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For an art gallery at the Metropolitan Opera, Richard Prince, top, is putting a less romantic spin on Madama Butterfly. Wangechi Mutu, above left, joins her fascination with crowns and Gluck's "Orfeo ed Euridice"; David Salle shows a work in progress, above right.

## Where Bel Canto Meets Paintbrush

### At New Met Opera Gallery, Artists Create Images of Heroines

By CAROL VOGEL

Peter Gelb is camping out in his new office at the Metropolitan Opera. The furniture is temporary and the walls bare, except for a large, flat-screen television.

As Mr. Gelb, who officially began his job as general manager of the Met on Aug. 1, talks to a visitor, he keeps an eye on the television screen. There the Great Wall of China is being erected on the stage of the Met, a practice run to see how the sets will work when "The First Emperor," one of six new productions this sea-

son, makes its world debut here on Dec. 21. Its director, Zhang Yimou, and its composer and conductor, Tan Dun, are well-known to film buffs for their work on Ang Lee's prizewinning movie "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon."

"I want to plant the seeds for more collaboration between opera and the contemporary art world," Mr. Gelb said. "It's a long tradition that began with the Chagall murals — the iconic image of this theater — and with artists like David Hockney, who have designed sets here."

Mr. Gelb talks over the sounds of hammers and buzz saws coming from the south

side of the house, where another first is slowly taking shape: a contemporary art gallery that is to open on Sept. 22. It will exhibit work by some of today's hottest artists: William Kentridge, Richard Prince, John Currin, Barnaby Furnas, Sophie von Hellermann, Makiko Kudo, David Salle, Cecily Brown, Verne Dawson, George Condo and Wangechi Mutu.

"It was a black hole," Mr. Gelb said, referring to the 1,500-square-foot space, which had housed a box office that rarely opened.

Now that space will have its own entrance, and two of the glass-fronted posters that

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Rob McKeever/Gagosian Gallery



Marianne Boesky Gallery



David Regan/Gladstone Gallery

Above, Cecily Brown's "Untitled," an oil inspired by "Il Trittico"; far left, "Untitled," in mixed media, by Barnaby Furnas, portraying Euridice in "Orfeo ed Euridice"; left, Richard Prince's "Madame Butterfly Isn't Dead," a collage based on Puccini, in which a skull emerges from a butterfly.

## Where Bel Canto Now Meets Paintbrush

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march along the facade of Lincoln Center will feature contemporary art. But for the opening, in place of traditional posters, Mr. Kentridge is in the process of creating a three-dimensional work that he says may include special lighting.

The gallery, designed by the Manhattan architect Lindy Roy, is named Gallery Met; it is financed by a \$1 million donation from Marie Schwartz, a Met board member. It will be open whenever the opera house or the box office is, and through the end of every performance. Nothing is for sale. When the works come down in May, at the end of the opera season, they are to be returned to the artists.

Rather than just randomly placing art on the walls, Mr. Gelb asked Dodie Kazanjian, editor at large for Vogue, to be the Met's curator at large for contemporary art, a pro bono position that involves choosing the artists and organizing the exhibition.

For the first show Ms. Kazanjian wanted each artist to make a work of art inspired by a heroine from the season's six new productions. She assigned some artists specific heroines; others were selected by the artists.

"I was looking for something that would tie it all together," Ms. Kazanjian said. "Almost every opera has a heroine." She said she chose artists she admires, many of whom she has written about for Vogue. "I wanted to combine the traditions of grand opera with cutting-edge art and see where it leads."

None of the artists will be paid, but sales are expected when the art is returned to them or to their dealers after the show. When the Met's brochure about the new productions came out in March, it included information about the gallery project

and listed the six artists who had by then agreed to participate. Ms. Kazanjian said the Met then began getting calls from people who were already interested in buying the works.

Most of the artists also said they enjoyed the challenge. Mr. Salle, for example, who is creating a portrait of Helen of Troy, based on Richard Strauss's "Egyptian Helen," said he liked "the chance to go uptown, metaphorically and literally — anything that gets art outside of its circumscribed context."

Some of the artists are opera buffs, but others have little familiarity with the art form.

"I went once," said Ms. Mutu, the African-born artist, whose collage paintings are oddly grotesque and hauntingly beautiful. "But I was disappointed. It was all very 19th century; I assumed it would be a bit more contemporary."

And so she is injecting her own distinctive sensibility as she melds her fascination with crowns and Gluck's 18th-century opera "Orfeo ed Euridice."

"I've never seen it as an opera but I've watched the movie version," Ms. Mutu said, describing her painting of a crown for one of the lovers as a radiating headdress. "It's very abstract," she said. "I liked the notion of depraved regal things, the idea that something is both heightened yet looked down upon. This crown is not jeweled or gold, but has animals' parts in strange, interesting patterns."

"It's an edgy approach to the same themes," she said about making opera the subject of a painting. "An interesting re-enactment of ancient stories."

Mr. Furnas confessed that he had a hard time sitting still, and that that included making it through an opera. "My attention span is pretty short," he said. Still, he was intrigued by the challenge Ms. Kazanjian presented.

He, too, has created a painting

based on "Orfeo ed Euridice." But his work deals with a specific moment in the opera, when the gods let Orfeo descend into the underworld to retrieve his wife on the condition that he not look back at her while returning with her to Earth.

"I've been listening to it," Mr. Furnas said of the opera. "I went with that idea of what he saw when he finally looked at her." His painting is a brightly colored abstract work, cap-

**'It's a long tradition that began with the Chagall murals.'**

turing that moment, when Euridice is half-dead, half-alive.

Mr. Prince is putting his own, less romantic spin on his heroine. "I knew the story of Madame Butterfly," he said. But he read the plot again and is currently at work on a painting that portrays Madama Butterfly as a lesbian.

"Years ago I started a painting like this, but I put it away," said Mr. Prince, who has also designed a collage for the show called "Madame Butterfly Isn't Dead," in which a skull emerges from a butterfly, and the words Madame Butterfly appear

in cutouts.

"Every once in a while someone will approach me to take on a project I find interesting," Mr. Prince said. "I put on my conceptual thinking hat. It breaks up what I'm working on and makes me think in a way that is not normal to my everyday studio situation."

Ms. von Hellermann, a British artist, rushed to Covent Garden to see Rossini's "Barber of Seville." "It just happened to be there," she said. Her painting, a dreamy canvas, shows Count Almaviva singing to Rosina from a tree as she stands on a balcony.

"I do enjoy the opera," she said. "I've always wanted to go to the Met. I'm hoping to get there for the opening."

Both Mr. Gelb and Ms. Kazanjian say that they hope this assignment inspires artists to think about future projects for the opera house. The gallery, they say, is just the beginning. In addition to future exhibitions, which might include solo shows, they are contemplating the reproduction of artworks from the gallery in the opera playbills and commissioning artists to create curtains and eventually entire sets.

"The combination of art, music and drama goes back to the earliest days of Western civilization," Ms. Kazanjian said. "We're trying to push this ancient tradition in new, imaginative directions."



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A preliminary computer rendering of the art gallery at the Met.