

bel canto

Contemporary Artists Explore Opera

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition

Bel Canto: Contemporary Artists Explore Opera

SITE Santa Fe, March 16, 2019 – January 5, 2020

Curated by Irene Hofmann

BEL CANTO TEAM

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Contemporary Artists Explore Opera

The exhibition "bel canto" explores the intersection of contemporary art and opera. It features works by several artists, including [Artist Name], who have created pieces that reflect the themes of the opera. The exhibition is held at the [Museum Name] and runs from [Date] to [Date].



Preface & Acknowledgments


This exhibition—named for the lyrical style of singing that characterized the height of Italian opera—brings together artists and works that address the music, history, politics, and aesthetics of the opera. Through artworks that take a wide range of forms, *Bel Canto* frames the opera as a mirror of society, a creative expression that embodies essential emotions and cultural values. *Bel Canto* celebrates the glorious audacity of opera, while exploring its subversions and considering the complexity of its relationship to such issues as race, class, and gender.

Opera is a medium of unique character. Its stories get at the heart of our shared humanity through the representation of such universal experiences as love, betrayal, grief, passion, and joy. Drawing on a range of creative disciplines, opera is a distinctive dramatic form that invites audiences to suspend disbelief, slow down, and step into an immersive and alternate world.

The relationship between artists and the opera dates back to the rise of opera in Italy in the late seventeenth century. In the early years, artists were frequently commissioned to create portraits of popular performers. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as opera began to reach larger audiences, artists were often engaged to create elaborate costumes. At the same time, artists such as William Hogarth, Mary Cassatt, Edgar Degas, and Édouard Manet saw opera and its audience as rich subjects for their paintings of class and society.

By the twentieth century, opera companies were regularly commissioning prominent artists to design sets and costumes: Salvador Dalí famously created the sets for Peter Brooks's controversial staging of *Salome* at the Royal Opera House in London in 1949, while in 1964 the Metropolitan Opera in New York commissioned Marc Chagall to design the sets and costumes for its first production of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's 1791 *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*).

Today, the worlds of contemporary art and opera boast many extraordinary collaborations, as artists across cultures and disciplines have lent their visions to the opera stage as costume stylists, set designers, and directors. It is against this historical backdrop and long-standing and generative relationship between artists and the opera that *Bel Canto* is situated, with works that offer the contemporary artist's critical perspective and observations on the rich and complicated world that is opera.



Opera houses are the grandest of theaters. Wherever you go in the world, they are often the most significant buildings in a city—their architecture, scale, and location assert them as symbols of creative ambition and as cultural landmarks. Italy, the birthplace of opera, is home to some of the most magnificent houses anywhere. When it opened in 1637, the Teatro San Cassiano in Venice became the first public opera house in the world. The theater, built in stone, took its name from the neighborhood where it was sited, the parish of San Cassiano near the Rialto. By the end of the seventeenth century, another ten opera houses had been built in Venice alone, making it the opera capital of the world. Today, Italy boasts hundreds of opera houses located throughout the country, while worldwide there are now nearly two thousand opera theaters.


Several of the artists in *Bel Canto* approach the opera house itself as a signifier of culture, status, and class. **Matthias Schaller** treats the opera house as a stand-in for Italy itself, a powerful symbol of the country's spirit and history. His photographs of 150 Italian opera houses form a compendium of civic achievement and a lexicon of the Italian style of opera house architecture. For **Candida Höfer**, the opera house is a highly conspicuous subject to photograph empty and still, and with great precision. With long exposure times and a straightforward compositional approach, Höfer brings small details to the fore while expressing the power of these spaces absent their intended occupants. In his approach to opera house architecture, **Guillermo Kuitca** focuses on the physical layout of the theater: the seating plan and its markers of privilege and access. At times his manipulated floor plans become abstractions of space, while at others his manipulations express the acoustic qualities and potential of these grand interiors.

The audiences of early opera were clearly attuned to, and appreciative of, the performance of gender fluidity. In the history of opera, there is elasticity in many masculine and feminine roles—period audiences readily accepted both castrati and the women who sang *en travesti* (cross-dressed). **Vasco Araújo** explores the history of gender confusion in opera in works with installation and video components, including several videos in which the artist himself sings. With a mix of humor and poignancy, Araújo's works probe the complexities of identity both on and off the opera stage.

Along with gender fluidity, other tropes often inherent in the narratives of traditional opera include ethnic stereotyping, cultural appropriation, exoticism, and the depiction of crude caricatures. Until the last century, these more troubling attitudes were largely accepted uncritically by audiences. **Yinka Shonibare CBE (RA)** addresses the racial biases and other legacies of colonialism in Western art modes ranging from painting and sculpture to ballet and opera. In *Addio del Passato*, 2011, he reimagines the French aristocratic protagonists of Giuseppe Verdi's 1853 *La Traviata* as the British historical figure Admiral Lord Nelson, a symbol of Britain's imperial history. The British opera singer Nadine Benjamin, cast as Lord Nelson's estranged wife Fanny in the role of Violetta, sings the final somber aria of *La Traviata*. Outfitting his heroine in a dress made from fabrics associated with African textiles, Shonibare asserts the voice, the body, and the history of persons of color in Britain's past and points to the scant appearance of Black characters and stories in opera.

Costuming is also at the heart of **Suzanne Bocanegra's** installation inspired by Francis Poulenc's 1957 *Dialogues des Carmélites*, an opera that tells the story of the martyrdom of a group of Carmelite nuns during the French Revolution. In Bocanegra's *Dialogue of the Carmelites*, 2018, printed pages showing mid-twentieth-century nuns from various orders throughout the United States are embellished by the artist with cloth and embroidery to call attention to the many variations and details in the habits. Presented in a solemn and contemplative space, the altered images function as relics of the condemned nuns of eighteenth-century France.

Opera's tales of love, betrayal, death, and morality provide rich opportunities for reflection and interpretation by the artists represented in *Bel Canto*. The works by **Bill Viola** and **William Kentridge** center on operas whose productions the artists have designed or directed, in the process becoming intimately familiar with their stories and iconography. Viola's video *Becoming Light*, 2005, is inspired by the tragic love story in Richard Wagner's 1865 *Tristan und Isolde*, while Kentridge's drawings and animations, subsumed under the title *Learning the Flute*, 2003, explore the themes of *Die Zauberflöte*. In each case, the compelling artworks capture the imagery and aesthetics the artists brought to the stage.



The first large-scale exhibition of its kind, *Bel Canto* offers contemporary artists' takes on opera and constitutes a twenty-first-century inquiry into this beloved and longstanding art form. Whether you are a connoisseur or have yet to experience your first opera, we invite you to look at the form from a new perspective as you enjoy the sights and sounds of *Bel Canto*.

Realizing this ambitious and complex project would not have been possible without the hard work of many. I am grateful to all who supported *Bel Canto* and dedicated themselves to its realization.

I owe significant thanks to SITE's Assistant Curator Brandee Caoba, who not only collaborated with me on writing this catalogue, but also contributed to innumerable aspects of the show along the way. I am, as always, extremely grateful to Sage Sommer, Exhibitions Manager and Registrar, who coordinated a complicated installation, kept a steady eye on our planning, and managed every aspect of bringing the artworks safely to SITE. She, and the entire exhibition team, was supported by the hard work of Max Holmes, Exhibitions Assistant. Special thanks go to our dedicated installation team, who, under the direction of John Cross, our remarkable Lead Preparator, skillfully executed the show's many details. No mention of our *Bel Canto* preparations team could go without special acknowledgment of the talented Sabrina Griffith, the creative force behind the many stunning curtains that punctuate the exhibition. Her vision has helped create a dazzling milieu for the works. My thanks also go to Nora Dolan, Publications Manager, who attended to the many details of this publication as well as our new Guide by Cell audio guide, which provides a range of content that *Bel Canto* visitors can access on their phones. I am grateful to Nora for all she has done to help us launch this new technology, and to SITE's Public Programs Production Manager, Johnny Bell, for overseeing the technical elements of this new visitor engagement initiative.

Beyond our stellar exhibition team there are many other staff members throughout the SITE building who helped make the show a reality. They have been key to its success and I deeply appreciate all that they have done. I am grateful to Joanne Lefrak, Ring Director of Education and Curator of Public Practice, for the creative interdisciplinary public programming that accompanies *Bel Canto*. I thank Anne Wrinkle, Director of External Affairs, who skillfully directed our marketing and public relations efforts and at the same time led a large-scale collaborative marketing campaign undertaken with the Santa Fe Opera and The Lensic. Our *Bel Canto* marketing effort was assisted by the digital

expertise of Maddy Skrak, our Digital Marketing and Communications Coordinator. I want to acknowledge the tireless efforts of SITE's Development department, including Paisley Mason, Associate Director of Development, and Kate Kita, Grants Manager, who helped us secure funding, and Johanna Frenz, Events Manager, who created a series of extraordinary events to celebrate the exhibition. Special thanks go to Josie Butler, Executive Assistant and Membership Manager, for skillfully juggling the demands of planning, communications, hospitality, and so much more.

As we undertook preparations for the exhibition, we were assisted by a number of colleagues at the Santa Fe Opera. I am particularly grateful to Robert Meya, General Director, for his counsel and for his invaluable support of the project. We were fortunate to work with Randy Lutz, Director of Properties, and Amaris Puzak, Prop Shop Administrator, who made it possible for us to borrow beautiful furniture, chandeliers, and props that once graced the Santa Fe Opera stage. The furnishings introduced a surprising and delightful aspect to the galleries as we replaced our traditional seating with grand sofas, dining chairs, and lounges. I extend my thanks to Andrea Fellows Walters, Director of Community Engagement, for her collaboration with Joanne Lefrak on a series of joint public programs, and to Cori Ellison, Dramaturg, for her participation in *Bel Canto* programs and events.

Also crucial to this project was the support and kind assistance of the staff at many galleries and artists' studios, including the following: Trish Bransten at Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco; Jane Cohan and Yvonne Zhou at James Cohan Gallery, New York; Marian Goodman, Danielle Forest, Brian Loftus, and Rose Lord at Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Jeffrey Grove and John Haenle at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; Bobby Jablonski, Kira Perov, and Gene Zazzaro at Bill Viola Studio; Angela Westwater at Sperone Westwater, New York; and Queenie Wong at Son nabend Gallery, New York. For pulling together the works from these locations and beyond, I acknowledge the important role played by Bob Simon and his stellar logistics team at TCI-Transport Consultants International, Cranford, New Jersey.

I am grateful for the assistance of the following private and public lenders and staff for entrusting us with their works: Pierre Bourgie and his assistant, Suzanne Martin, at the Pierre Bourgie Collection, Montreal; Jillian Griffith at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Holly Hughes and Catherine Scrivo Baker at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; Patricia Machado at the Coleção António Cachola, Elvas, Portugal; and Susan Talbot at The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia.

For their unwavering belief in the project, I am incredibly grateful to SITE Santa Fe's Board of Directors. Under the leadership of Steve Berkowitz, the Board contributes immeasurably to our work. I am especially grateful for the leadership support committed by Board members Steve and Karen Berkowitz, Marsha and Robert Jones, Jim Manning and Dana Pope Manning, John and Anne Marion, Marti Meyerson and Jamie Hooper, Chuck and Barbara Moore, Marleen De Bode Olivie and Marc Olivie, Louisa Stude Sarofim, Courtney Finch Taylor and Scott Taylor, Carl and Marilyn Thoma, and Andrew Wallerstein and Mary Sloan. Additional supporters of *Bel Canto* include Avalon Trust, Maria and Ed Gale, and Cindy Miscikowski.

To all of the funders of the exhibition, I am deeply appreciative of your support. For championing our show early on with a vital and generous leadership grant, I wish to acknowledge the Carl and Marilyn Thoma Art Foundation. A grant from the National Endowment for the Arts provided crucial support for this publication and the *Bel Canto* public programs.

For helping to realize the vision of this project with a beautiful book design, I am indebted to Montana Currie and David Chickey of Chickey Design. I am grateful once again to have worked with Lucy Flint, our talented editor, whose collaboration has produced another publication we can be very proud of.

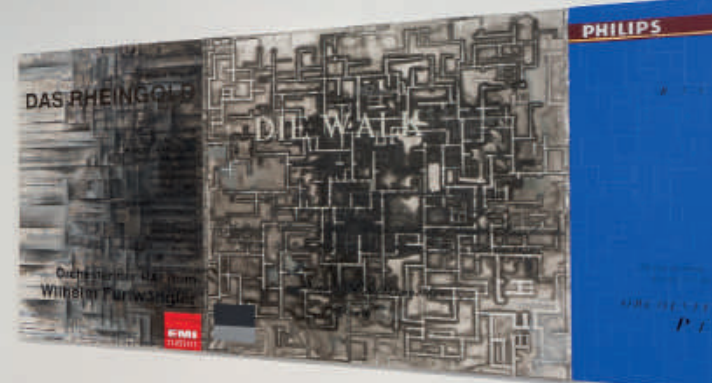
Finally, and above all, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to the participating artists, whose captivating works provided the inspiration for this endeavor.

IRENE HOFMANN

Phillips Director & Chief Curator



Suzanne Bocanegra





Vasco Araújo

Suzanne Bocanegra

Candida Höfer

William Kentridge

Guillermo Kuitca

Matthias Schaller

Yinka Shonibare CBE (RA)

Bill Viola



Vasco Araújo, *Diva, a Portrait*, 2000, on view in *Bel Canto*

Vasco Araújo

(b. Lisbon, Portugal, 1975)

Working in a wide range of media—installation, film, sculpture, performance, and photography—Vasco Araújo explores issues of identity and cultural stereotypes. Before becoming a visual artist, he trained as an opera singer, and the influence of voice, gesture, and storytelling permeates his work. Veering from standard storytelling arcs, Araújo digs deeply into literature, history, and philosophy to provide the perspective of “the Other.”

The rich history of gender flexibility in opera informs many of Araújo’s works.

Diva, a Portrait, 2000, features the staging of a prima donna’s dressing room with a nod to the history of men playing women’s roles in opera. At first glance, we see a dressing table, bouquets of flowers, clothes, and bottles of perfume; on closer inspection, we find among these objects masculine accoutrements such as razors, aftershave, and men’s shoes. The diva’s double identity alludes to the elasticity of many masculine and feminine roles throughout opera history. We are reminded that the audiences of early opera were attuned to, and appreciative of, the performance of gender confusion.

In his video piece *Recital*, 2002, we see the artist himself, dressed as a woman, appearing to expressively sing arias from operas including Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s 1791 *La clemenza di Tito* and 1786 *Le nozze di Figaro*, and Gioachino Rossini’s 1813 *Tancredi*. However, the sound of the singer’s voice is absent. Instead, the arias are overlain with a soundtrack in which a woman’s voice dispassionately recites the emotional lyrics that speak of life, afterlife, the underworld, and unspeakable bereavement. *Recital* merges the comedic undercurrents long associated with gender reversals in opera with the power, sincerity, and poignancy of the librettos.

Far de Donna, 2005, is one of Araújo’s most complex musings on gender and opera. The title literally means “to play as a woman.” Using male singers to play female parts, Araújo spins the story of a mother who loses her voice just as her son discovers the potential of his own, as if her expressive power had been transferred to him. On a single screen, the video pairs up the son’s castrato vocal training with the mother’s narration of their story in sign language. Araújo focuses on the poetry of the mother’s physical movements, converting her signing to English subtitles. Araújo leaves us wondering what might be lost in the multiple translations within the intertwined realms of gender, music, gesture, and words.

BRANDEE CAOBA



ABOVE & OPPOSITE: *Diva, a Portrait*, details



Suzanne Bocanegra, *Dialogue of the Carmelites*, 2018, detail

Suzanne Bocanegra

(b. Houston, Texas, 1957)

Suzanne Bocanegra works at the intersection of contemporary visual and performing arts. She moves fluidly between installation, sculpture, costume design, performance, and video, and finds inspiration in sources that have included ballet, film, theater, and, most recently, opera.

For *Bel Canto*, Bocanegra presents a recent work inspired by Francis Poulenc's 1957 opera *Dialogues des Carmélites*. The opera is based on the true story of French nuns who were executed by anticlerical revolutionary forces in the waning days of the French Revolution. Bocanegra writes of her inspiration for the work: "After seeing the opera, I decided to stage my own version, casting all the nuns depicted in the 1953 edition of the catalogue *A Guide to the Catholic Sisterhood in the United States*."¹

The guide Bocanegra references is a handbook for young women interested in entering religious life. The manual briefly describes the history, qualifications for admission, and distinctive habit for each order in the United States. With a vintage copy of this now-outmoded volume as her source material and aesthetic inspiration, Bocanegra introduces her "cast" by removing the book's binding and presenting each page on a shelf, like the sheets of a musical score resting on a music stand or head shots of actresses lined up for a casting call. Bocanegra has "costumed" each nun's image using embroidery, much in the same way that cloistered nuns throughout the centuries embellished pages of their prayer books with hand stitching.

The collective formed by Bocanegra's elaborately costumed nuns commemorates the tragic history of the Carmelites while paying homage to the many costume designers who have created their opera stage proxies.

Bocanegra's meditative work is accompanied by music composed by the eminent composer David Lang and sung by the acclaimed Caroline Shaw, with sound design by Jody Elff. The lyrics, crowd-sourced from the Internet, are presented in a whispered chant, and are meant as a meditation on a life in community, a life never alone.

IRENE HOFMANN

1. Suzanne Bocanegra, artist statement, press release for the exhibition *Suzanne Bocanegra: Poorly Watched Girls*, The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, October 2018.



Candida Höfer

(b. Eberswalde, Germany, 1944)

Candida Höfer is a distinguished photographer known for her monumental chromogenic prints of public spaces such as libraries, lecture halls, museums, and theaters. While her subjects are often venues for large public gatherings, the images are always devoid of people—stately and timeless, the photographs eloquently express the presence of those absent.

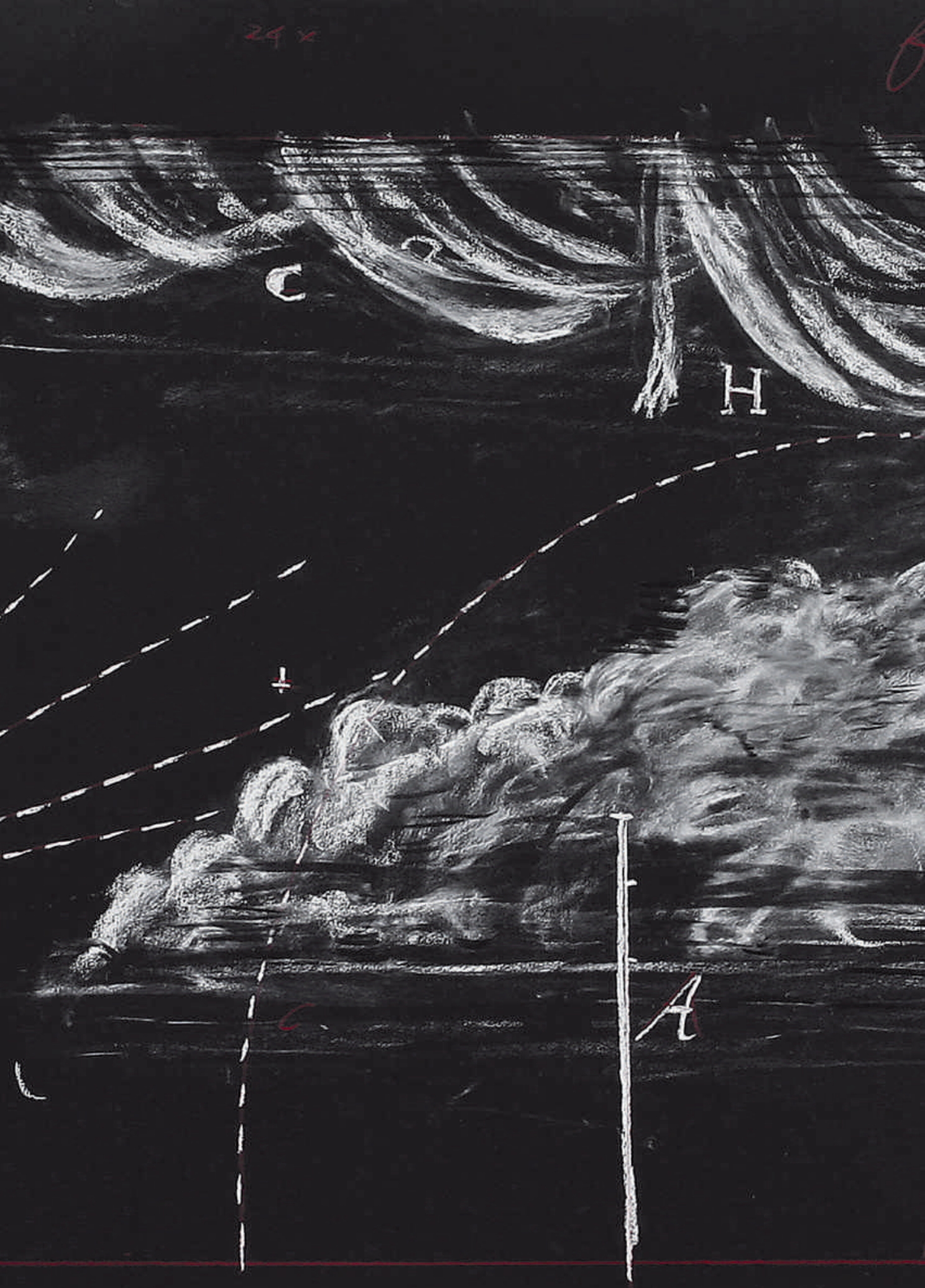
In the early 2000s, Höfer began creating monumental photographs of opera house interiors that capture the beauty of these palaces of performing arts. Her camera takes us into empty foyers, orchestras, stages, wings, and boxes. While the houses are still and empty, we can imagine the performers and the audience, as well as the fictitious figures, plots, and places that animate a night at the opera. Although many of the world's most famous opera houses have been photographed from every angle imaginable, in Höfer's hands we get an intimate and evocative view of these beloved spaces.

Teatro di Villa Mazzacorati di Bologna I, 2006, shows a gem of a theater in Bologna, Italy, that was inaugurated in 1763. Famed for its acoustics, the house seats only eighty. The auditorium's refined decoration features pastel frescoes on the walls and twenty atlases and caryatids seeming to shoulder the two balconies. This photograph is illustrative of Höfer's meticulous approach to architectural interiors, and makes visible opera's promise of high drama, escapism, and an intense shared experience.

In *Teatro Degollado Guadalajara I*, 2015, Höfer captures an opera house of a very different scale. This panoramic view of a lavish theater seating eight hundred is shot from the stage looking out to the seats and up toward the five gilded balconies. Even the theater's elaborate ceiling, featuring frescos depicting the fourth song of Dante Alighieri's fourteenth-century *Inferno*, comes into view in this large-format image. Inaugurated in 1866 in the Mexican city of Guadalajara, the neoclassical Teatro Degollado was one of a number of opulent theaters, churches, and other prominent buildings that Höfer shot in Mexico throughout 2015. In this series, titled *In Mexico*, Höfer portrays six hundred years of architecture in Mexico, capturing the distinctive formal strength and enchanting details of each space.

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William Kentridge, *Drawing for "Preparing the Flute" (Clouds and Curtains on Black)*, 2005, detail. Photo by John Berens

William Kentridge

(b. Johannesburg, South Africa, 1955)

The remarkably versatile South African artist William Kentridge creates works that fuse the political with the poetic. While dealing with subjects as sobering as apartheid, colonialism, and totalitarianism, his work is often marked by lyrical undertones and humor. Kentridge is best known for animated films he creates by filming charcoal or chalk drawings, altering them with erasures and revisions, and filming them again.

In 2003, Kentridge was commissioned to stage Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's 1791 *Die Zauberflöte* for the National Opera of Belgium in Brussels. He based this remarkable stage production on the metaphor of the early camera, while reversing the black-and-white contrast of the negative to reflect the opera's shifting presentation of good and evil. Kentridge's vision featured large-scale projected moving images that he reworked and refilmed, as in his signature stop-animation artworks.

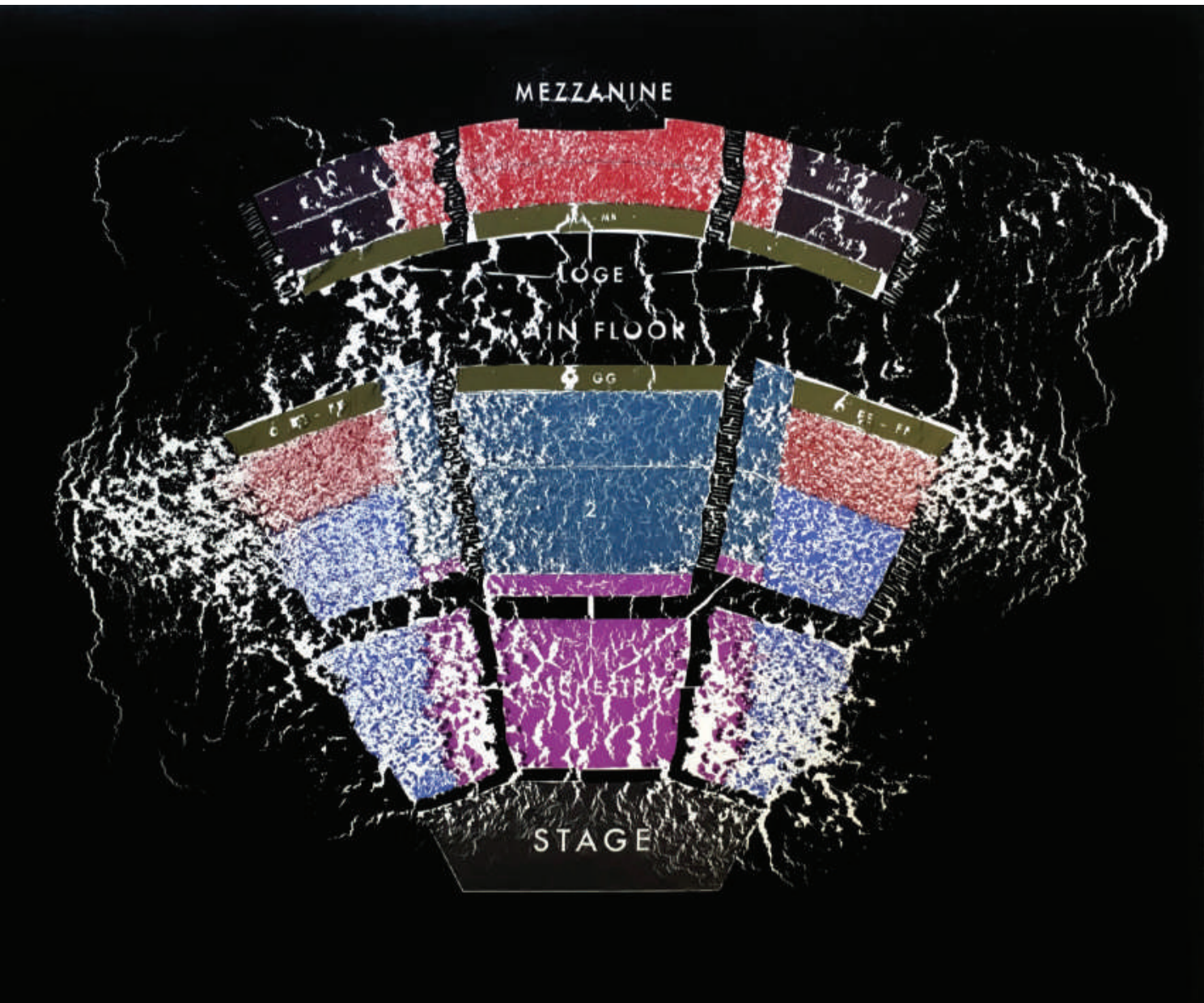
Whenever Kentridge engages with opera productions—he has been a frequent collaborator with opera companies over the years—he creates artworks that serve as studies for his stage productions. His *Learning the Flute*, 2003, was such a tool for his staging of *Die Zauberflöte*, which would premiere two years later. *Learning the Flute* is a short film that presents a series of morphing chalk drawings of the captivating visuals that would find their way into the production. The artist remarks: "I needed to try to find a language for the production, as a way of making sense of the opera as a whole. I had the idea of a blackboard as sketchpad, on which ideas could be tested. The blackboard as object remains. The film is projected onto a blackboard, becoming the screen."¹ During the eight minutes of the film, we see Kentridge forming the central imagery of his *Die Zauberflöte* set design, replete with Masonic allegory, Egyptian forms, and perspectival studies of the stage.

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1. William Kentridge, quoted in press release, Kappatos Gallery, Athens, Greece, November 12, 2003.



William Kentridge, *Learning the Flute*, 2003, on view in *Bel Canto*



Guillermo Kuitca

(b. Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1961)

Guillermo Kuitca finds inspiration in the fields of architecture, theater, and cartography. Drawing is key to his artistic investigation, taking the form of linear grids, gestural strokes, and notations that imbue his collages, paintings, and sculptures with a sense of dislocation and poetry. In his words, “I always have the idea that my work does not start out from the blank canvas, but goes towards the blank canvas.”¹

For nearly two decades, Kuitca has been particularly drawn to the subject of the opera. Inspired by Richard Wagner’s 1876 four-opera epic *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, commonly known as the “*Ring* cycle,” Kuitca created *The Ring*, 2002, a five-panel painting over 20 feet wide. The panels show original album covers Kuitca designed for his favorite recordings of the opera cycle, complete with the names of the performers, conductor, and orchestra. His visual narrative moves chronologically through the panels from left to right, beginning with a cubistic *Das Rheingold* and ending with *Götterdämmerung* rendered as a digital distortion.

In recent years, Kuitca has focused on increasingly complex paper collage works based on the seating charts of famous opera houses around the world. The viewer’s attention shifts 180 degrees as the weight of the drama is transferred from the space of the performers to that of the audience. The large-scale collages in Kuitca’s series *Acoustic Mass (Covent Garden)*, 2005, explore the space and sound conditions of London’s renowned Royal Opera House through the use of color, shape, and composition. While each varies in color and construction, they all share the same frenetic movement and visual frequency, overturning any notion of static space, imagery, or atmosphere.

With his series *32 Seating Plans*, 2007, Kuitca introduces an elaborate, surrealist-inspired hybrid process composed of painting, printmaking, and digital photography. Using digital sources and tools, he manipulates opera and theater seating charts, which are then printed out and immersed in water. As the specially chosen inks begin to bleed, the opera house renderings are transmuted into fluid semi-abstractions. Most recently, Kuitca brought this unique technique to two new works created specifically for *Bel Canto*—*Santa Fe Opera I* and *Santa Fe Opera II*, both 2019—which pay tribute to the renowned Santa Fe Opera.

BC

1. Guillermo Kuitca, in Hans-Michael Herzog, *Das Lied von der Erde: Guillermo Kuitca*, bilingual ed. (Zurich: Daros-Latinamerica AG; Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2006), n.p.



Guillermo Kuitca, *Santa Fe Opera I*, 2019, *Acoustic Mass (Convent Gardens) IV, III, and I*, all 2005, and *32 Seating Plans*, 2007, on view in *Bel Canto*



Matthias Schaller

(b. Dillingen, Germany, 1965)

Matthias Schaller is a photographer who has created an unconventional, imaginative form of portraiture. His works, which he calls “indirect portraits,” represent his subjects through objects or spaces. Over the past twenty years, these have included the studios and homes of prominent German photographers who have influenced him, including Andreas Gursky and Bernd and Hilla Becher. Other examples of the subjects of these indirect portraits include empty astronaut suits, the desks of cardinals at the Vatican, and the artist palettes of some of the most renowned painters of the past two centuries.

In the photographic series included in *Bel Canto*, we see Schaller’s portrait of the nation of Italy through a vast collection of photographs of its opera houses. From 2005 to 2017, Schaller traveled throughout the country to photograph 150 houses, both grand and modest. The title of his project, *Fratelli d’Italia* (Brothers of Italy), is taken from the Italian national anthem. Schaller explains: “My initial intention was to create a portrait of Italy, not in an empirical way but rather metaphorical.”¹ He has further explained that he considers Italy’s opera houses to be reflective of the country’s political, anthropological, and historical dimensions.

The buildings in *Fratelli d’Italia* form a cohesive collection, in part because they were nearly all constructed and inaugurated as opera houses during the 1800s, but also because of Schaller’s aesthetic choices. Shooting each opera house from the vantage point of the stage and desaturating the colors, he emphasizes the consistency of the architectural type. Taken as a whole, *Fratelli d’Italia* is a compelling testament to the power of opera in Italy and its remarkable ability to unify an otherwise diverse region through shared cultural experience long before it even became a country.

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1. Matthias Schaller, quoted in Elena Sommariva, “Fratelli d’Italia,” *domus* website, September 9, 2008, <https://www.domusweb.it/arte/2008/09/09/fratelli-d-italia.html>.



Matthias Schaller, *Fratelli d'Italia*, 2005–17, on view in *Bel Canto* (detail on previous spread)



Yinka Shonibare CBE (RA)

(b. London, England, 1962)

For nearly three decades, Nigerian-British artist Yinka Shonibare CBE (RA) has created works that explore race, class, and history. He is perhaps best known for the colorful, patterned textile designs that appear in his costumes, photographs, and films. These fabrics have a complex significance that has consistently been central to Shonibare’s practice: although the source material has come to represent African identity and heritage, it is in fact Dutch wax-printed cotton, produced in the Netherlands by artisans influenced by Indonesian batiks. The artist explains:

Actually, the fabrics are not really *authentically* African the way people think. They prove to have a crossbred cultural background quite of their own. . . . And it’s the fallacy of that signification that I like. It’s the way I view culture—it’s an artificial construct.¹

In his recent film-based work, Shonibare presents costumes made of these distinctive textiles in stunning restagings of scenes from major operas. In doing so, he overlays a postcolonial voice onto some of opera’s most traditional stories. In *Addio del Passato* (roughly, “Farewell, past”), 2011, he reimagines the French protagonists of Giuseppe Verdi’s 1853 Italian opera *La Traviata* (The Fallen Woman) as the British Admiral Lord Nelson, a recurrent figure in Shonibare’s work and a classic symbol of Britain’s imperial history. Shonibare parallels the feelings of loss and yearning of Nelson’s wife Frances Nisbet (Fanny), aroused by his scandalous love affair with Emma, Lady Hamilton, with the emotions expressed by the opera’s heroine Violetta on the eve of her death. The British opera singer Nadine Benjamin performs Violetta reimagined as the betrayed Fanny. Wearing a Victorian dress made of Shonibare’s colorful signature fabric, Benjamin sings the heartbreaking aria from the last act of *La Traviata*, which expresses Fanny’s sorrow as she succumbs to her illness and visions of Lord Nelson’s own melancholy and impending demise flash before her as art-historical death scenes. As an allegory of loss or impending loss, *Addio del Passato* can be seen as a metaphor for the end of colonial power and patriarchy.

BC

1. Yinka Shonibare, quoted in Pernilla Holmes, “The Empire’s New Clothes,” *ARTnews* 101 (October 2002): 118.

Yinka Shonibare CBE (RA), *Addio del Passato*, 2011, on view in *Bel Canto*
FOLLOWING SPREAD: Yinka Shonibare CBE (RA), *Addio del Passato Film Still 3*, 2011





Bill Viola, *Becoming Light*, 2005, video still

Bill Viola

(b. New York, New York, 1951)

When Bill Viola began exploring the potential of the video camera in the 1970s, it only vaguely resembled the sophisticated devices of today. Over the intervening years, he has brought his extraordinary technical skill to works that have been central to the transformation of video into a preeminent form of contemporary art.

Viola defines his art as “sculpting time.” In his hands, time may be stretched, condensed, repeated, layered, reversed, sped up, or slowed down. His signature slow motion technique obliges us to look attentively at his images to fully grasp their evolution. Viola’s video works often focus on bodies in an untethered condition—swimming, drowning, searching, dreaming—inviting association with spiritual states.

In 2004, Viola was engaged by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Paris Opera, and the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts to collaborate on the staging of Richard Wagner’s 1865 opera *Tristan und Isolde*. For this innovative production, Viola created sweeping, languid videos of water, fire, and figures that were as integral to the opera as the singers and the music. Viola’s monumental video projection for *Tristan und Isolde* provided a literal, metaphorical, and spiritual complement to the tragic story of the star-crossed lovers.

Becoming Light, 2005, seen in *Bel Canto*, is a companion artwork to the bold visuals Viola created for *Tristan und Isolde*. The artist has written of this work:

A man and woman tread water in slow motion, entwined in one another in glowing blue water with spots of light sparkling on the surface as if it were a night sky. The light streaming through the surface of the water patterns their bodies, moving them to become more abstract forms. After final breaths of air, the couple eventually sinks away from the camera in an embrace, becoming a small spot of light in the center of the blue water. They drown together in ecstatic union, losing their identity as individual people, and become part of the greater body of water surrounding them.¹

Evoking the narrative of Wagner’s epic tale, *Becoming Light* distills the concepts and emotions of the opera, with water signifying the consuming love between the protagonists.

IH

1. Bill Viola, artist statement, fact sheet for the exhibition *Becoming Light*, James Cohan Gallery, New York, November–December 2018.



Works in the Exhibition

Vasco Araújo

Diva, a Portrait, 2000

Installation: dressing table, clothes rail, clothing, props, fresh flowers,

16 black-and-white photographs

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist and Coleção António Cachola, Elvas, Portugal

Recital, 2002

Installation: video (color, sound, 20:06 minutes), painted chairs

Dimensions variable

Pianist: Celeste Patarra; Narrator: Lúcia Lemos (reading extracts from the librettos of

Orfeo e Euridice, *La clemenza di Tito*, *Le nozze di Figaro*, and *Tancredi*)

Courtesy of the artist

Far de Donna, 2005

Video (color, sound, 10:45 minutes)

Dimensions variable

Text: Maria da Graça Queiros

Performers: Pedro Cardoso, Lucia Lemos, Alexandra Torrens

Courtesy of the artist

Suzanne Bocanegra

Dialogue of the Carmelites, 2018

Mixed media installation

Dimensions variable

Composer: David Lang

Performer: Caroline Shaw

Sound design: Jody Elff

Courtesy of the artist

Dialogue of the Carmelites was commissioned by The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia.

Candida Höfer

Teatro di Villa Mazzacorati di Bologna I, 2006

Chromogenic print, 78 ¾ x 97 ¼ inches (200 x 247 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Sonnabend Gallery, New York

Teatro Degollado Guadalajara I, 2015

Chromogenic print, 70 7⁄8 x 112 1⁄16 inches (180 x 286.9 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

William Kentridge

Learning the Flute, 2003

Projector, blackboard, easel, 35mm animated film transferred to video

(black-and-white, sound, 8:02 minutes)

82 x 65 5⁄8 x 100 1⁄16 inches (208.3 x 166.7 x 254.2 cm)

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Gift of Brenda R. Potter and Michael C. Sandler

Drawing for “Preparing the Flute” (Clouds and Curtains on Black), 2005

Charcoal and pastel on paper, 29 7⁄8 x 44 1⁄4 inches (76 x 112.5 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

Drawing for “Preparing the Flute” (Panoramic IV Clouds), 2005

Charcoal and pastel on paper, 23 ¾ x 124 ¾ inches (61 x 316.9 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

Drawing for “Preparing the Flute” (Temple with Fireworks), 2005

Charcoal and pastel on paper

31 ¾ x 47 ½ inches (80.5 x 120.5 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York

Screened in conjunction with *Bel Canto*:

The Nose, 2013

High-definition video (color, sound, 121:00 minutes)

Composer: Dmitri Shostakovich

Conductor: Pavel Smelkov

Librettist: Dmitri Shostakovich, with Yevgeny Zamyatin, Gregory Ionin, and Alexander Preis

Performed by the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus

Courtesy of The Metropolitan Opera, New York

Guillermo Kuitca

The Ring, 2002

Oil and colored pencil on linen, 5 parts, 77 ⅛ x 322 ¾ inches (195.9 x 818.8 cm) overall

Pierre Bourgie Collection

Acoustic Mass I (Covent Garden), 2005

Mixed media on paper, 71 x 71 inches (180.3 x 180.3 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

Acoustic Mass III (Covent Garden), 2005

Mixed media on paper, 71 x 71 inches (180.3 x 180.3 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

Acoustic Mass IV (Covent Garden), 2005

Mixed media on paper, 71 x 71 inches (180.3 x 180.3 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

32 Seating Plans, 2007

Mixed media on paper, 32 parts, each 11 x 8 ½ inches (27.9 x 21.6 cm)

Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. George B. and Jenny R. Mathews Fund, by exchange, 2008

Santa Fe Opera I, 2019

Mixed media on paper, 36 x 43 ¾ inches (91.5 x 110 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

†SITE Santa Fe commission

Santa Fe Opera II, 2019

Mixed media on paper, 36 x 43 ¾ inches (91.5 x 110 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Sperone Westwater, New York

†SITE Santa Fe commission

Matthias Schaller

Fratelli d'Italia, 2005–17

Inkjet prints mounted on Dibond, 150 parts, each 15 ¾ x 15 ¾ inches (42 x 40 cm)

Courtesy of the artist

Yinka Shonibare CBE (RA)

Addio del Passato, 2011

Digital video (color, 5.1 sound, 16:52 minutes)

Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York

Addio del Passato Film Still 1, 2011

Digital chromogenic print, 50 x 66 ½ inches (127 x 169 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York

Addio del Passato Film Still 3, 2011

Digital chromogenic print, 50 x 71 inches (127 x 180.3 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York

Bill Viola

Becoming Light, 2005

High-definition video (color, silent, 8:29 minutes) on plasma display mounted on wall

Dimensions variable

Performers: John Hay and Sarah Steben

Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York



Orpheo ed Eurydice

Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Italian libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte
The Marriage of Figaro explores the dynamics of power in the relationship between the aristocracy and their servants, all through the lens of a single family. The opera also demonstrates and demonstrates the power of the individual and the power of the individual.

Le nozze di Figaro

Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Italian libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte
The Marriage of Figaro explores the dynamics of power in the relationship between the aristocracy and their servants, all through the lens of a single family. The opera also demonstrates and demonstrates the power of the individual and the power of the individual.

Die Zauberflöte

Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, German libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder
The Magic Flute is a late Mozart opera and includes some of his most beautiful music. The Magic Flute is a late Mozart opera and includes some of his most beautiful music. The Magic Flute is a late Mozart opera and includes some of his most beautiful music.

The following operas are referenced in the exhibit

La clemenza di Tito

(The Clemency of Titus, 1791)
Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Italian libretto by Pietro Metastasio
La clemenza di Tito is about an assassin who is about to be executed. The opera demonstrates his mature style of composition and his mastery of the dramatic form.

La Traviata

(The Fallen Woman, 1853)
Music by Giuseppe Verdi, Italian libretto by Francesco Maria Piave
La Traviata tells the story of a beautiful woman who is dying from tuberculosis and ill-fated love.

Tristan und Isolde

(Tristan and Isolde, 1865)
Music and German libretto by Richard Wagner
Set in Cornwall, England, Tristan und Isolde is a love story. The four-hour opera intertwines the story of the two lovers and the love, and Wagner masterfully uses the orchestra in the role of omniscient narrator.

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