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October 5, 2017



WALTON FORD

CALAFIA

Opening reception:
Thursday, November 2, 6–8PM
November 2–December 16, 2017

456 North Camden Drive
Beverly Hills, CA 90210

It's a sort of attraction-repulsion thing, beautiful to begin with until you notice that some sort of horrible violence is about to happen, or is in the middle of happening.

—Walton Ford

Gagosian is pleased to present “Calafia,” new watercolor paintings by Walton Ford. This is his first exhibition with the gallery.

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Ford's work explores where natural history and human culture intersect. His large-scale, empirically precise, and highly detailed paintings consider the drama and history of animals as they exist in the human imagination, revealing the deeply intertwined relationships between nature and civilization. Using the visual language and medium of nineteenth century naturalist illustrators such as John James Audubon, Ford masters the aesthetics of scientific truth only to amplify and subvert them, creating provocative, and sometimes fanciful narratives out of facts.

"Calafia" comprises a new series of epic paintings in which Ford depicts California through an amalgam of its myths, legends, and folklore. In a sixteenth century novel, *Las sergas de Esplandían (The Adventures of Esplandian)*, the Castilian author Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo wrote of a fictitious island, inhabited by enormous flying griffins. On this island lived a tribe of Amazons, ruled by a warrior queen named Calafia. When the Spanish sailed up the western coast of North America, they named the land after this same imaginary island they had read about—thus fiction became history.

Echoing this process, in which fantasy makes its way into the landscape of reality, Ford creates various creatures, both real and invented, in the Californian image-scape, using his characteristic meticulous rendering. In *Grifo de California (2017)*, a hybrid creature sits in a clearing at the top of a mountain, evidently endangered by human encroachment. Instead of the griffin traditionally depicted in European art and fantasy, which is half-lion, half-eagle, Ford creates a "New World" griffin by merging species native to California; he combines the lower body of a mountain lion, and the talons, beak, and blue-black shimmering feathers of the critically endangered California condor, the largest North American land bird. In a ten-by-five foot watercolor, the iconic MGM studio lion is reimagined in the role of a decadent movie star, lolling by the edge of a swimming pool. In the background, warm light shines from glass windows typical of modernist Los Angeles architecture; on the lower left is inscribed the MGM slogan, "Ars gratia artis," or "art for art's sake," further satirizing the human-animal relation. The vast triptych *La Brea (2016)* depicts the La Brea tar pits, evoking a billboard for a blockbuster movie. Prehistoric animals rise from the mysterious black tar, emerging from the pits and eerily making their way across the landscape.

The use of watercolor on this scale is rare, added to which the panoramic format of Ford's epic works imparts a heightened cinematic drama to his skills as a draftsman. Each painting encourages contemplation from both near and far: the composition in its entirety requires viewing at a distance, while at close range, the minutiae form intricate, engrossing patterns. Blending historical realism with fantasy worthy of the silver screen, Ford composes complex visual eulogies to the anthropocentric world.

Walton Ford (born 1960) grew up in the Hudson Valley and lives and works in New York. Collections include the Museum of Modern Art, New York; New York Public Library; Princeton Art Museum, New Jersey; San Antonio Museum of Art, Texas; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Institutional

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exhibitions include “Walton Ford,” Aspen Art Museum, CO (1998); “Walton Ford,” University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach, CA (1999); “Walton Ford,” New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, CT, (2004); “Tigers of Wrath: Watercolors by Walton Ford,” Brooklyn Museum, New York (2006); “Walton Ford,” San Antonio Museum of Art, TX (2007); “Walton Ford: Bestiarium,” Hamburger Bahnhof Museum fur Gegenwart, Berlin (2010, traveled to Albertina, Vienna, and Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark); and “Walton Ford,” Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, Paris (2015–16).

Image: Walton Ford, *La Brea*, 2016 (detail), watercolor, gouache, and ink on paper, in three parts, each: 60 1/2 × 119 1/2 inches (153.7 x 303.5 cm) (unframed) © Walton Ford. Photo by Christopher Burke.

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