

GAGOSIAN

89.3 KPCC

The past strikes back in Walton Ford's huge watercolors

Marc Haefele



A detail from Walton Ford's "La Brea," at Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills through December 16 © WALTON FORD/PHOTO CHRISTOPHER BURKE/COURTESY GAGOSIAN

What if the beasts trapped for millennia in the La Brea Tar Pits rose up all at once and started for us? That's just one of the questions posed by Walton Ford at a new art show at Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills, reviewed by KPCC culture correspondent Marc Haefele. The show is up through December 16.

“For two million years, we were just another flavor of meat.” -- Walton Ford

Walton Ford is that rarity, a modern painter who tells stories. He also tells truths through his stories. And he even tells stories about stories. He likes to invoke mythologies and even create his own.

In the show at Gagosian Gallery, called “Calafia,” Ford turns his attention to our state of California — its mythic past, its prehistory, and even its frayed, fabulous present. In the process, he makes up some wonderful stuff, alive in some of the largest and most vivid and visionary watercolors you ever saw.

His stuff is ... well, the word that came to me was “overwhelming.” The light is set up as though it were emitting from the pictures themselves. Ford intended this as an evocation of the dioramas of a natural history museum.

But his history is not natural. The chief work in the new collection is a thirty-foot-long triptych called “La Brea,” which fills a wall of the gallery’s back room. “La Brea” brings us a sunset Los Angeles seen from the Hollywood Hills. In the eastern distance, lies a green, grid-pattern LA from a century ago. But in the middle-distance, rising from the La Brea Tar Pits, a thundering

herd of 10,000-year-old tar-colored beasts—mammoth, dire wolves, bison, short-faced bears, and sloths -- ascend the hills in a mad stampede, led by a vanguard of giant, tar-dripping saber-toothed cats (our state's official fossil) with glaring yellow, pupil-less eyes, snarling ferociously as they savage their evolutionary cousin, a hapless mountain lion.

The revenge of our distant past on the unworthy present? A revolt of nature against Mankind's myriad transgressions? Ford claims not to know, although he says of man, "for two million years, we were just another flavor of meat."

A native New Yorker, he says his California paintings were inspired by the sense of insecurity, "attacking our anxiety," that the original Europeans and the European-descended have felt in this land whose sunny face belies the sudden hazards of earthquakes and firestorms, of drought and fierce floods.

Beyond this prehistory, Ford, who's a voracious reader on California, indulges in the state's false history — that of the 1510 Rodriguez de Montalvo novel "The Labors of Esplandian," featuring a fictional island called California, after which early explorers named this place.

This fictional California was infested by a mythical bird, the griffin, so Ford decided to invent his own man-eating *grifo de California*—a hybrid of the California condor and the mountain lion. He shows us a nest of griffin chicks surrounded by human bones, and even what happens when one of his birds runs afoul of a power line. Even to a mythical creature, he says, life in California is highly contingent.

As it is for us all.