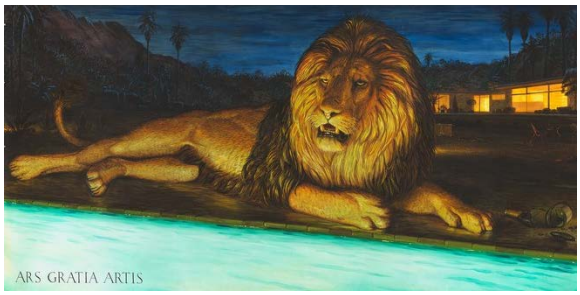
Vogue
November 1, 2017

GAGOSIAN

VOGUE

Walton Ford's Fantastical Paintings Explore the Tension Between Human And Animal Worlds

Dodie Kazanjian



Walton Ford, Ars Gratia Artis, 2017
Photo: Tom Powell/ Courtesy of Gagosian, © Walton Ford

Walton Ford's hyper-realistic watercolor paintings of the natural world are often compared to John James Audubon's, but they harbor disturbing undercurrents--glimpses of cruelty and compassion that echo the divided nature of their human oppressors. They blend fact and fiction, drawing us in and repelling us at the same time, telling tales that question the balance between human and animal kingdoms. Ford's art reaches new levels of fantastic beauty in "Calafia," his current exhibition at Gagosian gallery in Beverly Hills (November 2 through December 16). Before it opened, he talked to Vogue.com about California, its legendary beasts and predators (real and imagined), its vulnerability to natural disasters (forest fires, droughts, and the ever present threat from the San Andreas Fault), and why the place has always seduced and terrified him.

Dodie Kazanjian: How did you start thinking about "Calafia?"

Walton Ford: Calafia was a fictional figure from a 16th-century Spanish novel called Las Sergas de Esplandian (which translates as The Adventures of Esplandian). It is one of the chivalric novels mentioned in Don Quixote as driving the Don mad, and it's full of nonsense and clichés, but it has the distinction of being the first place where the name California appeared. Presumably, the conquistadors who sailed up the West Coast in the 1530s had read the book. In the novel, the island of California is ruled by a queen named Calafia, who is described as a magnificently beautiful black woman. She is a warrior and has an army of Amazonian women who train griffins as attack animals and kill all the men that visit the island. I wanted to name my show after Calafia because the entire show is a contemplation of fact and fantasy, and of natural history in California. I did paint a portrait of Calafia, and Naomi Campbell was kind enough to

pose in my studio. But in the end I didn't put it in the show--all the other paintings were about animals.

DK: Calafia makes me think of Wonder Woman. What is the Calafia story that you're telling?

WF: I'm not actually telling a Calafia story, but using the figure of Calafia and the imaginary island of California as a jumping off point to explore the complicated relationship that contemporary California has with its own hostile landscape and fauna.

DK: Let's hear more about your griffin concoction (condor/mountain lion)--why that hybrid? Is there a historical link or precedent here?

WF: In traditional European imagery, the griffin is usually a hybrid animal--half African lion and half golden eagle. I wanted to take this absurd fantasy novel and treat it as if it was historical fact--that the conquistadors discovered the actual island of California as described in the novel, complete with Amazonian warriors and these new world griffins. I decided to create a griffin that was half California condor and half mountain lion, two species that evolved entirely in North America and flourished in California specifically. Condors are descended from storks, and old-world vultures are descended from hawks. Yet, they share the same appearance--a bald head for eating carcasses and a wide wingspan for soaring on thermals. My griffin resembles the European griffin but is unique to California.

DK: Animals rule in your magic kingdom. Do you think that's the future of California, and for all of us Americans--considering the beast who now occupies the White House?

WF: My geeky interest in natural history preceded this show and has nothing to do with Trump coming to power. As a little boy, I collected natural history specimens and kept wild animals in my room. I spent much of my free time in whatever scrap of woods I could find, or reading about Herpetology or Ornithology or whatever else I could get my hands on that would transport me out of the confines of the suburbia in which I grew up. I'm a big believer in allowing your art practice to become a form of play. It can be serious play, but nevertheless, if you're not playful in your studio, you're probably not making very good work. I do the kind of work that I couldn't have imagined when I was ten years old, but I believe my ten-year-old self would be delighted with what I do now.

DK: What were you thinking about when you did that wide-screen triptych of the La Brea Tar Pits?

WF: A painting like La Brea was conceived simply as a contemplation on both the pleasures and the anxieties I feel as an East Coast person in California. When I'm in New York, I don't think about a building pancaking on me in a sudden earthquake. When I'm walking in the woods in New England, I know I'm unlikely to encounter a mountain lion or a rattlesnake. Part of the thrill, and the dread, that I feel in California has to do with feeling a sort of hostility that's underneath the nice weather and the beautiful landscape. When I first visited the La Brea Tar Pits I felt that it was a very creepy natural phenomenon, unlike any I had seen before. Here was something that resembled industrial pollution or an oil spill oozing out of the ground, miring animals for millennia. It's all a reminder of what a thin crust you're standing on, and how there are great, big cracks everywhere for this almost bloody ooze to come out of the earth. I decided

to take it a step further and have the ghosts of the animals that were trapped rise out of the tar and attack contemporary LA. It felt corny, like a movie pitch concept, but it also felt genuine in the sense that it reflected my own uneasiness. People have seen this painting as a metaphor for global warming, or for how petrochemicals have come back to bite us in the ass. I completed the painting soon after the election, so this doomsday feel of the thing suited a lot of peoples' moods. I try not to paint timely things, but the fact is, many great works of art are painted in a reactionary way.

DK: So much of your work comes out of legends or tales that you've found in your reading. As you know, until quite recently, both figuration and story-telling were banished from contemporary art. Why are they so strong in your work, and why do you think they're also making a comeback in works by so many other artists?

WF: I was lucky enough to spend my senior year at Rhode Island School of Design in the European Honors Program in Rome. I wasn't an honors student, but I made such a fuss that they let me go anyway. The students were all packed in buses and taken on what was called the Northern tour during the first semester. One of the stops was Assisi. When I saw Giotto's frescoes of the life of St. Francis, it changed my life. Everything in those paintings serves a narrative function, and everything that does not help tell the story is stripped away. The life of the saint reads like a giant comic book across the walls of this magnificent building. I had never seen any piece of contemporary art that moved me so much. I was not raised Catholic so I didn't have any idea what I was looking at. But there were crazy, surreal images of St. Francis in ecstasy, receiving the stigmata from an airborne alien crucifix with multiple wings. I didn't know what the fuck it was all about, and I wanted to understand. So I started reading up on St. Francis' life while vowing to myself that I could make mysterious and beautiful narrative paintings. It took me many years to have any artistic success in this.
I've always known that this way of working was completely unfashionable, and quite frankly, I don't give a shit. As far as narrative painting making some kind of comeback, I guess I've missed that. I'm not sure who you mean. I suppose Kara Walker and Neo Rauch, but if there is a trend in this direction, I'm willfully and blissfully ignorant of it.

DK: That MGM lion of yours--a grande horizontale if ever there was one--what's the story here?

WF: I wanted to do something about the MGM lion and discovered that there were several lion farms in the Los Angeles area during the Golden Age of Hollywood. One was Gay's Lion Farm and another was Goebel's--most of the MGM lions over the years came from Goebel's. These farms, which were basically captive breeding facilities, were tourist destinations. I read some crazy stories about these farms. For example, Jane Mansfield's six-year-old child was attacked by a lion and almost killed during a photo shoot at Goebel's. The Lion's Club held annual dinners at the farms and guests ate lion tenderloins. One of the MGM lions was in a plane crash and survived in his crate. But none of these bizarre episodes gave me what I was looking for. So I started thinking about how, as technology changed in Hollywood, they would have to shoot the roaring MGM lion intro again and again. For example, there was a silent film MGM lion, and then a sound film MGM lion that was in black and white, then a color lion, and after that a widescreen version, etcetera. I imagined a has-been, retired MGM lion, whose best years were behind him. The background in my painting is very creepy and I'm happy with the result. Although the lion was painted before all the scandals erupted in Hollywood, it's taken on new

meaning now. Something about a big, defeated predator by a Hollywood swimming pool seems pretty timely, don’t you think?