

PETRIe INEQUALITY



Artwork by Ben Ashton

Ben Ashton's latest portrait series, *The King is Dead, Long Live the King* is on show at Cob Gallery, London, until 29th October. Dynamism, vitality, and a "new fluidity" define his works, which mark a shift in his creative practice and approach. I was interested to hear more about this announced death of a king and the rise of another.

Elena Stanciu: How did *The King is Dead, Long Live the King* come about?

Ben Ashton: This show marks a moment of rebirth in my work, and the death of what came before; a metamorphosis that was heightened by the birth of my son in late 2014. With the joy and excitement of creating new life comes the realisation of your own mortality, as one generation naturally replaces the next.

The project is the fruit of collaboration with my wife, Fiona Garden, with whom I work on

our creative partnership, The Fashtons, and with the renowned mask maker Magnhild Kennedy, aka. Damselfrau. We fell in love with Damselfrau's work while developing a video project with Daphne Guinness, and we knew immediately that I would work with these exquisite objects, but it was only when I started wearing and moving in them that I realised what form the collection would take.

ES: Tell me about hyperrealism in your work. What is it about the techniques of this genre that appeals to you?

BA: I see hyperrealism as the tail end of realism, which in turn I consider an effort to create the illusion of reality in paint. My interest is in achieving this reality, not by simply copying a photograph as it appears to the eye, but rather by making every effort to understand anatomy and space, depth and perspective, and paint itself. Knowing what pigments are opaque or transparent, what mediums to pair with the pigments to enhance their properties or to serve my immediate purpose. That's something that I feel has been lost in recent photorealism.

ES: I know you are highly influenced by your study of historical figurative painting and Dutch masters. Can you elaborate on this relation you have with research? How is your work directed by your entering into this creative dialogue with the history of art?

BA: I come from a family of artists, my father is an abstract painter with a focus on the golden section. I discovered the masters quite late, but their work felt fresh. Out of historical context, Caravaggio looked contemporary, it was a connection to a tangible past through realism.

In art school I was encouraged not to paint at all, but rather to pursue performance art. I had to rely on ancient manuscripts, like 15th century *The Craftsman's Handbook*, which describes techniques for everything from preparing panels, mixing gesso, to how to glaze and varnish paintings. It's amazing that these techniques haven't changed in centuries.

I always considered myself an apprentice. I used to focus on and obsess about an individual artist to glean everything I could from them. I would stand in front of works by artists like Van Dyke, Rembrandt, Rubens, trying to work backwards from the finished article, back through the layers of paint and time.

ES: In *The King is Dead, Long Live the King*, you mix self-portraits with portraits of your wife and your son. What prompted this choice?

BA: I revere the power of portraiture and believe that one is painting one's own legacy. It always felt that that should be reserved for those important to me. It's a progression from my first show, portraits of myself in various guises and using techniques referencing particular artists. This was followed with a series of my wife and myself in mundane domestic environs - my most honest and unembellished work, a reflection of what at the time was a new personal stability, influenced by Dutch masters.

My current series is the first collection where I've not started with any particular reference, or influence. The source imagery, the collaborative element, the subject matter, the presentation, and approach to execution are all a culmination of years of evolution and research.

ES: I am particularly fascinated with the way you work with movement in this new series – the tension between visual traces of movement and the arresting still poses of the characters. I think it's so interesting how you capture these short term memories of bodily activity, unseen to the naked eye. Can you tell me a little about this “new fluidity”, as you call it?

BA: In work predating this series, I felt there was a stoic and rigid nature, and I wanted to give the appearance of transience, bring gestural nuance into this body of work.



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I sought a duality in the imagery for this collection. I was inspired by long-exposure photography and the use of ambient light to capture almost a memory of movement, in a flight from classical postures.

The secondary figures that appear are separate entities, external expressions of emotion or thought. It's the duality of Apollonian, the cerebral and conceptual, and the Dionysian, the corporeal and bestial. I have always seen this in my creative and personal relationship with my wife – a complementary dynamic. We need each other to thrive.

ES: Portrait photography and figurative painting are established mediums of creating personal and collective memory. How do you reflect on the use of body in your portraits and figurative painting? How do you balance corporeality and setting? Would you say there are stories of humanity that we all recognise in depictions of embodiment, which cannot otherwise be depicted?

BA: It's the rawest form of expression: being in your body. Throughout history, certain poses have become part of the vernacular. Religious scenes, for instance, rendered again and again by different artists over time, each with their own style, form a canon of movement that has become part of my artistic DNA. It does become a universal visual language. In that there is a timelessness.

ES: Your subjects wear masks in this series. Is there something you seek to hide, or something you want to paradoxically reveal, with the use of masks?

BA: Both, really. In my work, I've always found my body and myself to be the most convenient tool at my disposal, because I'm always here. However, I have been moving to separate my identity from my work slightly and these masks provided the perfect set of alter egos.

I see the masks as a set of characters in a space outside of time. When you put them on you take on their characteristics, you move in a different way. I found it so liberating letting myself react naturally to them and allowing them to influence the direction of this series.

ES: I recently read something that stuck with me: "Every artist should have the opportunity to burn their own work." It seems you have quite a reverential attitude regarding the role of visual art in preserving our history and culture and sort of keeping time from flowing. Have you ever been tempted to destroy your own works, just for the intimacy of not sharing them with the world and achieve a different sort of timelessness, only available to you?

BA: My wife often prevented me from burning my old paintings. In London, there is very little space for excess work and I am sorely tempted to destroy works that I don't deem important enough to save.

I have toyed with the idea of doing a show where I would destroy all works that are not sold, letting the public know that if the works are not bought, they will no longer exist. Thinking purely from an investor's point of view this would make the surviving work so much more valuable and I would enjoy the celebratory bonfire to mark the end of the exhibition.

Words: Elena Stanciu