

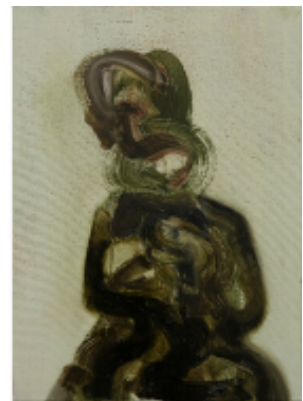
# Danna Writes



ART AND POP CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

## LORDS OF MISRULE: ROSS CHISHOLM'S 'TESTAMENT'

Were Ross Chisholm born into 18th century British society he would have had three viable career options: gentleman farmer, chimney sweep, or portrait artist. Although he might have been quite the sought after portraitist, he thinks of the nascent industrial era as grim and is relieved to be living in present day England, burning brown toast in the kitchen, listening to Bonny Prince Billy and painting from a rented Central London studio that is damned to become a bourgeoisie café in a matter of months.



*The Letting Go (2013), oil on canvas tetraptych*

*Testament*, his first show in the Middle East, is running at Green Art Gallery in Dubai and showcases his wonderfully odd reproductions of 18th century portraits. The high society subjects in said portraits had such strong presence that we whispered in subdued voices throughout our interview as though they could hear us

and disapproved with raised eyebrows. Some of the portraits are traditional and quite realistic but with a twist of punk morbidity (See his 2009 work *Henrietta, Countess of Warwick without her Children* to see the perfect example of what I'm talking about). Others are so abstract that it's difficult to even think of them as portraits at all, save for the lace collar or lapel that identifies the bust of a subject.



*Lords of Misrule* (2013), oil on canvas





*Testimony* (2013) oil on canvas

Whoever installed the show did a clever job arranging the works in a surprising way—the most diminutive portrait hung right beside the largest, and so on. Also of note are the provocative titles like “*Lords of Misrule*.” Chisholm adds his titles as a poetic, linguistic flourish only once a work is completed. Sometimes the titles happen by chance, like the time a flustered London gallerist hurriedly named an untitled

painting, “*Still Life With Flowers.*” More delighted than mortified Chisholm kept the title with the spelling typo.

Chisholm is in dialogue with old school British painters [Joshua Reynolds](#) (1723-1792) and [Thomas Gainsborough](#) (1727-1788), who were known for portraits commissioned by British aristocracy who paid handsomely to be immortalized on canvas. Fascinated by the effects of history on art, Chisholm spent time in university and museum conservation departments, which sound a bit like art morgues: “I saw so many disfigured paintings. Time has become a material quality of the work and they are yellowed and darkened.” What had happened to these paintings over time was something beyond the patron or the artist’s intentions, and decontextualized them entirely.



*Flux Legion* (2013), oil on canvas diptych

While all this death and decay would be enough to make most artists question the lasting legacy of their practice, Chisholm felt inspired to take his more realistic reproductions and experiment by adding layers, then peeling them back to mimic the effects of time: “Although people find faces in them, these aren’t portraits to me. They are abstractions, the residue leftover from the process of making

reproductions.”

In my high school printmaking course I used to appreciate the faded, obscure ghost prints more than the heavily inked up monotype that always came first. These more abstract portraits also have a ghostly feel to them and contain a heavier message that demands time but are not nearly as pretty as the reproductions— which may turn off young collectors looking for an easy painting to hang over the couch. But that’s not the point here!





*The Exhibition's Verisimilitude (2013) oil on canvas*

Good Ideas: 'Testament' runs at Green Art Gallery in Dubai on Alserkal Avenue through 10 March. For info and timings go [here](#).

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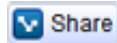
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