

FRONT ROW CENTER

Classical Music and Opera

Drama on an outdoor stage

Waiting to enter the Met? Look up. A huge artwork may be part of the show

BY TED LOOS

The artist Walton Ford is known for his richly detailed and complex paintings of animals, some familiar and some extinct, drawn with a striking, at times unsettling, take on the traditional academic style. Imagine the work of the artist-naturalist John James Audubon, but on steroids and Red Bull.

His work doesn't exactly scream black-tie-opening-at-the-opera.

And yet, Mr. Ford has contributed not one but two images to the program known as the Gallery Met Banners, appearing on the facade of the Metropolitan Opera announcing the presentation inside.

"I've never done anything quite like it," said Mr. Ford, who added that he thoroughly enjoyed the experience of creating an artwork for Hector Berlioz's "La Damnation de Faust" (featuring a rearing goat) and "Die Fledermaus" by Johann Strauss (a bat with wings outspread hanging from a woman's arm).

His works, majestic and a bit creepy, somehow tap into the uncanny drama that powers many an opera plot.

The Gallery Met Banners began in the 2006-7 season with the painter John Currin's take on "Die Ägyptische Helena" by Richard Strauss (a laughing woman, head thrown back) and have gone on to include 35 more.

The program has been on hiatus this season, but according to its prime mover, Dodie Kazanjian, the founding director and curator of the nonprofit contemporary art space Gallery Met, it will return in the fall with the artist Kerry James Marshall doing a banner for "Porgy and Bess."

Ms. Kazanjian, a writer best known for her work as a longtime contributing editor at *Vogue*, said that she and Peter Gelb, the Met's general manager, came to the banner concept after they had initiated the art exhibitions inside the Met's travertine walls.

"We thought, how can we expand this so we're not segregated in this space?" Ms. Kazanjian recalled.

What they came up with was a program with parameters. The banners — perforated so they don't blow away —



LINDA VARTOOGIAN/GETTY IMAGES

"It has to have the title of the opera and tie into what's on stage," Ms. Kazanjian said. "But the artist doesn't have to coordinate with the scenic designer."

It was meant to be an independent venue for artistic expression, and certainly the Italian artist Francesco Vezzoli took that opportunity and ran with it.

In the 2010-11 season, he made a banner for "Le Comte Ory," Rossini's comic take on love, seduction and deception.

"It was fun," Mr. Vezzoli said. "I got to step out of my routine."

materials," he said. "In the daytime, you see them very clearly, but at night, unless you have something high contrast, like I did, the image can wash out and disappear."

Like Mr. Party, Mr. Ford said the number of viewers for the banners was part

of the appeal. "It's a temporary chance to be a public artist," he said. "This was an opportunity to become part of the texture of the city."

Ms. Kazanjian said that perhaps an exhibition of all the banners could be arranged someday — though not in

Gallery Met, because of their size.

Mr. Ford would welcome such a show, though he said it might not compare with "foreign tourists taking pictures of a banner for a whole month."

He added, "Being a part of that is quite thrilling."

Big impact
Nicolas Party's banner for the Thomas Adès opera "The Exterminating Angel" in 2017.

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"We thought, how can we expand this so we're not segregated in this space?" Ms. Kazanjian recalled.

What they came up with was a program with parameters. The banners — perforated so they don't blow away — can be up to 54 feet high, and most artists have wanted to go big.

"It's a temporary chance to be a public artist," said Walton Ford, who has created two Met banners.



Details
From top: John Currin's take on "Die Ägyptische Helena"; a goat in Walton Ford's piece for "La Damnation de Faust"; and a portrait of Rossini as the basis of Francesco Vezzoli's banner for "Le Comte Ory."

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"It was fun," Mr. Vezzoli said. "I got to step out of my routine."

He started with an old portrait of Rossini himself as the basis of the image. Then, he added tears streaming from the composer's eyes — tears are a prominent feature in much of Mr. Vezzoli's work.

But in this case, the tears were images of pastoral male nudes by the photographer Wilhelm von Gloeden.

"Crying a von Gloeden? It's about as politically incorrect as you can get," Mr. Vezzoli said, laughing. He admitted that the concept was quirky at the very least.

"I'm surprised they used it," he added. Sometimes, the connection between the banner artist and the opera can be more easily explained.

The artist Nicolas Party, who is inspired by Surrealists like René Magritte, was commissioned to make an image for the Thomas Adès opera "The Exterminating Angel," based on the 1962 film by the Surrealist director Luis Buñuel.

The production featured a prelude with live sheep on stage, also a reference to the film. Mr. Party's image featured a man in a tuxedo and a sheep, "but they have a weird look to them," he said. It has the bold blocks of color that characterize most of his work.

"I did an image that was simple," Mr. Party said. "I began to think about what would look good, and interesting, on that scale."

Mr. Party started his career as a graffiti artist and still works on murals, including a coming one at the Marciano Art Foundation in Los Angeles. He said that to him, the public presence of the banners at Lincoln Center was the central factor of interest.

"People don't make an active decision to see it," he said. "It's always good to have a different type of audience."

There is no requirement that the banner artists be opera buffs.

"I'm not a huge aficionado," Mr. Ford said. "I grew up with rock 'n' roll." He noted that he rarely accepted commissions; the only other one that he could think of was his album cover for the Rolling Stones' 50th anniversary compilation, "GRRR!"

But he enjoyed thinking about how to turn "Faust," with its tale of Mephistophelean temptation, into a single image.

"I make animal metaphors, and I use animals as symbols," Mr. Ford said. "So I was thinking of the way goats have been used in Goya, and in general, as satanic figures."

At the time, Mr. Ford was living in the Berkshires, and he visited a nearby farm to look at goats and sketch them.

Once he actually saw the opera performed, he was pleased at the connection between it and the banner.

"It felt like a good lock," he said.

Mr. Ford said the assignments took some planning beyond his usual process, in part because the perforations can make the banners read as translucent.

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Nicolas Party's banner for the Thomas Adès opera "The Exterminating Angel" in 2017.



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