



MYTH AND MYSTIQUE:
THE ART OF
MALCOLM RAINS



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Malcolm Rains in his studio.
Photograph by Odon Wagner, March 2016.

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DISTILLED LIFE

Art of the Recent Future by Malcolm Rains

BY DONALD BRACKETT

“Be like the fox/who makes more tracks than necessary/some in the right direction/practice resurrection.”
–Wendell Berry

It's not only that Malcolm Rains is a master of many styles and that each one looks the way a spoken dialect in language sounds: he is in fact a master stylist, period. Each of his motifs belongs to a broad and deep painting territory which he traverses and revisits the same way we can return to Rome or Athens to follow our own footsteps and yet still feel it's a first time encounter. There's something hauntingly familiar, gently reassuring and yet utterly otherworldly in the way this artist can explore major subjects over a long term career trajectory.

One such subject is a domain he has confidently commanded for over a decade, the kind of crisp representation I can only call *objective portraiture*. Whether it's the way fruit occupies space on a table, or the way light is refracted from a glowing metallic surface of pure colour, or the way creased paper can assume the awesome stature of a mountain, one recursive element remains shared by them all: optical splendour and its transmission.

Portrait, still life, landscape, or abstract: there's really only one kind of painting, one theme and one format, which disguises itself in a chameleon-like fashion depending on its relative time and place. All painting is actually conceptual in nature and consists in the rendering of *embodied meanings*, in whatever shape, form and content is called for by its specific situation. We could call this uniquely old and new aesthetic realm: quantum painting.

These flexible postures of a mutable realm are highly applicable to the latest paintings of Malcolm Rains. Think

existential origami, and you'll be heading in the right direction, backtrack and you'll still be right. Though all the images reference the classical in tone and optics, as their ancient Greek titles suggest, I believe it's more accurate to consider them as being pre-Socratic in their aesthetic intentions. The pre-Socratic philosophers, among them Pythagoras, Heraclitus and Zeno, all posited the origin of things as a first principle: the undefined, immaterial, unlimited substance without qualities which they called apeiron.

Such a perspective suggests the absence of a traditional *elsewhere*, because everywhere else is also here, all the time. That premise sounds shockingly like the relatively recent 20th century physics notion of quanta: linked temporal packages of energy interconnecting with everything else everywhere. But however we choose to identify them, these new images by Rains, all meticulously rendered in oil on linen in the precise manner which has become one of his signature styles, and all breathtakingly beautiful, also call into question any artificial barriers or boundaries between the formats and themes of art history as we've become accustomed to it. They offer us instead the fabula of a non-localized reality.

Therefore they're not exactly still lifes, at least not in the conventional sense of the term, and are in fact more like *distilled life*, a virtually new category which I had to invent solely in order to share an appreciation of these startling works. Each one presents us with a formal and exceptional objective portrait; each one confronts us with a miniature

and usually solitary monument which clearly occupies its territorial space in a stance suggesting landscapes (though only a minimal figure ground relationship exists within which to limit either their physical character or our apprehension of them).

These paper structures could either be immensely huge or infinitely tiny, or both at once. As such, they are quantum paintings par excellence and each could be considered a macroscope, a tool for accessing the gigantic grandeur of distilled life. Exactitude is their chief attribute, both in form and content. Their classical Greek and even sometimes pre-Hellenic titles certainly do reference both place names important in antiquity (and therefore to the civilization we all inherited in the west) as well as mythological figures who were embodiments of either natural forces or archetypal designs in the collective unconscious we all share.

“Poseidon” is of course the primal god of the sea, and there's definitely something wave-like in the formation of the cascade shape in that painting; yet it could just as easily not be water at all but rather light, sound or even electromagnetic waves that are being transmitted and recorded.

“Lyttos”, “Pharsalus”, “Nafpaktos” and “Chersonissos” are all mythically important locations, some where a battle was won or lost, one even where the chief god Zeus was fabled to be born. As such, they carry a deep and emotional cargo of history, memory, meaning and metaphor, even though no literal or prosaic representations of place or person are being designated. They are all quite beyond mere prose and instead emerge into the bright light of pure physical poetry, where symbolic forms cease to require the logical interpretation of linear history. Instead, they are history embodied in action and gesture by the skilled hands of their maker, an artist who still has the same astonishing skill as an abstracted Caravaggio or a conceptual Titian.

Unlike most of the other solitary figures depicted, in “Acteon and Artemis” there's a metaphorical and fateful encounter between two: a heroic hunter and a divine goddess (also later known as Diana by the Romans) where his hubris in gazing at her ritually fertile presence was punished by his transformation into a stag (indeed, a stag attacked and devoured by his own hunting dogs, who no

longer recognized him). The interplay between these two white forms is perhaps the most dynamic and engaging of the whole painting suite. But like all the rest, we're amply rewarded by willingly submitting to their tranquil charms.

In a similar manner quite free of limiting qualities, they also mysteriously manage to convey a suitably quantum simultaneity of subject matter: they are somehow mystically about nature, self, society and spirituality all at once. There's no elsewhere in them at all. They stare back at us as vividly as we stare at them, eventually eradicating the imaginary quantum space between us and them. To me, that also makes them temporal works: their time signatures are frozen in a near cinematic gaze which only appears on the surface to be standing still.

In reality, if there is such a thing, they are a montage of moments operating in an endless film loop, not unlike a mobius strip. Such a notion would have pleased a pre-Socratic thinker like Heraclitus and amused a quantum thinker like Heisenberg, for both of whom uncertainty was a compelling and charming feature of the distilled life. Both would have been equally comfortable having one of these paintings on the walls of Plato's cave, and so should we, simply because Rains so assiduously practices pictorial resurrection. He is a fox of the painted medium.

Two of the smaller but most compelling paintings in the series, “Axos” and “Sybritos”, reference a mythical warrior's helmet and the location of a temple to Hermes (also later known as Mercury, check your American Express card to see the god of trade and commerce) respectively. Both images capture the drama of the winged messenger's narrative in a way that is not literal but oneiric. They manifest rather than represent his story. At first glance, it might appear that paintings poetically titled with classical references, and occupying so persistently a pictorial realm, might be returning us to the archaic dream world of painting's archival origins.

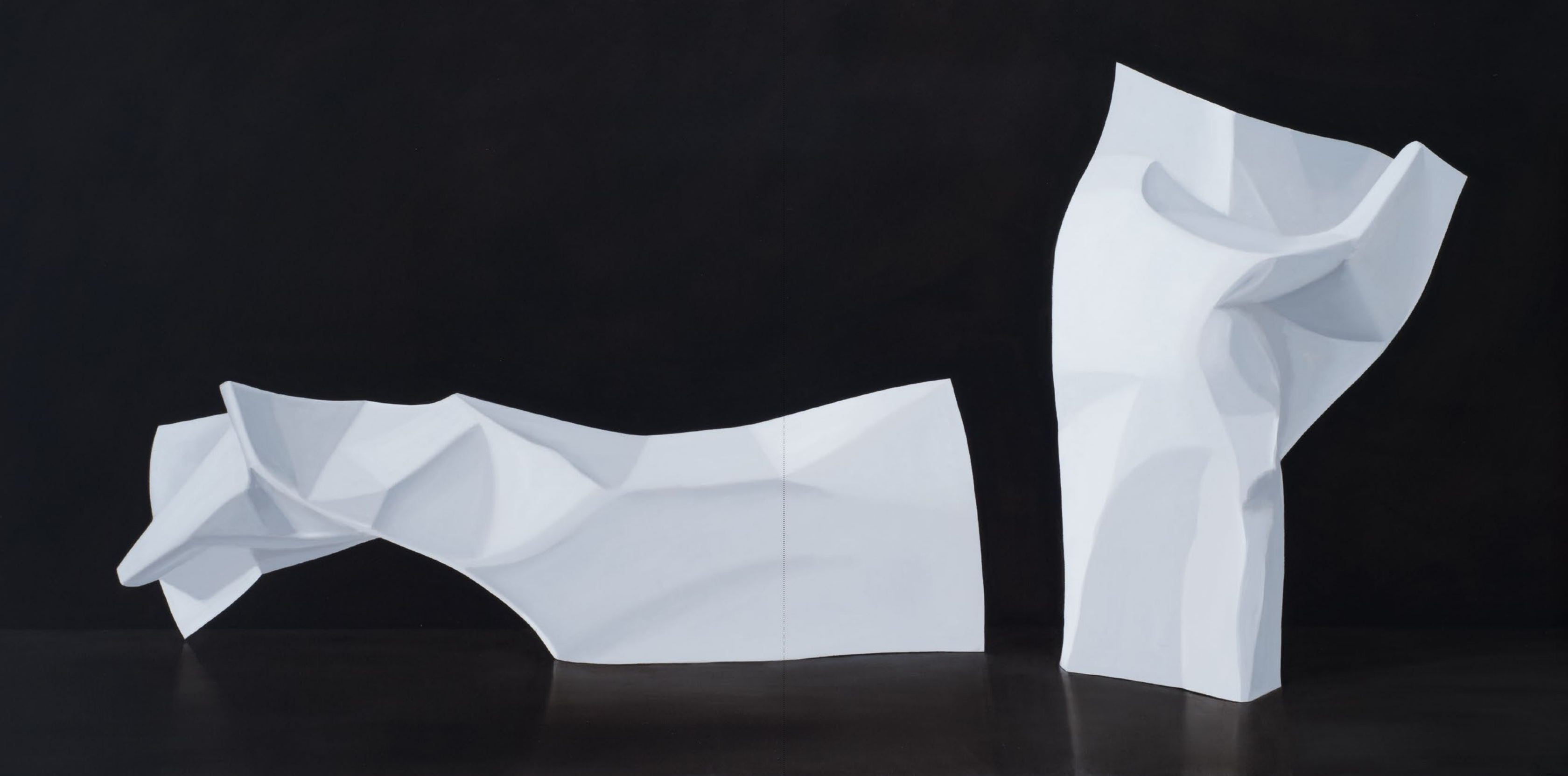
Quite the reverse is true. Like all great painting, and as they are actually quite indescribable in the end, I must invent one more closing category with which to capture their true quantum personality, one utterly beyond appearances: they represent an art of the recent future. If that seems paradoxical, it's because it is. They also embody duration: Zeno would have loved these diagrams of his dialectic.



Nafpaktos, oil on linen, 44 × 66 in.



Chersonissos, oil on linen, 54 × 45 in.



Actaeon & Artemis, oil on linen, 42 × 84 in.

Axos, oil on linen, 36 x 30 in.





Poseidon, oil on linen, 54 × 45 in.



Lytos, oil on linen, 44 × 66 in.

MALCOLM RAINS

1947 Born in Bristol, England
1955 Emigrated to Canada (Canadian Citizen)
1967-69 Studied Architecture at the University of Detroit
Studied Architecture at the University of Toronto
Attended and graduated the Ontario College of Art

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2016 Odon Wagner Contemporary, Toronto, Ontario
2012 Galerie de Bellefeuille, Montreal, Quebec
2010 Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
2010 Paul Kuhn Gallery, Calgary, Alberta
2008 Meyer Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico
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2005 Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
2004 Meyer Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico
2001 Meyer Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico
2000 Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
1998 Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
1996 Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
1994 Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
1992 Costin & Klintworth, Toronto, Ontario
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1989 Costin & Klintworth, Toronto, Ontario
1988 Costin & Klintworth, Toronto, Ontario
1986 Oakville Gairloch Gallery, Oakville, Ontario
1984-85 Klonaridis Inc., Toronto, Ontario
1983 Sable-Castelli Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
1981 Sable-Castelli Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
1981 McIntosh Gallery, London, Ontario
1979 Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Ontario
1979 Sable-Castelli Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
1979 Sable-Castelli Gallery, Toronto, Ontario

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2014-15 Art Toronto, Odon Wagner Contemporary,
Toronto, Ontario
2011 Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
2006 Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
2006 Paul Kuhn Gallery, Calgary, Alberta
2003 McIntosh Gallery, London, Ontario
2002-04 Albuquerque Museum of Fine Arts,
Albuquerque, New Mexico
2001 Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
2000 Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
1999 Meyer Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico

1997 Mira Godard Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
1995 Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton, Ontario
1994 The Koffler Gallery/The Koffler Centre of the Arts,
North York, Ontario
1993 The Power Plant, Toronto, Ontario
1993 The Station Gallery, Whitby Arts Inc., Whitby, Ontario
1992 Saidye Bronfman Centre, Montreal, Quebec
1992 McIntosh Gallery, London, Ontario, (catalogue)
1989 Diane Farris Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia
1989 Costin & Klintworth, Toronto
1985 Art Gallery of Northumberland, Cobourg, Ontario
1981 Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba
1981 Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario
1980 Glendon Gallery, York University, Toronto, Ontario
1979 Art Gallery at Harbourfront, Toronto, Ontario
1978 Etobicoke Civic Centre Gallery, Etobicoke, Ontario
1978 Art Gallery at Harbourfront, Toronto, Ontario
1978 Ontario College of Art, Toronto, Ontario
1973 Gallery Pascal, Toronto, Ontario

AWARDS

1986 Canada Council Arts Grant 'B'
1984 Canada Council Short-term Grant
1983 Canada Council Project Cost Grant
1982 Canada Council Arts Grant 'B'
1981 Canada Council Short-term Grant
1979 Canada Council Arts Grant 'B'
1978 Ontario Arts Council Grant
1978 Canada Council Short-term Grant
1977 Ontario Arts Council Grant

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Ontario
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Art Gallery of Peterborough, Ontario
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Front Cover:
Pharsalus, oil on linen, 55 × 45 in

Back Cover:
Sybritos, oil on linen, 28 × 42 in



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