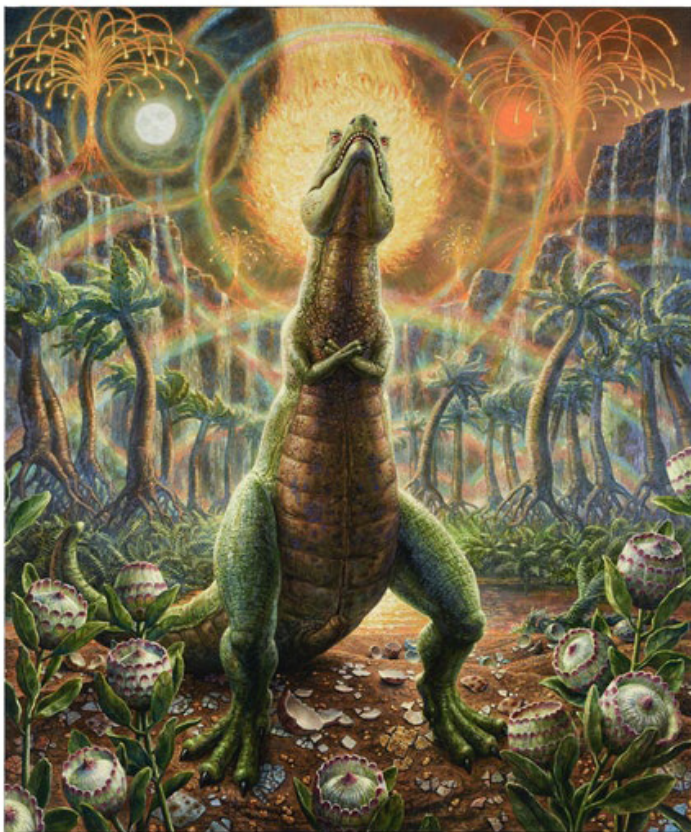


BROOKLYN RAIL

Thomas Woodruff: *Resurrection*

By David Ebony
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Thomas Woodruff, *Benedict*, 2022. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches. © Thomas Woodruff. Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery. Photo: Argenis Apolinario.

New York painter Thomas Woodruff is best known since the mid-1980s for his precisionist technique and arcane, phantasmagoric imagery, often dealing in metaphorical ways with topical issues—social strife, the AIDS crisis, sexual identity, and the struggles of the LGBTQ+ community. For the recent works in this luminous show, *Resurrection*, he looks to the far distant past for inspiration, conjuring an apocalyptic yet buoyant vision of the end of the Mesozoic Era (around 100 million years ago or so) that uncannily parallels our

own. Relayed in the three large canvases on view (ranging up to six feet high, and nine feet wide), plus twelve smaller oval-shaped canvases, Woodruff's primordial saga features meticulously painted dinosaurs—a *Tyrannosaurus rex* and pterodactyls—as well as a Mesozoic millepede, and dinosaur eggs about to hatch.

These remarkable creatures inhabit a lush and turbulent landscape full of colorful tropical flora and spiky volcanoes erupting beneath stormy skies at sunrise or in moonlight. Rendered by Woodruff as a ball of fiery white light, the fateful asteroid appears in each work at the moment it blasts into the Earth's atmosphere. Most scientists believe that this cataclysmic event, and the environmental upheaval it caused—including catastrophic climate change—led to the abrupt extinction of the dinosaurs. However, it is not all doom and gloom in Woodruff's Jurassic fantasy, as he offers a ray of hope by means of a shimmering rainbow or two that brighten the ominous sky in each painting. As always, this gay emblem and symbol of inclusivity suggests that somehow disaster may be overcome, and those grappling with hostility of all sorts might survive and thrive after all.

In a press statement, Woodruff reveals that he embarked on this series at the beginning of the pandemic, isolated and holed up in his mid-Hudson Valley studio. Having survived the AIDS epidemic, and now facing another potentially lethal, global contagion as he approached the age of 65, an official senior, Woodruff felt like a dinosaur—wary, perhaps, of navigating the ever-

treacherous art-world terrain. Immersing himself in the lore of an archaic yet wholly identifiable catastrophe proved to be something of a balm.

For the new series, he developed an eccentrically exaggerated hyper-illusionistic space, while rejecting the conventions of Natural History painting as well as “paleoart.” He aimed to imbue his dinosaurs with human aspirations and emotions. The most imposing work in the exhibition, *Benedict* (2022) centers a Tyrannosaurus rex against a background of swaying palms, erect in a field of glistening Protea flowers. Far from moviedom’s clichéd tropes of T-Rex rage, this creature, with its diminutive arms crossed, raises his head toward the sky, rapt in a state of either anguish or ecstasy. The exploding asteroid glows behind his head like the radiating halo of a religious icon. For this composition, Woodruff was, in fact, inspired by religious paintings of the Baroque period, specifically Alonso Cano’s *St. Benedict’s Vision of the Globe and the three Angels* (1658-1660) in the Prado.

The late dancer and choreographer Martha Graham was the unlikely muse for *Martha* (2021). This rather heartrending image features a Pterodactyl alighted on a rocky ledge. The animal dramatically raises its wing in a gesture that recalled for the artist one of Graham’s dance moves. The pterodactyl ostensibly uses its wingspan to shield her young (not shown) from the incoming asteroid, visible through the wing’s translucent skin. A stream of blood on the rock beneath the creature refers to the moot legend that some avian species cut themselves and fed the blood to their young if there was not enough food available. This fable was assigned particularly to pelicans, which are, like all birds, distant relatives of dinosaurs.

Dinosaur eggs are the primary subjects of the other works on view. Nine large, opalescent eggs, clustered in an earthen hollow, appear at the

center of the long, horizontal *Nest* (2021). At left, a giant, scaly millepede—partially hidden beneath a bunch of Welwitschia seed pods—watches over the nest, while on the right, two pterodactyls fly high in the sky below a shining rainbow. A single dinosaur egg, approximately the size of a human head, fills each of the vertically hung oval canvases—a design long associated with formal portraits. Framed in gold, nine of these works from the series were arranged in an arcing row on one wall. The uppermost piece, *Turquoise* (2021), shows a green-speckled blue egg set on the ground highlighted with flecks of gold leaf. Also in the dirt, a triangular bit of blue shell apparently just fell from the cracking egg. A dinosaur is about to be born. Will it survive? Pondering the dinosaurs’ future in the face of disaster—just like assessing humanity’s fate in our own difficult and tumultuous time—is the conceptual gambit that unites all of the works in Woodruff’s imaginative, primeval endeavor.



Thomas Woodruff, *Nest*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas with touches of gold in three parts, overall: 48 x 108 inches. © Thomas Woodruff. Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery. Photo: Argenis Apolinario.