

Reinventing the Classics

By Jessie Moniz

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Artist Charles Godet Thomas trekked across cold, wet Wales to reinterpret a painting by an 18th Century Welsh artist featured in the Bermuda National Gallery's (BNG) European Collection.

The resulting work by the 25-year-old will appear in a new exhibition opening at the BNG tomorrow, Reinterpreting the European Collection.

Mr Thomas, the son of Bermudian artist Molly Godet, lives in London, England. He will talk about his work at the BNG tomorrow, with American artist Titus Kaphar.

"I have a piece of work in the show which is a reinterpretation of a 1760s painting by Richard Wilson called Classical Landscape with Diana and Actaeon," said Mr Thomas. "My piece is called The Lament of the Image."

Wilson was the first major British artist to specialise in landscape painting while other artists focused on portraiture. By concentrating on mood and atmosphere, he transformed landscape from an art that was essentially topographical and decorative, to one that could be a vehicle for ideas and emotions. His treatment of the subject strongly influenced the next generation of British landscape artists, among them William Turner (1755-1851) and John Constable (1776-1837).

Diana and Actaeon were featured in a Greek myth. The goddess was bathing with three of her maidens when she noticed Actaeon spying on them from behind the trees. Outraged, Diana turned Actaeon into a stag, and set her hounds on him.

"The Richard Wilson work wasn't really about Diana and Actaeon at all," said Mr Thomas. "But Wilson used that story to paint what he wanted to paint the landscape and his emotional connection to the landscape. It was painted in London after he moved from Wales. It is a collage of images that he is recalling, unified into a single image. I was interested in this idea of an imagined space."

Mr Thomas said he felt a connection with Wilson as his father's family were originally from Wales and he currently lives in London. To really get into the artist's mind, he travelled to Penegoes, Montgomeryshire, Wales and set out to find exactly where Wilson based the scenes for the piece. This turned out to be an almost impossible task.

"It was a ridiculous thing to do, I know," he said. "It was interesting how many people had an idea about where it was painted. It was quite cold and wet. It was extraordinary. I went up all kinds of hills and forests. It was interesting because it was uncanny how many elements I could recognise from the painting but couldn't quite pin it down. I think it might have been painted near Aberdovey looking over the water. I found that right on the last day. The weather cleared up so the sky matched the painting. I stayed in two different bed and breakfast places over a few days. I was not really sure what I was looking for. It was just a process to try to think about the painting and what I wanted to do with it."

The resulting work by Mr Thomas was a layered photography collage placed over Wilson's work. It is accompanied with a piece of free verse that can be listened to on headphones.

"The verse is about the nature of recollection and the way in which memory is intrinsically connected to fiction," said Mr Thomas.

To research the work he went to the National Gallery in London which has several of Wilson's pieces.

"Having gone through this process, I realised that I had overlooked some of his work because it was landscape-based," he said. "It is easy to overlook landscape paintings and not fully understand what the artist is trying to do. It was a good opportunity for me to focus on a painting and understand fully what the artist was doing."

Mr Thomas received his Bachelor of Arts in fine art from Manchester School of Art two years ago. He is currently working for the installation artist Isaac Julien as a researcher and archivist. He has also carried on

making his own work. He has his own studio and took part in the Bacardi Limited Biennial in 2008 and 2010. He had his first solo show in London last year, Notes on Reality, at Le Garage Gallery.

“All my work is around ideas of time and transition,” said Mr Thomas. “Most notably on ideas of memory and recollection and mortality.”

One of his installation pieces, Grave Dimension, shows the exact dimensions of a grave. The piece is about coming to terms with things out of human capability.

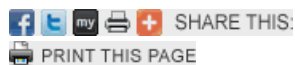
“It is sort of ridiculous trying to make sense of something like death,” he said. “It is much easier for the human mind to understand something like the physical stuff in the tangible world and doesn’t get any closer to understanding mortality. With my work I start from an autobiographical point, but I am not really interested in making work that is purely autobiographical. I am more interested in the universal human experience. Of course, there can never be a universal human experience. That is the point.”

Although Mr Thomas grew up in England, he said Bermuda has absolutely influenced his work.

“Bermuda has given me the opportunity to show the work I want to make in different shows,” he said. “My mother is Molly Godet, a Bermudian. She is a landscape painter and a lot of my work in the last three years revolves around landscape. I used to come out here to visit my family I would go and paint with my mother and my friends. I think that influenced my later work.”

Mr Thomas will present his talk at the BNG at 12.30pm tomorrow, September 2. Tickets are \$5 for non-members and free for members.

Useful websites: www.charliegodetthomas.com or www.tituskaphar.com.



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