of our fascination. Ruins present the possibility of reimagining an alternate, sanctified space of re-emergence; at once redemptive and alluring, was there ever such powerful cultural currency as that of the phoenix and the flame?

These ideas are explored in Ruins, an exhibition which brings together two consummate artists who masterfully consider the transformative power of ruins through drawing, painting and sculpture. Working in starkly different ways, they make a compelling exhibition that successfully presents a comprehensive revision of its chosen theme.



Richard Stone's works are a 'reversal of making', the undoing and subsequent re-assigning of meanings. Stone's sculptural works consist of antique porcelain, spelter and wooden figures that the artist has shrouded in thick wax, leaving the original characteristics largely obscured. Though as viewers we may wish to know what hides beneath, we are immediately confronted by the reality of the objects restructuring, simultaneously robbing what is hidden from us of much of its allure.

The Day Will Come (2012) stands, facing us, hints of the original Greco-Roman inspired drapery clearly visible, and yet it feels as though the application of a heavy, form-obscuring cloak speaks more pertinently to a process of ruination and gradual stripping back than to the action of addition. Stone's painterly works (including The Last Wave and Waiting for England series, all 2012) similarly startle, consisting of antique landscape paintings that the artist has, through a process of heavy abrasion, reduced to pixelated ghosts of their former selves. Of his artistic intention, the artist states: "Like Rauschenberg I'm not interested in erasure as an act of destruction, rather, in two histories made present, oscillating against each other." Potent narratives emerge through the re-contextualisation of Stone's practice; his works stand as new readings of their former selves, rather than autonomous objects divorced entirely from a sense of their history.

The strength of the physical alterations which allow Stone's works to be deconstructed and re-rendered in front of our very eyes, are contrasted deeply against the fleeting snapshots presented by Saad Qureshi. A central tenet of Qureshi's practice is cultural otherness and how the duality embodied in this concept corresponds to the psychology of visual perception and the possibility for more panoptic notions of belonging. The fragmentary feel of Qureshi's drawn, painted and sculptural pieces provides much of their impact. One often feels as though his works exist with the express intention of capturing the reaction from the periphery, highlighting the centre through its deliberate absence.

There is an inherently narrative quality to Qureshi's works, maybe owing to the strong influence of both Christian and Islamic symbolism and the importance of storytelling in these traditions. These influences are clear in works such as Beyond Oracle and Doubt (2013). This piece, intensely re-worked, featuring a rectangular border, beautiful roundels and ornate decorative devices, strongly recalls both Islamic and traditional Christian book arts. Within the confines of the border, where one might expect to find beautiful flowing versus of holy text, we are instead confronted by what appears to be an aftermath – a thick, rising cloud of smoke and undulating flame. The source is somewhere outside of the frame, happening in a place that we are not privy to. Through the artist's visual confirmation we know that somewhere, something has been ruined – a process has taken place that has altered what was and put into motion a re-emergence. The heavily blurred treatment of the border and roundels creates a distorted visual affect, further reducing our ability to clearly see where the lines have been drawn and where we stand in the process that is unfolding before us.

The artist's decision to continually reprint the lines of the piece, almost to the point of abstraction, suggests a kind of compromise; it provides an opportunity for meanings to be layered and shared rather than firmly situated in one perspective. This idea and the use of frames and abstraction to impress the point, reflects on the artists understanding of museum and gallery spaces as conduits for sacred experience and agents of reorientation. The evolution of these once purely secular spaces into representatives for a new form of religiosity encourages us to consider the forced separation of artistic icons from their previous incarnations as non sacred objects, just as Beyond Oracle and Doubt encourages us to consider the power of the heavy frame that separates us from the unseen eruption. Qureshi's art is a study in liminality; an opportunity to stand at the threshold between previous modes of understanding and new ways of seeing.

The works of both Stone and Qureshi consider the importance of context and its fluidity when confronted by the unstoppable inaction of time. Ruins, as a metaphor for life, reminds us that

no matter how desperately we feel that the significance of an item, place or practice must endure, ultimately the shifting parameters through which these things are given significance will fall victim to renewed understandings and contemporary obsessions. All we can do is look at the beauty of these works and understand that though the lens through which we look may be shifting, multiple sources from which to draw significance remain inherent within the context of the ruins.

by Michelle M Davis

'Ruins' runs from 19th of April – 18th of May at ArtEco Gallery, London, UK.