

Ben Ashton: The Enchanted Underwater



Artwork by Ben Ashton

Which is the way to Wonderland?

We all have moments where it would be nice to hide from the humdrum. Open a door, leap away. Shut our eyes and open them somewhere other-worldly. Sometimes we want to reach for the wardrobe door and step into another realm.

The easiest way to do this, I've recently discovered, would be to go and lock yourself in a room with Ben Ashton's latest series. The effect is instant; everything falls away. You are left to fend for yourself amongst floor-to-ceiling tall canvases that are crowded together and which seem to light up around you in a ghostly, waterbed green. The painting shows Ben Ashton, his wife Fiona and their cherubic son in masks. The masks themselves are special creations of Damselfrau (Norwegian artist, Magnhild Kennedy). Before the paintings, Ben and Fiona set up a photoshoot in which they wore the masks and messed about with long exposure. The result in the paintings is the appearance that the figure in each canvas has left its shadow, a phantasmagorical double, elsewhere in the piece. One personal favourite shows Fiona in a mask with dangling pearl droplets, her arms raised as though summoning a spell. Another shows Ashton arms pulled back, chest forward like a warrior ready to vault into battle.

The paintings seem at once menacing and mesmerising. The figures, no longer Fiona and Ben Ashton, are not looking at the viewer; they are playing in their own pictures and possibly with each other. Whatever they are; they seem extremely powerful.

“I decided when I was doing my last series on glass, that I wanted to do away with a lot of the hues in the skins. I don’t like orange as a skin hue because I feel like it distracts from the sculptural form of the figure. I found that putting everything in green light made you much more aware of tonal variations.” Ashton explains about the predominant greenish-white palette. Not only does it highlight the anatomy of the bodies; but it delivers the spectral luminescence, and it allows the masks themselves to really jump out and astound.

These masks, each handmade, are made up of elements that spring alive when worn; tassels, ribbon, textiles. The masks mould to the movements of the wearer in that way. Damselfrac is a collaborator of Ashton and his wife, and a friend they filmed one of Daphne Guinness’s music videos with. “She’s a wonderful patron, actually” he nods of Daphne sincerely. After the video, Marionettes, was filmed she bought most of the masks for her private collection.



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You may be able to tell already with the amount of other names I’ve dropped in from Fiona, Ashton’s photographer and artist wife – to Damselfrac, that this series is in many ways not just one man’s work. Collaboration is key to Ben Ashton; he thrives on it and appears genuinely excited by it. When speaking about his talented partner, Fiona, his enthusiasm is infectious; “As far as I’m concerned we back each other up, we are our own little team, and we’ve gained people through the work we’ve done together.” They also run The Fashtons, a London-based art direction team through which they often work with music photography, album covers and other visual projects. “Collaboration is a big thing for us now, it keeps us fresh, keeps us ticking, means we never get stale because there’s this constant influx of lovely new people coming in.”

Ben Ashton himself is a stereotypical artist so long as you remain surface level. A little shy, with an overflowing studio, and simple, paint-stained clothes. But when considering his work, and really listening to what he’s saying, there’s clearly a depth of skill and studying that is too often absent. Influenced by old-master techniques, Ashton takes me through the story of how he discovered

Cennini, an Italian scholar of the middle ages who's writing talks you step by step through old-school processes; from how to build up gesso layers to building a panel in the first place and how to apply grout, glazes and even how to paint blood realistically – what with the era being prone to religious painting. “It was a surprisingly chatty book, and so I started like that really, just reading bits in the library, trying to apply it in my own way and learning all about colour theory. I basically went from artist to artist through the centuries trying to glean what I could from how they did things. I'd just stand in front of paintings for ages trying to work back through them... Looking at radiographs so you can see exactly how much lead white was put into the underlayers... that sort of thing.”

The result is sheer skill; effected in a style he calls “hyper-realism”. It is not a photographic, sharply outlined realism, his pieces involve a measure of imagination and magic. “If everything is massively detailed and it will just look like a photo, I do think it lacks something because of that. I mean what's the point? It should look like it's painted.” His profound interest, painstaking practice and extensive research has resulted in Ben's art profiting by accolades including being shortlisted twice for the BP Portrait Award held annually at the National Portrait Gallery and being photographed by the legendary David Bailey for GQ. But nothing is a show of merit more than the fact that it took him in total only 6 months to start and finish the 12 canvases, 8 of which are floor-to-ceiling, all of which are oil and 1 month of which was spent creating the panels alone.

Though, as any creative, he's cautious about his career. “You never know... I could go way up there... or go way down there!” The unaffected comments are refreshing for an art world that is often questionable to your average art-lover. When you are not a minted collector or zealous dealer, it can be too much bother to look at contemporary art, often inundated by tenuous ‘concepts’ without much to actually enjoy aesthetically. You wind up drifting once again through the National Gallery wondering whether there's something you might have missed... If you are prone to finding yourself, once again standing before your prescribed Constable at the Tate Britain, remember that there are artists emerging like Ben Ashton, who try to create “things which don't need blurbs”, as he so aptly phrases.

“What I witnessed at school (speaking of his masters' at The Slade) a lot of the time people were trying to run before they could walk. They didn't really learn the tools before they started doing and I think that's the fault of the system. In fact, art courses are run by academics now, it seems. And after all, the whole field is to do with tactility and doing things with your hands. We've been removed from that in some way.”

We could debate back and forth about art and academia for eons, but I'm reaching my wordcount. I guess all I have left to say is that should you want to buy something that will actually affect you, impress you and enchant you every time you look at it, you'd better give Ashton a call. And should you want to spend a little time submerged in the mist of this collection entitled “The King is Dead – Long Live the King” then you'd better go and engulf yourself in this upcoming show. Only in seeing it face to face does it have quite such a spellbinding effect. Though I warn you, it's likely you won't want to come back up for air.

You can view Ben's exhibition at the Cob Gallery from 4th to 29th October.