



Thomas Woodruff, *Danse Macabre*, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 72 inches (228.60 x 182.88 cm) © Thomas Woodruff; Photo by Argenis Apolinario; Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery

THOMAS WOODRUFF
THE DINOSAUR VARIATIONS
FEBRUARY 9 - MARCH 30, 2024

VITO SCHNABEL GALLERY
455 WEST 19TH STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10011

Vito Schnabel Gallery is pleased to present *Thomas Woodruff: The Dinosaur Variations*, an exhibition of recent paintings depicting prehistoric creatures in the moments before their destruction. The exhibition will be on view at 455 West 19th Street in New York from February 9 to March 30, 2024. It is the artist's third solo presentation with the gallery.

The paintings in *The Dinosaur Variations* are a continuation of a series Woodruff began in 2020, during the pandemic lockdown, which debuted in his solo show, *Resurrection*, at Vito Schnabel Gallery in 2022. Working in isolation in his Hudson Valley studio, he began to compulsively draw dinosaurs, viewing them as compelling avatars of both pathos and melancholy well-suited to such a challenging moment. Despite Woodruff's meticulous rendering of his dinosaur subjects, the resulting paintings push against the expectations of "paleoart" and other forms of natural history illustration, casting the dinosaurs as the dramatis personae of an apocalyptic production, rather than paleontological specimens. Woodruff

sets these anthropomorphized creatures within stage-like environments, adorned with bursts of intricate flora, gleaming rainbows, and flaming orbs streaking across the sky. These elements draw upon inspiration from a wide range of art-historical and theatrical touchstones; from the luminous textures of Titian, to the mystical landscapes of the German Romantic painter, Philipp Otto Runge, to the extravagant violence of Edo period *ukiyo-e* master Yoshitoshi, as well as the canons of classical ballet and grand opera.

In composing these works, Woodruff turned to the conventions of music, borrowing the idea of the "theme-and-variation" structure, with each painting in the series employing the same basic components – a dinosaur or dinosaurs, a rainbow or other prismatic atmospheric effect, a volcano, a moon, and an asteroid strike or its aftermath – articulated in different ways. In some of the paintings, the dinosaurs are shown just before disaster strikes, barely aware of what will soon befall them: *Nydia* (2022), named for the tragic blind heroine of Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1834 novel *The Last Days of Pompeii*, depicts a sauropod resting in a field of flowers, glancing up at a fireball careening towards Earth as a volcano erupts in the distance, while the mural-sized *Aurora (Sleeping Beauty)* (2022), spanning 16 feet across four panels, shows a Tyrannosaurus rex in repose amid a thorny bramble as explosions light up the sky. In *Angus D.* (2022), a baby Spinosaurus breaks free of its jewel-like shell, just in time to see a thickly impastoed asteroid wrapped in lacy ribbons of smoke.

Woodruff incorporates self-portraits into several of the works, in the form of a moon bearing a solemn human face. In *Foposaurus* (2022), an homage to the late artist Duncan Hannah, who passed away in 2022, for instance, an elegant invented species, depicted with intricately patterned scales suggestive of brocade, looks up at the man in the moon with a sense of quiet resignation, while flaming meteorites fall around it. The Stegosaurus at the center of the triptych *Ruby* (2023), is similarly calm as an asteroid hurtles toward it. Despite its imminent obliteration, the scene is exuberant, with the dinosaur protagonist surrounded by a mandala of lush flowers and dragonflies, inspired by the kaleidoscopic choreography of Busby Berkeley's Hollywood Golden Age musicals, all watched over by the artist in a crescent moon suspended in the painting's upper left corner. *Theophany* (2022), on the other hand, embeds the artist's portrait into the blazing surface of the asteroid itself. A group of twelve long-necked beasts stare up at it reverentially, their mouths agape, as if seeing a god.

Throughout *The Dinosaur Variations*, Woodruff plays with art historical references, reinterpreting tropes and themes associated with the art of the past, to reflect on the tumult of the present. *The 3 Graces* (2022) depicts a trio of theropods gently linking arms in a field of white magnolias, recalling the titular group of goddesses in Botticelli's *Primavera*—only here, they gaze up at a fireball that threatens to blot out the sky. In the triptych *The Large Bathers* (2023), Woodruff adapts a classical subject taken up by artists from Titian to Cezanne, depicting three long-necked “Nessie”-esque monsters immersed in water, as flame-filled orbs rain down all around them. The diptych *III Matched Pair* (2022), based on a series of 16th century allegorical paintings by Lucas Cranach the Elder, is a double portrait of two different species of dinosaurs, a rainbow-haloed meteor hanging in the air between them. *Sid and Wili* (2023) likewise shows an interspecies pair, with a spiky, club-tailed Ankylosaurus and a feathered Velociraptor meeting in a secluded grotto surrounded by red rose bushes, reminiscent of the secret trysts captured in Jean-Honoré Fragonard's Rococo painting cycle, *Progress of Love*. Taking its cues from performance history, by contrast, the commanding Pterodactyl at the center of *Maya Lacrimosa* (2023), shrouding her babies under her wings as a storm rages around them, is a cross between *The Nutcracker's* Mother Ginger and Maria Callas's “Medea”, her eyes dramatically ringed with black.

The paintings in *The Dinosaur Variations* epitomize Thomas Woodruff's virtuosic brand of queer maximalism, irrevocably shaped by his experience of living through the AIDS epidemic as a young gay artist. As the artist has described, the series is an “exploration of grace in the face of annihilation,” presenting scenes of mayhem and doom suffused with glamor and wit.

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