

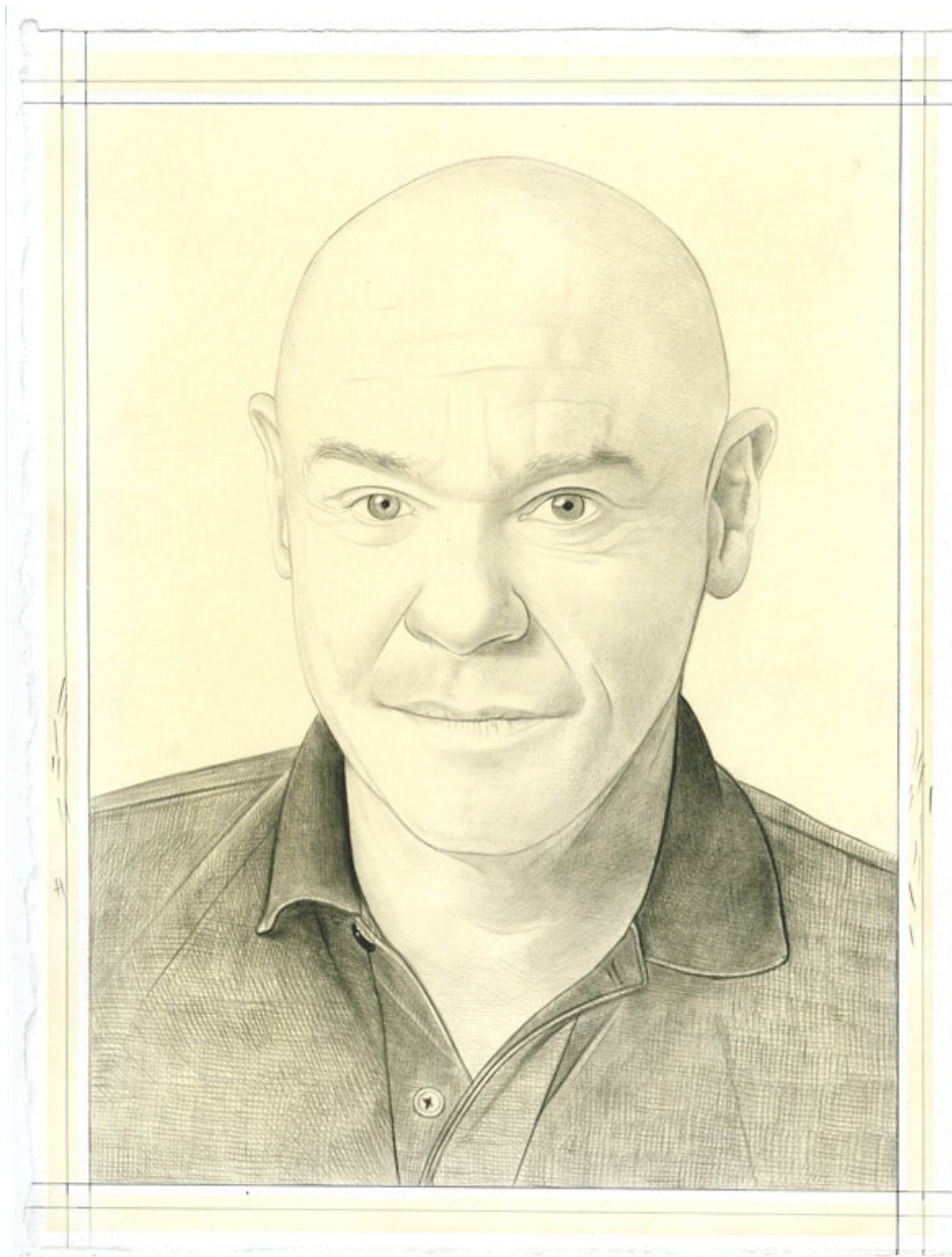
The Brooklyn Rail  
Jason Rosenfeld  
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**BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

**Art In Conversation**

**WALTON FORD**  
with Jason Rosenfeld

*NOV 2017*



Portrait of Walton Ford, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Walton Ford's new exhibition of customarily grand watercolors at Gagosian Beverly Hills is titled *Calafia*, after the warrior queen in Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo's Spanish novel *Las sergas de Esplandián* (*The Adventures of Esplandián*). Printed in 1510, it imagines the early history of the American Pacific coast, and a race of African warrior women accompanied by a fierce army of man-slaying griffins residing on the fabled island of California. The grandiose triptych titled *La Brea* is a thirty-foot long, horror film-worthy panoramic view from the Hollywood Hills of resurrected prehistoric beasts rising out of the ebony ooze of the famed tar pits, either setting off downhill for the city or barreling into the canyons, with neon-eyed saber-toothed cats attacking an unsuspecting mountain lion. Other ripping works deal with the tragic history of the California grizzly and, in *Ars Gratia Artis*, a gone-to-seed MGM studio lion mascot lounging drunkenly at night by a swimming pool. Senior *Rail* writer, Jason Rosenfeld, met Walton Ford at his studio in New York to talk about these new paintings.



Walton Ford, *Grifo de California*, 2017, Watercolor, gouache and ink on paper, 60 1/4 x 83 3/4 inches 153 x 212.7 cm (unframed) © Walton Ford. Photography by Christopher Burke. Courtesy Gagosian.

**Jason Rosenfeld (Rail):** Do you have any connection to California? I know you are from Larchmont in Westchester.

**Walton Ford:** I'm such an East Coast person, and when I dream of getting a country property, it's in New England. And it's the barn studio, and E. B. White and all of that kind of thing—that's what I fucking love. And that's what feels like home. My father was a sportsman and a natural history freak, and so we went trout fishing, fly fishing, bird watching—all that kind of shit. We'd go on camping trips together. So I grew up thinking a gentleman hunts and fishes and knows all the birds and knows all the animals, and can identify a track in the snow. I didn't even see a palm tree until I was an adult, because my parents split up when I was eleven, and there was suddenly little money and four kids and my mom went to work with a high school education, so we were scraping by in a little house that was built in the twenties, and were more or less broke. We're eating scrambled eggs for dinner. So I didn't fly on airplanes, and I didn't do the stuff that the kids around me were doing—in Larchmont, they were all skiing in Aspen and I'm getting hand-me-down clothes from my brother.

So I didn't go to California until I was an adult and I got there on my own steam. I got into RISD. I lucked out. I had talent. So I got in and I got money and student loans and work study and made it through school, and then visited my friends out in California—I was blown away. Because in the '80s someone's like, "It's a really dangerous neighborhood," and I'm like, "But I just saw a bird of paradise flower and a hummingbird! This is beautiful! Bougainvillea spilling over the street." And yet the next morning there's a blood stain on the sidewalk, and suddenly there was a shooting and there's police tape and there's fucking helicopters looking for the guy, and I'm like "This is scary, all right, it's scary but it's beautiful—it's hard to figure it out." My friend, he lived in some shitty little beautiful apartment building in West Hollywood back in those days, and had a swimming pool but it was full of eucalyptus leaves.

**Rail:** Totally foreign environment. And surreal. It's like an explorer's perspective.

**Ford:** Everything seems novel to you and of interest, and you want to record it. I was so blown away—so amazed. I loved it. And you know, they're like "The water is too cold to swim in, It has great white sharks and the waves are too big. And then the ground is trembling, and there are rattlesnakes, and mountain lions in the hills, and there's LA, and gangs, and fucking police shootings," and I'm like, "This is a crazy fucking place!"

**Rail:** Isn't it weird that we East Coast people—we'll swim in the ocean any time?

**Ford:** Any time!

**Rail:** And then in Southern California...

**Ford:** I'm cold the whole time. So, when I was offered a show in California by Larry [Gagosian], I thought I would make the show about California. And my general mode of working is that I deal with how animals live in the human imagination, the kind of cultural history of animals, and as you know, the stuff I draw really heavily on is from 19th-century traditions of Natural History art, and earlier as well. I mean, it all starts with Dürer's *Young Hare* in 1502, this sort of humanist tradition of looking very carefully at whatever is put in front of me by nature—so I look through the cultural lens and say, "Ok, well, what was the world that Dürer's rabbit lived in?" I make that front and center—it takes over like a computer virus in my work, and it becomes the thing that the painting is about. So it looks initially like a work of traditional Natural History art. It looks like an exhibition of watercolor from the Victorian era, but in reality it is a sort of hypnagogic comment on our relationship with the natural world. So the way the process starts is I just start reading anything I can get my hands on about California.

**Rail:** Let me ask you about your suburban experience, because we share this as I grew up outside Philadelphia. In this country, when I was a kid, we used to go two blocks away and there were crayfish.

**Ford:** Right.

**Rail:** And garter snakes.

**Ford:** Right.

**Rail:** And you've talked about that in some of your other interviews—it's all been replaced by malls and track development, and I think there's a failure of children's imagination now. If you grow up in the city, that is one kind of stimulus that has stayed the same. But in the suburbs you used to have a different stimulus, where you were on the edge of the rural, right? And now it's been replaced by this mindless self-absorption in the age of the screen.

**Ford:** I hate being the older guy that's judgmental of the younger generation. I have young daughters that I raised in the country. There are always these tremendous exceptions to the rule. And I was the kind of kid who, even in my own environment, was like, "I'm going to turn the log over and look for the garter snake." But even in the '60s there were a lot of kids who were doing things I wasn't interested in. Kids were obsessed with trading baseball cards or with sports in general, and I wasn't. I wanted to be in the woods. I dreamt of the kind of things I paint about quite frankly, ever since I was very little. I was a traditional kind of geek that—if he's lucky—either ends up being a scientist or a natural history artist. I have friends that are in the sciences—my brother in law is a paleontologist, and I was the kind of geek that kept plastic dinosaurs in his pocket when I went to school. I was that kid. And when you read the lives of scientists, like Stephen Jay Gould—that's the kind of kid we are talking about. I wanted to go to the Museum of Natural History. I wanted to watch *King Kong* because it had a cool tyrannosaurus.

**Rail:** The first *King Kong*.

**Ford:** Yeah, that's what I'm talking about.

**Rail:** That fight between the tyrannosaurus and the ape—that was my favorite part.

**Ford:** It was incredible. I was just involved in a project for Taschen, a book called *Paleoart: Visions of the Prehistoric Past*. It's a survey of the reconstruction of dinosaurs. That's the art of reconstructing the prehistoric past, rather than, say, Paleolithic art. They're reproductions of how we view the prehistoric world, such as a Victorian era oil painting by Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins.

**Rail:** The great man. He was in New York! He built dinosaurs in Central Park.

**Ford:** That's all documented in this book. And there's [Zdeněk] Burian who's a Czech artist—incredible. Zoë Lescaze, who's also an art writer, wrote the thing, put together all the images and did an incredible job. That kind of kid would be obsessed with a book like this one. You know, they're almost a cliché, a certain type of geek. That was how I grew up. And then we had underground comics coming out at the time.

**Rail:** Yeah, I read comic books. That's how I got interested in Victorian art, because I was reading *Conan* by Barry Windsor-Smith, and then I went to England and saw the real thing, and said, "Holy shit, this guy has been looking at the Pre-Raphaelites!"

**Ford:** Yeah, it was Frank Frazetta that did the covers of all the *Conan* books. I was obsessed with him!

**Rail:** And Jon J Muth and P. Craig Russell and all those guys.

**Ford:** Then they lead you to Howard Pyle and N. C. Wyeth and then those guys lead you to the Victorians that you and I know, and the Pre-Raphaelites and all that.

**Rail:** This is the generation that has kind of pushed away High Modernism and said, "We're interested in the figurative. We're interested in story. We're interested in narrative."

**Ford:** You know, one of the good things about the fucking Internet is that young people today have no Balkanization in their mind. Kids don't have any of those boundaries.

**Rail:** Or biases, right?

**Ford:** Or biases! Artists in their twenties sometimes tell me, "You're awesome, dude!" More artists of my generation have been deeply suspicious for a long, long time. I feel way more accepted by artists in their twenties because they're as into their tattoos as they are fine art. The funny thing is, the minute I started seeing people displaying taxidermy and old national history prints and having wax moustaches in Williamsburg and then doing back-to-the-land kind of farmers-market restaurants and bespoke shit, I thought, "Ok, maybe I'm in now." I went to Yale a few years ago to talk to the painters and they were all doing installation and messing with computers. The last time I went they were all covered with paint. They were completely over it, like, "Don't put a computer in my practice," or "If I use a computer to render, then I paint the fucking rendering that I print." They weren't enamored with technology at all. They were enamored with getting the fucking paint under their fingernails and learning how to draw. The magic in that sort of craft never goes away. There's just a certain amount of pleasure in grappling with these things that are real, that can't get quashed.

**Rail:** So it's okay that they didn't grow up with crayfish and garter snakes.

**Ford:** I think so! I think they figure it out. I was desperate for that shit, so when I had my children, we moved to Berkshire County. We didn't even have Internet service or cell phone service in the tiny village, Southfield Massachusetts. And they still can't fucking get a signal there.

**Rail:** [*Laughs.*] It's so healthy.

**Ford:** I loved it.

**Rail:** The second you get to the point where there's no signal, there are cheers in the car! But you channel that, you take those childhood experiences, and then you go off and get your education and you do whatever, and you listen to people pontificate and promote their own theories, and then you come back to what you really were stimulated by initially.

**Ford:** Absolutely! I tell students that at art schools. If they're stuck, there are a couple of things I say. I say [*Laughs*], "What did you draw when you were ten years old? Did you draw hot rod cars? Dinosaurs? I mean, what the fuck did you draw? Horses? I don't care what the hell it was, but what was it? I'm not telling you that you should do that, but I'm telling you that you should be aware of it if you have artist's block, because the minute I got back to what I loved when I was a kid, I was on the right track. It was like this world just suddenly bloomed into this thing that I couldn't have imagined when I was ten, but I would've *fucking loved!*"

**Rail:** So you feel like you're making something that would've appealed to your early self.

**Ford:** Totally! I would've been my own favorite artist when I was little—like, I can't believe he's doing this!

**Rail:** I guess you have to tell students that you have to trust your instincts. I don't teach my students that Impressionism is the greatest thing ever in the late-19th century. And they go to the museum, and they say, "Why is everything Impressionism?" And they question that.

**Ford:** When I was a kid the way art history was taught is that it was a linear progression, and it was an linear process where we got improvements as we went. So in this model Modernism was a refusal to engage in this false illusionistic painting style that was just a bunch of tricks— But the fact is we know from biological evolution that there is no model like the one they show of human beings starting out as a little monkey and then turning into a big guy walking around. That evolution actually branches out in a million different directions. Some branches die, some live, some go skinny, you know, whatever. It's a crazy, totally disorganized root system. It has no relationship to linear progress. And the same is true of art history! And then I meet young people who say "Oh, I love Buckminster Fuller!" I'm like, "Where the fuck did you come across Buckminster Fuller at twenty-something years old?" But it's just because they're looking for soul mates. They're not looking for what's meant to be the most important shit. So, the sort of old models of art history are dead, and that gives room for people like me.

**Rail:** It connects with people, and that's the thing. The work you're doing is complex. It can be very difficult, but it immediately has a kind of connectivity. People see it and they're interested in the detail, the story.

**Ford:** It's figurative right away. It makes a direct appeal to the viewer where you don't need the intermediary of an art historian or a museum professional. I can go directly to the viewer, whether they are trained to understand art or not. And they might be like, "What the fuck would you paint a thing like that for?" but they get a lot of information. So, I think the distinctions between fine art and illustration, high art and low art—they've just gone out the window, and nobody's interested in that anymore, you know? People talk about tattoo artists as if they're fucking great artists, and now we don't even think about it.

**Rail:** Right. The difference, of course, is the process, because you've developed a process that is individual and unique.

**Ford:** Based on traditional ones that I didn't create at all. I don't paint in any way differently from how people have been painting for hundreds and hundreds of years, and I had no pretensions to make technical advances. When I went to school people were still imagining that art history needed to go in that direction. That unless you were doing something innovative, you were doing stuff that had already been done. My senior year I went to Italy, and I stood at Assisi and looked at Giotto's telling the life of St. Francis. I didn't know his life, so I looked at it like an illiterate peasant would've done in the 14th century, and I thought, "This is the most fucking amazing comic strip I've ever seen! I don't even know how to process how amazing this is." And I stood there and drew them. I just tried to absorb this sequential narrative of this guy's life. I hadn't seen anything in contemporary art that blew me away like that. And for years I didn't know how to process that, or what to do with it.

Artists like Bosch and Bruegel—those guys leave plenty of room for mystery. I'm trying to make those kinds of paintings. If I take a visual language like that and I'm super inspired by natural history art as well and then I apply it to a place like California—there's all of these possibilities that weren't there before for anyone else. So I might paint like a nineteenth century natural history guy but I have an opportunity to tell a story that they could never tell.



**Rail:** You're talking about how you're not reinventing the technique. Is there a particular style that you feel is your most comfortable and connected with a certain period in art?

**Ford:** I would say that the general look of these things has a lot to do with the 19th century. The color and the sort of wrongness of perspective like in this griffin [*Grifo de California*]. Audubon painted foreground background relationship like that. It's a kind of feeling that you know you place the specimen on a sort of stage and you light it in this artificial way. It's the low horizon, the sort of paper as sky as paper—all of that is from a lot of 19th century like [Karl] Bodmer, who went out west with Prince Maximilian and painted the Indians. And Audubon and—

**Rail:** And Edward Lear?

**Ford:** And Edward Lear, and any number of natural history artists, especially the studies they did from life or from a dead specimen. They would've had notations because it was going to later be a lithograph or an engraving—like field notes, the ephemera of exploration, the ephemera of journal entries by explorers of Africa and the Amazon. Those are the things that really excite me.



Walton Ford, *Los Niños*, 2017, Watercolor, gouache and ink on paper, 41 5/8 x 59 5/8 inches (105.7 x 151.4 cm) © Walton Ford. Photography by Tom Powel Imaging. Courtesy Gagosian.

**Rail:** What about the backgrounds of dioramas?

**Ford:** Dioramas have been a huge influence. Mostly the natural history museum dioramas that influenced *Los Niños* and *Grifo de California*—putting the subjects on a stage and lighting them in this way that's unnatural because the light is actually coming from one direction in the background but there's a little spotlight on the animal coming from the other side, which is so much like the Museum of Natural History that I sometimes laugh. I have a lot of fun with the sources. But it's all related to that sort of experience of going to places like the Museum of Natural History and going into their archives. And finding documents, field studies, and just wanting to somehow have the excitement of that first contact stuff come out in the world.

**Rail:** And you get rid of the middle ground so it's very vertiginous—you just jump right into the background. It's a bit like seeing that gorilla in the natural history museum—the King Kong one—it's still on the postcards. He's right in front of you and then *boom!* All of a sudden you're in the background.

**Ford:** Yes! Because the best way to tie in the foreground and the background is to have a hill drop off behind the animals. I never get sick of it. And then the other thing I love is that you have not only Audubon but also Japanese, Chinese traditions where the paper is sky—like in the California paintings—it's just white paper. You can write on it, but it also goes back a hundred million miles because it's the sky and it just goes back and forth.

**Rail:** The infinite space that you get.

**Ford:** The infinite space that becomes flat paper. Why is that so magic to me?

**Rail:** And then it sets off the beast.

**Ford:** That's why they put the low horizon on all the illustrations. You have a taxonomic information graphic that will help you identify the animal in the field, so we're putting them against the sky and putting the horizon really low so you don't have a lot of distraction. And I just use it as an aesthetic device because I just fucking love it.

**Rail:** I wanted to ask about *La Madre* with the great grizzly bear—and the use of simultaneous narrative like in the Renaissance with two stories at once.

**Ford:** Like the griffins in *Isla de California*, he's also getting electrocuted in the background.

**Rail:** Ah, it's the same griffin shown twice.

**Ford:** Or different, but it doesn't matter.

**Rail:** Kind of like a phoenix.

**Ford:** He's getting zapped by a power line. In *La Madre* there is the roping of grizzly bears in the background, but then in this foreground she's the mother and a King Kong-sized bear—the birds are supposed to show the scale shift, so it's not like you're closer to a normal-sized bear, you're actually dealing with a gigantic-ass bear. She's like the vengeful spirit of the extinct grizzly that's on the flag of California.

**Rail:** This is the weirdest thing about this country. We take the bald eagle—we try to kill it. That's our national bird. And then we miraculously save it. And the flag of California celebrates a bear that they killed. The last one was maybe 1924.

**Ford:** We don't know when the last ones were alive, because there could be one lingering there till like 1935, but the idea is that it's the last one *we* have a record of. In another painting I have the skeleton of a grizzly bear, it's called *Eureka* because that's the motto on the seal of California. So I've done a sort of new model of California. And I have to say, I've hiked around in California and I thought, grizzlies were thick on the fucking ground in a place like Big Sur. Like really a lot of grizzly bears. God it'd be terrifying.



Walton Ford, *La Madre*, 2017. Watercolor, gouache and ink on paper, mounted on aluminum panel. 108 x 144 inches. © Walton Ford. Photograph by Tom Powel Imaging. Courtesy Gagolian.

**Rail:** Let's talk about the lion in *Ars Gratia Artis*.

**Ford:** There were several lion ranches in California. There was one called Goebel's Lion Farm, another called Gays

Lion Farm, and they were raising lions for zoos, for stuffed specimens, for Hollywood, and at Goebel's they raised the MGM lions. They were the exclusive providers. The first MGM lions were in the silent era, and then technology kept changing in Hollywood and they would have to re-photograph the lions...

**Rail:** And then the one roars.

**Ford:** The one roars finally, and then you get the widescreen one, and then the color one. So there were many MGM lions and I thought about the retired ones, the has-been ones... The other thing that was interesting about those lions is that they had the belly mane and they have the huge mane that's characteristic of what they call a Barbary lion, which is the lion that the Romans used in the Coliseum. It's very rare. It's been extinct in the wild for many, years. This DNA is floating around out there but essentially it's an extinct subspecies of lion, *the* magnificent lion of all lions. I read so much about the lion farms. I was looking for an image. It was one of those weird hypnagogic moments when I saw *The Kid Stays in the Picture*...

**Rail:** That's a great documentary.

**Ford:** And I slept, and I had been reading about lions all month, and when I woke up that was the image in my head. It was done, like I didn't even have to think twice, I knew what to do.

**Rail:** It's the Hugh Hefner lion.

**Ford:** Yeah, it was so obvious that was how I was gonna paint the lion, and all my research went out the window. There are some really great pictures of Tippi Hedren, Melanie Griffith's mom, and they're in the swimming pool and Melanie Griffith is a teenager, and they have pet lions. It shows them in the swimming pool with the lion and all that.

**Rail:** My favorite part about this painting is the logo, "Art for Art's sake," from the studio that gave you *Hot Tub Time Machine 2*... So this works perfectly well. Also the lighting, on this magnificent beast, and this sort of drowsy face.

**Ford:** I just think he's had enough, man, he could even die that night. It's like one of these John Belushi moments.

**Rail:** Let's talk about the griffins a little bit. They are from this crazy story, *Calafia*.

**Ford:** Yes, from *The Adventures of Esplandián*, by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo. It's one of the novels that Don Quixote's friends burned in the beginning of *Don Quixote*, when they're getting rid of all these books that have rotted his brain. And the first one on the fire is actually this book. It's this chivalric bullshit nonsense novel, that all the conquistadores read, and when they saw Baja, they named it after one of the episodes in the book, which is them finding an island called California that is inhabited by griffins and beautiful black Amazonian women, who fed men who got to the island to the griffins.

**Rail:** And *this* was enough to propel them across the Atlantic. Forget your "gold, god, glory."

**Ford:** [*Laughter*] You know I don't think they were looking for this shit! I think it's a joke. They were like, "This is such a silly book, let's name this fucking place after it." So what I wanted to do was to make it real, to absolutely give it that credibility.

**Rail:** Right—"it happened."



**Ford:** Yeah, it happened. This was absolutely painted in 1533 [*Grifo de California*] by one of the people on board and they had a dead griffin and they fucking painted it. They shot one with a crossbow or something and then a naturalist painted it, as if they brought Dürer's assistant with them. And he did a good job painting it [*Laughter*].

**Rail:** Or Martin Schongauer. Do you know Martin Schongauer *The Griffin* [c. 1485]?

**Ford:** There you go!

**Rail:** He's brilliant. These guys always seem really bizarre to me—Schongauer and Dürer—they could do animals like they were right in front of you, but they couldn't do people.

**Ford:** [*Laughter.*] Dürer is not interested in what a human being actually looks like, he's interested in perfecting what he thinks is the best human spirit. The drawings that Holbein did, it's like the person's breathing, as if they're about to speak. It's better than photography. It's so fucking real. So the ability didn't escape them, it just wasn't always an emphasis or something they were trying to strive for. When I went to do the griffin, my idea was like, this is traditionally in Europe...it's interesting that [Schongauer] used the cow because many, many people use a lion.

**Rail:** Right, for the back end of it.

**Ford:** Right, and then the front—he's made it fantastical, but most of the griffins I see are like an eagle, some sort of crested eagle, and then a European lion. So I thought I want to do a convergent evolution version of that, of a "new world" griffin that didn't evolve in Europe, that evolved in California—independent—so it's a California Condor and a California mountain lion, and they come together to make the griffin that you would only find here. That's true of our vultures, like old world vultures come out of falcons and eagles, new world vultures come out of storks. So I wanted my New World griffin to be the same thing. And I want to do enough research to make a credible falsehood.

**Rail:** Well that's the same as in the Ancient Near East, the Gates of Babylon. The Dragon of Marduk. It's a snake, it's an eagle, and it's a lion. Not like the dragons on *Game of Thrones*, which are dinosaurs. They didn't know dinosaurs, but they knew these three beasts, and they made a real imaginary beast out of these parts that they knew. So you take kids now and show them Marduk, the great dragon god, they say "that's not a dragon." But that's because their idea of a dragon is couched in something very different.

**Ford:** And I have to say, since I was doing a show about L.A. and Hollywood I did think about it in terms of how they both make beasts in the Renaissance, which is to put together various beasts—which is what Leonardo writes about doing—and also how they do it in DreamWorks, like this could be a recognizable Hollywood creation as well. I wanted it to be both. Because I wanted Hollywood to sort of infect my old-fashioned approach. *La Brea* for example, the tar pits, you know that animals sink into, and there's all the prehistoric animals that are entombed in there. And in my painting they're rising out, they're coming out of the tar. It's like a fucking Hollywood trope. It's like *Sharknado*-type pitch for an action movie. So they're coming out, bad special effects, all dripping with tar, coming across the landscape and attacking contemporary L.A., and the way you start the whole sequence is they kill a little bitty mountain lion, because they're all saber-tooth tigers. And then the quote that runs along the top is from Gaspar de Portolá, and it's the first description of what became L.A. from a western point of view. Portolá says that we traveled for three hours on a good road, and on the right were many plains covered with tar that the natives called *chapapote*, we discussed among ourselves whether this melted material that comes out of the ground could be the cause of these earthquakes. And I love that...all of it's in there for me. From the very first moment they arrive in what is now L.A. they're getting the creeps—ground is shaking, tar is flowing and we're trying to figure this shit out.



Walton Ford, *La Brea*, 2016. Watercolor, gouache and ink on paper. 60 1/2 x 119 1/2 inches 153.7 x 303.5 cm (unframed) © Walton Ford. Photograph by Christopher Burke. Courtesy Gagosian.

**Rail:** Something's not right.

**Ford:** Something's not right. And so all these many years later these animals are rising up.

**Rail:** And the third panel, the right wing of the triptych is really a remarkable thing, a sort of compendium of the imagined past and the present, and then the modern.

**Ford:** Everything about this project has been such a delight for me, I just am happy in the studio. I wanted each panel to be a really beautiful standalone painting, but also to work together and create a single horizon. One of my favorite tricks is that the white sun, which is almost unbearable to look at, is the same as the paper. But where the paper is, it looks about ten watts less bright, and the same with the paper there. It's the exact same paper in the ocean as above, but it somehow looks whiter and brighter, it's just context. And you do a thing like that and your brain just does it. I don't know how that fucking works.

**Rail:** It is amazing the way that you could do that, and it actually is difficult to look at—and is that just in our heads?

**Ford:** I know it is, it has to be that we're fooling our brain into thinking that's really what it looks like, and I think it triggers a lot of neurological shit that's fooling us. Same thing with that ocean.

**Rail:** It's like that Olafur Eliasson sun at Tate Modern where you can't really look at it [*The Weather Project*, (2003)], or there's a great painting by a Danish artist Møller, of a sun [Valdemar Schønheyder Møller, *Sunset, Fontainbleau*, 1900]. It's in the national collection in Copenhagen and is the most impossible painting to stare at, you feel like you're gonna go blind.

**Ford:** Turner does it. I've definitely got it here.

**Rail:** And it also connects with the eyes.

**Ford:** Yes the eyes look brighter than the paper behind as well

**Rail:** These saber-tooth cats.

**Ford:** Yeah I wanted it to be cryptic until you get to the foreground and see that it's this supernatural, fucked up thing. There are mammoths, and bison, and ground sloths. There's not an animal in the painting that wasn't found in the pits.

**Rail:** And they're all fleeing from the city.

**Ford:** They're all spreading out. Some of them are going down, some are headed away, but mostly they're just gonna spread out.

**Rail:** Watch out, you might get a pitch. You might get a writer's credit.

**Ford:** I hope so.

**Rail:** I wanted to ask you about films, because that's a big part of our shared adolescence, and what movies sort of connected with you... For me, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *Planet of the Apes*, obviously, *Capricorn One*, with O.J. Simpson about the fake Mars landing, *King Kong*, *Godzilla vs. anything*. Anything that had these weird beasts, these weird animals, and obviously with special effects that my own kids today would say "that's all so fake."

**Ford:** It's all puppetry. I brought my children to see the original *King Kong* in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in an old theater like the kind that would have first run it. I said, "I'm going to take you to see one of my favorite films." I took my seven-year-old daughter at the time, and I told her, "it's a puppet." A few minutes in she was afraid that she was gonna be afraid, because the build-up is pretty bad in the beginning, and when he finally made his appearance she went, "Ohhhh, he's cool!"

**Rail:** Because he is cool, right?

**Ford:** That's it, he's just a cool puppet.

**Rail:** And he's got a sense of humor in that movie.

**Ford:** It isn't particularly scary. It's just fucking cool.

**Rail:** But the battles, when he fights the beasts, that's the scary bit.

**Ford:** The stuff is intoxicating, in the movement. It is *fake*, but so is kabuki theater. I mean come on, it's stylized. So let's just take it at that. It's like what you were saying about not getting the people right in the Renaissance. It's a little different in those instances because in *King Kong* they *were* trying to get a convincing effect across, but if you just accept it as an incredibly beautiful stylized piece of art, then it gets a little easier to watch.

**Rail:** The thing I always liked about the old *King Kong* was that he was kind of funny, when you saw the close-ups. And I always think about it when I look at your pictures, at the tight working and the hair—and in that movie you can see the ape's hair, it's always moving around, it's not static, you know, it's living. And I love that part of it.

**Ford:** And a lot of subtle acting that [special effects designer] Willis O'Brien got in. *Planet of the Apes* was very important to me. *The Time Machine*. I loved that when I was a kid.

**Rail:** And then Spielberg came along.

**Ford:** You know, I felt a little old for that—by that time I was in college—so when I started going to see Spielberg I was really jaded and cynical, which it turns out I'm not.

**Rail:** But now you would say he's telling stories in the best way possible, and most films today can't do it.

**Ford:** I fucking love it. But I couldn't say it influenced me as a kid because I felt too grown up when it came along. As an adult I look at Spielberg's work, even the first twenty minutes of *Saving Private Ryan* is some of the best shit you'll ever see. *That's* colossal. When I went to school it was *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*—

**Rail:** Oh yeah, I want to talk about Herzog.

**Ford:** Oh, *all* of his stuff.

**Rail:** Can you do an imitation? Can you do a Herzog?

**Ford:** Oh everybody does it, and I'm just as bad at it as everyone else. But I *love* it. And of course *Grizzly Man* might as well be...you know [*imitating Herzog*] "When I look into the bear's eyes..." He's amazing, right?

**Rail:** He has that visionary imagination—

**Ford:** I wanted to make films like that, where you were transported into this distant past, but it felt like a documentary, you feel like you're *there*, you can fucking smell it. So yeah, I went through film school at RISD. I did a lot of acting. I was in Sam Shepard plays. And then I tried to make films, I wanted to make animated films. It turned out I wasn't any good at it, and I would go home every day and paint. I had been drawing animals—dinosaurs and all that shit—since I was a little kid, so I was like, this is just gonna fall right out of me.

**Rail:** But I think there's something very cinematic about what you're doing, clearly. You're working on this scale, like the 19th century exhibition watercolors, Turner paintings, those were the Hollywood blockbusters of their day.

**Ford:** Yes, and I'm so into that idea. All of the Hudson River School painters did it that way too, and they would charge tickets to go in and look at those paintings. That way of looking at art is really something that's rubbed off on me. You *have* to be in the presence of it to understand, like don't try to pretend you know what I'm doing, because it looks like a lot of other stuff that you've seen, but not when you're in the room with it.

**Rail:** I want to ask you a little about text, having seen the Raymond Pettibon show at the New Museum.

**Ford:** I *love* him.

**Rail:** There's a connection in that idea that sometimes the text diverges from the image. And I compare it to the idea of an unreliable narrator in cinema. So you have voiceover, but it doesn't necessarily correspond to what you're seeing.

**Ford:** My idea is that I don't want it to, and in very rare cases it does, like *Grifo de California*.

**Rail:** But that's more of a title.

**Ford:** Yeah, and that's also identified in the image which is not what I usually do. I like the title to add a layer of meaning that isn't in the image. For example, *La Madre*—there's no other way of knowing that it's a female bear, and that it might be the mother of other bears, or the mother of all bears. Or maybe you don't even know why it's called the Madre. But I wanted to introduce this idea of the big, scary mother. Like you said, it's an unreliable narrator, I wanted to keep underlining this idea that this fantasy California was really the one that ended up being discovered, that he really did find this fantasy land. And the whole show is called *Calafia*, and Calafia is the queen of the island in this novel, so it's the idea that she oversees the whole deal.

**Rail:** Well with the lettering, you might think that you know what it is, and then you don't.

**Ford:** There was definitely a concept that it's a beat or two into the process before you realize that you're dealing with something that isn't right. And yeah, that's that sort of computer virus aspect, you know, a very traditional mode of representation gone wrong, I really love that idea.

**Rail:** That kind of subversion is really inherent in everything that you're doing.

**Ford:** I hope so. I mean there's supposed to be humor, there's supposed to be a lot of ravishing beauty. I'm really interested in harnessing traditional painterly tools in this way to tell stories that it wasn't possible to tell when these kinds of visual languages were invented. It's interesting, someone asked "how are these not just illustrations?" Well how are those Giotto's not just illustrations from the life of St. Francis? How's the Sistine Chapel not Bible illustration? The only time it wasn't illustration was in the Modernist days, and even then, *Guernica*... The history of art is pretty much the history of illustration, until you decide to make a distinction. I guess until mass reproduction sets in and you start to have people who are distinctly in a market for illustrating books or something? But then, again, it just kind of blows up and is no longer of interest.

**Rail:** Well, it's not a dirty word, you know.

**Ford:** But it *has* been.

**Rail:** Like “sentiment,” which we thought was wrong.

**Ford:** Or “beauty!” [Laughter] But what I think—and you know this too—studying the kind of art that you study, is that you can have both. You can have a deeply soulful connection with an artist who’s a kind of fireworks-y technical master. The two things don’t have to be mutually exclusive. So I want a lot of spirit. It’s not tight or overworked or soulless just because it’s realistic. It’s pretty soulful stuff. It’s getting in there with the paint, and the sketches and the drawings show that the process is very tactile.

**Rail:** There’s a lot of drawing then? You do a lot of sketches?

**Ford:** There’s a lot of really loose gestural drawing that goes into these things. I’m glad it’s being shown. It’s great time to be making this work, because the normal resistances are falling away, and people have never had a more open mind about different types of art.

**Rail:** It’s a very eclectic age.

**Ford:** I’ve been dealing with this for like thirty years—this idea of the history of the culture of human and animals—and it couldn’t be a hotter topic right now. It’s like, “What are we gonna do? How do you live with an animal that can kill you, like a grizzly bear? How do we share the planet with animals that can kill us?” Right now, the great white sharks have made a big comeback in Cape Cod, which is a success story, but if you’re going there to go swimming it’s not a huge success story. And they were seeing sharks up and down the beach all summer. That stuff’s real. It’s not easy to coexist with an animal sees you as another flavor of meat, so these kinds of questions are more and more urgent. When I first started doing these things there wasn’t any interest in it, particularly. Paul Kasmin was helping me out, you know?

**Rail:** Well the world has caught up with you.

**Ford:** At least with the subject matter. I mean they don’t have to like my work or think there’s anything revolutionary about it, but the topic that I’ve been interested in since I was a little kid is definitely a hot topic.

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## CONTRIBUTOR

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JASON ROSENFELD, Ph.D., is Distinguished Chair and Professor of Art History at Marymount Manhattan College. He was co-curator of the exhibitions *John Everett Millais* (Tate Britain, Van Gogh Museum), *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde* (Tate Britain and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), and *River Crossings* (Olana and Cedar Grove, Hudson and Catskill, New York). He is a Senior Writer and Editor-at-Large for the *Brooklyn Rail*.