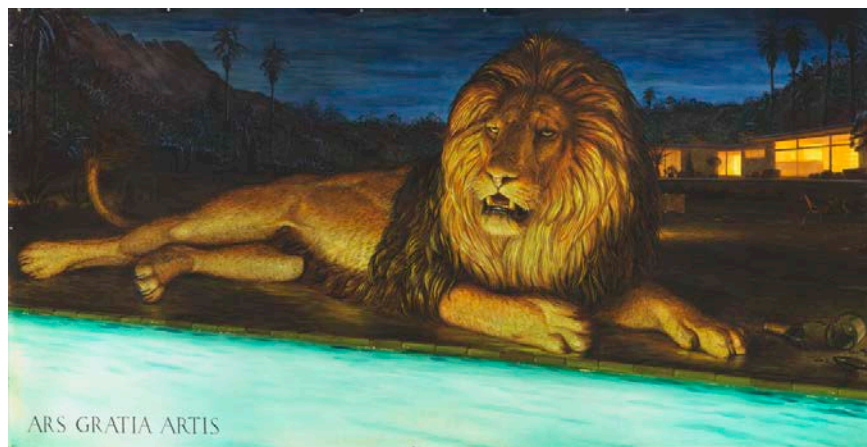


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California Dreamin': Walton Ford Explores Golden State Origin Myths at  
Gagosian Beverly Hills

Nate Freeman



Walton Ford, *Ars Gratia Artis*, 2017.  
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The book publisher and collector Benedikt Taschen lives in a John Lautner–designed Los Angeles home dubbed the Chemosphere, and on a late September morning, the Chemosphere was under attack by deep-fanged giant saber-toothed tigers emerging from the tar pits. The creatures came out of the black muck and galloped up the hills, the blinking city behind them, and when they approached the base of the modernist icon of architecture, they found a fair-skinned mountain lion to make prey. Claws out, saliva oozing down teeth, the big cats prepared to feast.

“In the classic Hollywood horror film pitch, I’m saying, the animals rise out of the pits and come and attack contemporary L.A.,” said Walton Ford, who had painted the narrative of rampaging beasts as a masterful triptych called *La Brea* (2016). We were standing in the Gagosian space on West 21st street in New York, looking at the work that would make up “Calafia,” Ford’s show currently up at Gagosian in Beverly Hills through December 16.

“It’s some dumb concept pitch that’s kind of like *Sharknado*,” Ford went on, referring to a made-for-TV movie in which there is a tornado filled with sharks. “Unbeknownst to L.A. this thing is happening, and they’re coming across the hill. And the first victim is the mountain lion being killed by the saber-toothed tiger right at the foot of the Chemosphere—my friend Benedikt Taschen’s house. So I get to say, ‘Benedickt! Look out!’”

The temporary hang of the works was wonderfully jarring—it was a sunny shock to walk straight in from the hum of Gotham’s West Side Highway and see gigantic paintings so evocative of the California glow. It was still a few weeks before the work would be shipped out to Los Angeles and feted by the town depicted in the paintings.

(For those who can’t make it out west, tonight at the Gagosian Shop on Madison Avenue, Ford is signing copies of the show’s catalog and his new Taschen book, *Paleoart: Visions of the Prehistoric Past*, alongside that book’s co-author, *ARTnews* contributor Zoë Lescaze.)

Ford’s practice takes him around the world as he captures natural landscapes in a hyper-realistic style that is cut with a mischievous romantic streak, his superb handling embedded with a wink that brings extinct animals and mythical creatures back in the modern age. But as a native East Coaster, he’s never done a deep dive on the landscape of California. So when the opportunity presented itself a few years back, he decided to investigate the state’s deep mythos, the way in which the initial seizure of Edenic land by the Spanish—a strip of mountain-studded oceanside property sitting seemingly at the end of the world—results today in the Hollywood dream factory and its runoff, the tinseltown you see at the movies.

“You leave the streets of Los Angeles, and you’re confronting myths about California from its earliest contact with the west,” Ford said during our chat.

He’s also never done a solo show with the dealer Larry Gagosian, who now has 16 international branches—in New York, Ford usually shows with his longtime representative, Paul Kasmin.

“When Larry and I first talked about working together, I had an idea for *this* gallery”—he pointed to the ground to indicate he meant the West 21st Street space that we were in—”and then I was rethinking it. And then Larry suggested, ‘Why don’t we do our first show in L.A., in the Beverly Hills gallery? And when I sat down and thought about it, I realized I could do a show about California, about the natural history of California.’”

Ford grew up in upstate New York, went to college at RISD in Providence, Rhode Island, and has lived in New York City for decades; he’s not a West Coast guy, really. But he was curious about the state’s natural phenomena, and with all of the contradictions its landscapes embody, it was too much to pass up.

“If you’re a natural history person like me, it kind of starts to fuck with you in a way, going out there,” he said. “You’re also seeing all this urban landscape, and you’re like, Oh, this is a really dangerous neighborhood, but I just saw a hummingbird. And there’s flowers everywhere—and you’re telling me it’s dangerous, and there’s a bloodstain on the sidewalk from a shooting the night before. That was my introduction to L.A. in the ’80s when I would go visit my friends who lived in Hollywood. It was police helicopters chasing people on the street and then you wake up the next morning and it’s  *fucking* beautiful, they have a garden and an old swimming pool full of leaves.

“The whole thing is so dark and so beautiful,” he added. “I didn’t think I would engage it in my painting, but it certainly fits in with what I’ve been doing the last 20 years.”

The show begins with *Ars Gratia Artis* (2017), which contains a familiar image: the MGM lion, the one that’s roared before each one of that studio’s movies since it was founded in the 1920s by

the pioneering movie men Louis B. Mayer and Irving Thalberg. In Ford's painting, the lion who long ago filmed the iconic opening segment is on a lawn, drunk and tired, winding down his days like many a former star: soused in the backyard of a Bel Air mansion as the detritus of endless parties piles up.

"From the time of the silent era on, they had to reshoot that opening segment over and over again so there are several MGM lions," Ford explained. "So as they retired one, the previous lion would have been like, 'It used to mean something to be a fuckin' MGM lion, these kids today, they think *they're* fuckin' lions.' So he's one of those guys—he's had his days, he's sitting by the pool saying 'I'm the fucking MGM lion, I don't know who the fuck these other guys are.'"

It establishes the show not just as a showcase for Ford's panoramic depictions of the states canyons and ranges and the critters that stalk them, but as an exploration of L.A. ennui. The Gagosian outpost sits in the city's luxury shopping district but is just feet away from all the nature that Ford's paintings show. The work is novelistic in the vein of Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939), meta-L.A. like Ed Ruscha. The faded lion is here a cautionary tale of Hollywood, his faced slacked by drink and drug.

And *Ars Gratia Artis* is painted in a way that intimates menace, emphasizing how houses in the Hills at night have a way of evoking danger—they seem to all look like the house on Cielo Drive where the Manson killings took place.

"It's almost like this crime scene," Ford said. "When Larry saw it he was like, 'Oh, he ate the whole family, and he's digesting. He ate the whole party.'"

(It's no coincidence that Ford asked Emma Cline, whose acclaimed first novel *The Girls*, 2016, involved a Manson-esque cult in '70s L.A., to write the catalog essay for the show.)

Next comes the triptych of the animals crawling out of the La Brea tar pits, then another play on classic film tropes, this time a mama bear in a pose that evokes *King Kong* (1933) and other golden-era captive beast films, with hunters trying in vain to ensnare the now-extinct grizzly bear, the bear on the flag of the state of California. It's called *La Madre* (2017).

"The vaqueros in the old mission days would rope grizzlies with lariats and two or three cowboys could rope apart a grizzly bear and it's this great bloodsport where you can get killed," Ford explained, matter-of-factly. "I decided to make the biggest fucking California grizzly imaginable, this freakishly big mother who's going to come out and fuckin' take revenge. Like Moby Dick, she's been roped many times, snapped as many ropes and killed as many vaqueros, so this is the baleful spirit of nature. It's what we've lost, and how terrifying what we lose can be."

As with the schlock-tastic elements at play within *La Brea*, the action in *La Madre*—King Kong in the Wild West—fiddles with the lifeblood of modern Los Angeles: the idea that a sticky and kitschy idea for a stunt narrative can trick millions of suckers into buying movie tickets and make one rich and famous.

"I wanted Hollywood pitch-making and Hollywood blockbusters—but bad ideas for Hollywood—to infect the show," Ford said. "I wanted to join in the great tradition—I know about this reporter in Hollywood who stood outside the supermarket once, and everybody who

came out of the supermarket he would ask, ‘How’s the screenplay going?’ And every grandma and every five-year-old kid and a homeless guy and a rich guy, they all said, ‘I’m on the third act!’”

The show’s title, “Calafia,” comes from the book that also gave the state its name, *Las Sergas de Esplandián*, published in Seville in 1510. As Ford said, “It’s a bad book, it was one of the books that was thrown on the fire by Quixote’s friends because his mind was being rotted by reading this stupid shit all the time.” But it was extremely popular, and it mentions at one point an island named California, inhabited only by black Amazon women who fly on griffins and are ruled by Queen Calafia. When the Spanish explorer Francisco de Ulloa was traveling on the West Coast and making the earliest maps of Baja, he heard about an island, and named it after the one in the book. The name stuck, and now we have California, the Golden State.

Ford made a painting of Queen Calafia (Naomi Campbell was the model) but instead of putting that work in the show, he made another that focused on the griffins.

“Griffins traditionally, in European art, are an eagle combined with an African lion,” Ford said. “But I thought it was a *California* griffin—there’s something called convergent evolution, where animals can evolve with the same traits but from different ancestors, so I created a convergently evolved griffin. This is half California condor and half mountain lion—it’s a New World griffin.”

He then showed me *Grifto de California* (2017), the made-up creature resplendent in glory. In accordance with the myth-making that California has become so good at, Ford created an archeological backstory that he could himself believe in, a tale that involves the first Spanish explorers fulfilling Manifest Destiny by hitting the end of the continent to see this new creature, this griffin. And as explorers would do, they would kill the griffin, and then use the dead carcass to paint the wild thing on a stone board, as evidence that it really exists.

“I imagine them painting the first griffin that they found—they probably killed it with a fucking crossbow—and then they posed it as if it were alive,” Ford said. “That’s 1833 when they first cite California, and this is the artifact left behind. I like making a fake artifact like this and setting up my California griffin as this beast that really existed.”

After talking, we took seats in the middle of the gallery and looked once more at the work, the vision of sunny L.A. seen through the lens of history and legend, filtered through the silver screen, painted from the artist’s native New York, and soon to be packed up and shipped west.

“I’ve never painted a better show in my life—you don’t have to fucking like what I do, but I did bring my best populist version of myself for the show, so I feel super proud of it that way,” Ford said.

“I can look at this and say, look, OK, dark underbelly of L.A., so what, it’s been done,” he continued. “But I have something else to talk about, I have something about how we approach the natural world, how we make up myths about the world that we live in.”

“To me,” he added, “it’s definitely a kind of love letter.”