

ArtSeen

November 18, 2018

James Hyde: *Western Painting—Magnasco*

By [Alfred Mac Adam](#)



James Hyde, *Marsyas (Magnasco)*, 2018. Acrylic and urethane dispersion, house paints, metallic and earth pigments, and powdered glass on stretched vinyl print, 8 x 10.5 feet. Courtesy 524 Projects.

In *Western Painting—Magnasco* James Hyde makes a brilliant case for abstraction—as long as we understand what he means by that idea. For Hyde, abstraction is an action, not a style. It entails extracting something from one context and placing it into another that he creates. His work constitutes a painterly exercise in deconstruction and reinvention that begins with looking at the art of the past, essential to any artist's education, and continues by transforming that looking into a gesture of appropriation—one whose intent is not to reaffirm a tradition, but instead to see it as raw material.

To create the four huge paintings (8 × 10.5 feet) that make up this show, he first photographed details from two works by Alessandro Magnasco (1667 – 1749)—the eccentric, late-Baroque painter from Genoa—in the Metropolitan Museum and the Worcester Art Museum. He then sent these images to a print lab, where they were enlarged to billboard size. When these massive prints were returned, Hyde began to work on

their surfaces: first applying a coat of urethane varnish, then acrylic paint, and finally adding virtually any other material he happened to have in his studio, including bits of ground-up rubber that provide texture and density. The small fragment grew into something new and wonderful.

Hyde's choice of Magnasco as a source for these titanic works is his ironic homage to a mostly overlooked master of the strange and bizarre. Magnasco's phantasmagoric scenes are filled with figures whirling in every direction, seeming to generate their own light, but Hyde extracts his pieces from more sedate works. The Met's *The Tame Magpie* (1707 – 1708) is a satirical painting of a rogue vainly trying to teach a magpie to sing. *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (ca. 1710 – 1720), in the Worcester Art Museum, contains the grotesques usually portrayed with this icon, but it is, by Magnasco standards, similarly calm. Both combine human figures and



James Hyde, *Proserpine (Magnasco)*, 2018. Acrylic and urethane dispersion, house paints, metallic and earth pigments, and powdered glass on stretched vinyl print, 9 x 12 feet. Courtesy 524 Projects.

ruins, and it is those ruins, taken as fragments of an originary totality, that link Magnasco to Hyde. Hyde is not here to praise, condemn, imitate, or parody Magnasco—he uses him as a point of departure.

The four recent paintings based on Magnasco (all from 2018) hang in a small, rectangular room whose four walls are just wide enough to accommodate them. Wherever we look, we are immersed in Hyde's abstraction. The paintings on the north and south walls, *The Sileni* and *Marsyas*, both suggest infinite depth because of the white flashes included in their dark paint. The other two paintings, *Proserpine* and *Midas*, contain no such illusory perspective. They are pure surface and demand that we run our eyes over every inch of their complex masses of dizzying pigment, calling upon us to stand in the center of the room and examine each painting closely. To follow the tormented eddies of paint, especially the gold in *Midas*, is to experience something like the sublime—the terror and ecstasy of infinity itself. We are stuck in a paradox: stranded at the center of a modest-sized room surrounded by works that, instead of enclosing us, make us sense the breathtaking presence of the void.



Installation view of James Hyde, *Western Painting–Magnasco*, 2018. Courtesy 524 Projects.

As we enter the gallery, passing through the entry hall leading to these four paintings, we see two smaller (15 × 20 inches) earlier works from 2008, which remind us that Hyde has been experimenting with his abstraction technique for more than a decade. *The Point* and *Rushes*, for example, derive from an earlier Baroque Flemish master, Paul Bril (1554 – 1626). Unlike the 2018 works, where all vestiges of the original Magnasco have

disappeared, these contain remnants of the original Bril paintings. In the past, Hyde has also used works by Stuart Davis to a similar end, but the Baroque—with its theatricality, turbulence, and chiaroscuro—is a more fitting parallel to Hyde's disquieting sensibility.

Contributor

Alfred Mac Adam is Professor of Latin American literature at Barnard College-Columbia University. He is a translator, most recently of Juan Villoro's *Horizontal Vertigo* (2021), about Mexico City.