

James McGrath Q&A: Ocular/Fleurs

Posted: 23 Nov 2015

[Like](#) [Share](#) [0](#) [Tweet](#)



Sydney-born artist James McGrath is bringing back the Baroque this November with his *Ocular/Fleurs* exhibit at the Cat Street Gallery. Inspired by 16th and 17th century classical masters painters, McGrath's visually seductive paintings feature a contemporary fusion of meticulous computer programming in the form of 3D rendering and the use of Baroque-derived spatial concepts and techniques.

Where did the idea for this exhibit *Ocular/Fleurs* come from?

Before this I'd been doing work on the Strahov Baroque Monastic library in Prague, where I repainted old bookshelves and flowers falling from the bookshelves. I did one or two circle paintings then and just decided to centre my show around them this time. Also, in the library they had these huge world atlases in the middle of the room and I remember at the time sort of ignoring them because there were all these beautiful books. As I've been rebuilding the room though, I thought about rebuilding the atlases. Then thought how they'd be great to reflect the garden outside. I've also done a lot of large flowers, flickering, falling flowers, so the idea for this show is that a mirrored ball has been placed in a room surrounded with flowers. I then paint the reflection of flowers in the ball.

How did you create the room full of flowers? Did you paint from real life?

This time I built a room of flowers on a computer model I used as an architect. You build the space to the scale of the library and then you can build a classic 80s representation of 3D rendering in the form of a chrome ball. It's actually really basic, I tell the computer to make a chrome ball and then I put all my paintings that I have done of flowers in this room, like a gallery, all over the walls, surrounding everything.

And what does 'ocular' actually mean, in the title of your show?

Ocular means the act of seeing. But it's also related to the fact the eyeball is round and it's actually the curve at the back of the eyeball, in medical terms. This show is very different to my normal pieces, where I work on very big, rectangular paintings that are just a bit bigger than the real. I like the idea that paintings can be a window or doorway into another world that if you close your eyes and just step into it you can step into another world. I like the continuity between the space you're in and the space you're being shown. So moving away from the rectangle, which is projecting out is the opposite of the circle that is projecting in. That's why we have gone to a ball.

How did you create the room full of flowers? Did you paint from real life?

This time I built a room of flowers on a computer model I used as an architect. You build the space to the scale of the library and then you can build a classic 80s representation of 3D rendering in the form of a chrome ball. It's actually really basic, I tell the computer to make a chrome ball and then I put all my paintings that I have done of flowers in this room, like a gallery, all over the walls, surrounding everything.

And what does 'ocular' actually mean, in the title of your show?

Ocular means the act of seeing. But it's also related to the fact the eyeball is round and it's actually the curve at the back of the eyeball, in medical terms. This show is very different to my normal pieces, where I work on very big, rectangular paintings that are just a bit bigger than the real. I like the idea that paintings can be a window or doorway into another world that if you close your eyes and just step into it you can step into another world. I like the continuity between the space you're in and the space you're being shown. So moving away from the rectangle, which is projecting out is the opposite of the circle that is projecting in. That's why we have gone to a ball.

You follow a very baroque style in your work, why do you think it is a genre of painting that is still relevant today?

Yes I do. And I think its because the baroque was an incredibly multimedia time. For example the interiors, they worked out how to map imagery onto surfaces and those surfaces (frescos) were incredibly complex. We all talk about computer graphics and 3D modeling, but the baroque period was where people really came up with the structures we use today to map images to 3D structures. And the baroque were all about narratives. They didn't just have the life of a Jesuit priest [painted] - they'd have it from five different angles, at different times of his life, sitting on clouds and on buildings. Their work was about layering and viewpoints, which I suppose you can now see in the selfie today. Those are various modern viewpoints of the same event. And honestly the baroque are just a genre that just keeps on giving.



You focus mostly on the flowers and yet you have two peacocks in the exhibit too, why did you decide to do that?

These ones here [laughing as he points to two paintings of peacocks set on gold foil] were my last ones. Because for me, I realized the problem with the mirror is that it looks back at you, you're not there in the space. That's probably, not a weakness but an aberration, in the work as a whole. But with these, I thought, I will make the peacock the artist, or the person looking back at you from the mirror. I wanted them to be something so beautiful, so you feel like you shouldn't be looking at yourself looking, which is a classic artist trite. They're about vanitas, peacocks are about vanity and arrogance etc. Then the foil, that's a symbol of outrageous beauty. Artists have always played around with them and the awareness that the watcher, the watched, the watching. For me I like the inner bling. I am so conservative and I am so normal, so I don't know where the hell I got peacock and gold foil from?! I never know!

So it's that idea of baroque flamboyance again, isn't it?

I mean, yes, I find the guilt of beauty an interesting one. I mean me, as an artist I've always been accused of referencing art history and beauty. Making things beautiful, because if you make things too beautiful then they stop being intelligent. And so it's this kind of anxiety of history, which a lot of artists have trouble with. But I don't, I enjoy it. I enjoy the anxiety; I want to engage with it, to have fun with it, while being intelligent about it.

Who's your harshest critic?

Well I share a space with my wife, who's an architect. She's my harshest, harshest critic. I love her dearly but I don't think I've ever done a piece of work that she likes. And my mum's an art critic but she's the opposite she loves everything I do. I've done some portraits of her and she just chucks those in the fire, but everything else is fine. Having kids, one thing I've learnt is that before kids, I was much more serious, now I don't take myself too seriously. I just make and make things beautiful and enjoy it. If your kids enjoy it that's great and if your wife doesn't like it, that's just life. *Emma Russell*