

PACE LONDON



Adrian Ghenie
The Darwin Room, 2013-2014
Mixed media installation
350 x 435 x 735 cm

Adrian Ghenie's *The Darwin Room*, 2013-2014, is the second of his installations presented as a "room within a room". The first, *The Dada Room*, 2010, is now in the permanent collection of S.M.A.K. Ghent.

Consisting of an assemblage of meticulously sourced 19th century furniture, wooden floor boards and wall panels, *The Darwin Room* takes its composition from Rembrandt's *Philosopher in Meditation*, 1632 (collection Musée du Louvre). Concentrating on the juxtaposition of shape, colour and tone, as if composing a two-dimensional painting, Ghenie has created a three-dimensional environment which, at first glance, resembles one of his paintings but later reveals itself to be a life-sized study room from a past era. Dark and gloomy, the room evokes an intriguing physiological atmosphere of anxiety and comfort; a prototypical birth site for visionary thought within European intellectual history.

As with much of his work, the artist forensically investigates the visual clues depicted in the art of Europe's past to build a framework for his painting. A memory of the fascination held as a young boy of seeing an image of Rembrandt's *The Alchemist*, prompted Ghenie to delve further into the visual depiction of the intellectual sphere. From the Middle Ages, through the Renaissance until the 17th century, the predominant subject matter of all of art was religious iconography, biblical or mythological scenes or the depiction of martyred saints. Ghenie was intrigued that almost the only saint ever depicted who was not a martyr was St Jerome. Typically pictured in a darkened cave bent over and immersed in the herculean task of translating the Bible, these formal and visual components became the stereotype for the representation of intellectual's environment. By using the formal and tonal composition of the *Philosopher in Meditation* the artist rethinks and critically reconstructs the concept depicted in the canvas; the modern paradigm of the intellectual sphere; a dark environment, a writing desk, a chair, all illuminated by a golden light (the light of reason). All of this codifies the representation of what Western culture sees of itself: a figure of enlightened austerity with the head bowed over books, but gazing towards and illuminated by the light of future and innovation.

Portraits of 20th century figures whose actions indelibly changed the course of history are a recurring theme in much of Ghenie work, particularly those associated with genocide and mass suffering (Hitler, Stalin, Mengele and Ceaușescu). To Ghenie, the publication of *The Origin of Species* (London, John Murray, 1859) represents an inflection point in history as the consequences of its revelations are of such long lasting profundity. The misappropriation of Darwin's ideas by despots and dictators, leading as it did to notions of eugenics, Social Darwinism and the evolution of the master races is a recurring theme in Ghenie's work.

Ghenie talks often of his interest in painting the "texture of history". Much of the visual information we see of historical figures, events and places are rendered flat and two-dimensional and it is their forgotten surface and texture that fascinates Ghenie. Darwin's personal story and iconography holds a special fascination for the artist; the appalling skin condition and vomiting syndrome that afflicted him, his luxuriant beard and Victorian attire all afford a rich source of textural possibilities that reveal themselves in the series of Darwin portraits that make up this exhibition. During his lifetime, Darwin's distinctive physical features became widely known. He was frequently portrayed in the satirical press of the era with the face of an ape superimposed on his. This grotesque caricature of the great man of science is a starting point for Ghenie's painting.