

Eight Views on Opera

BEL CANTO: CONTEMPORARY ART & OPERA // SITE SANTA FE

By Caroline Picard



The story is well-known and repeated often: Orpheus and Eurydice are in love. Orpheus is renowned for his voice. Eurydice is an oak nymph and the child of Apollo. Just before the wedding, she is bitten by a snake and dies. Unable to accept his grief, Orpheus travels to the underworld armed with only his lute. Surely, if he can sing the sweetest song, Hades would be compelled to return Eurydice to the bard and the land of the living. Somehow, Orpheus succeeds. His music is so profound, so incredible, the human convinces Hades to make an exception—one that could disrupt the balance of life ever after. And yet, Orpheus doubts the audacity of his wager, doubts in the power of his music and talent, he even doubts Hades' word. Orpheus' fatal, human insecurity undoes the effect of his art. Against Hades' single condition, which is that he not look back as he and Eurydice ascend from the underworld, Orpheus turns despite himself—only to watch the specter of his beloved withdraw into the afterlife, where she will remain forever. The earliest surviving operatic work, *Eurydice*, from 1600 by Jacopo Peri, tells this story. It sets a baseline for the operatic gesture, establishing opera's premise and aspiration. Art has the capacity, opera suggests, to overcome the bounds of mortality and its affiliated heartbreak.

Given its enduring prominence as an artistic form, it makes sense that contemporary artists would mine the musical field of opera—its affiliated compositions, librettos, politics, architectures, socioeconomics, and history. SITE Santa Fe's current exhibition, *Bel Canto: Contemporary Artists Explore Opera*, presents the work of eight such artists, produced in partnership with the Santa Fe Opera who furnished the show. The selection of artists on view, including Vasco Araújo, Suzanne Bocanegra, Candida Höfer, William Kentridge, Guillermo Kuitca, Matthias Schaller, Yinka Shonibare CBE, and Bill Viola, each present work within a range of mediums—from video and performance, to installation, music, drawing, animation, and photography. Rather than offer one cumulative argument about opera, the show unfolds as a series of small solo exhibitions, each utilizing different aspects of the form—its architectural spaces, stories, formats of distribution, history of performance, or music—as inspiration.

—A series of distinct violet and green curtains billow around the exhibition's entry. As contemporary art museums typically prefer spare

environments to perform (for better or worse) aesthetic neutrality, the gesture is striking. Variations of this fabric occur throughout the show at each transition point between a given room and hallway, recalling in some way the Baroque aesthetics of an opera house, while also attempting to unify the various artists. Through these visual cues, the exhibit is intentionally playful. The museum is positioned as an active participant, creating a correlation between the galleries and the theater where each artist's installation functions like a separate act.

—The textile embellishments also cue the show's interest in architecture—a theme that plays throughout the works on view. For instance, the first piece encountered is *Fratelli d'Italia* (2005–2017) by Matthias Schaller, a grid of 150 photographs of Italian opera house interiors. For twelve years, the artist traveled the country documenting theaters to create an indirect historic and anthropological national portrait of Italy. Perhaps responding to the legacy of Bernd and Hilla

Becher, Schaller has a controlled and regimented approach to documenting each space. The photographs are beautiful, yet spare and drained of most color; light corals and blues stand out from the details within the ceiling paintings, while theater boxes are dark, appearing almost like blackened teeth—the bones of the room are blown out to near-whites. Taken from the perspective of the stage, what is consistent in each photograph is a blood red ground of velvet chairs, inscribing a sense of duality, as if the 'body' of the opera house is tethered to a light soaked, and thus seemingly ethereal, ceiling. Unlike the more fleeting and industrial subjects of the Bechers' portraits, each opera house is presented as a relic of culture, not industry—enduring spaces dedicated to a communal, but fleeting, appreciation of the voice.

—Candida Höfer, a student of the Bechers, also has two large format photographs of opera houses included within the show, including *Teatro di Villa Mazzacorati di Bologna* (2006) and *Teatro*









Degollado Guadalajara (2015). The latter photograph of Mexico's 1886 Neoclassical opera house, like Schaller's photo suite, is taken from the stage, capturing the immersive lush chamber of red chairs and theater compartments. Architect Jacobo Gálvez's mural *El Limbo* (1880–90), featured in the top of the image, occupies roughly the same amount of space as the stage, as though to suggest a mirror between the two. Inspired by Dante's *Inferno* (1320), the paintings captures one of the final circles of Purgatory, home to those virtuous pagans—Plato, Socrates, Virgil, Homer, et al,—who were not baptized, but did not sin. Both Schaller and Höfer's photos provide meditations on the order of life and death alongside those who bear witness to vocal expression.

Höfer's *Teatro di Villa Mazzacorati di Bologna* frames the back of the theater, capturing chairs on the audience floor and stage against additional architectural backdrops that hang behind, as if to suggest the ways in which operatic productions create the illusion of depth and complexity. Indeed, the exhibition as a whole plays with this idea—each artist devises ways to tease the viewer's imagination to life. It conceives of the generations of audiences in attendance, the musics composed and performed within these spaces, the tragedies and comedies, rife with death scenes and weddings, all through these rooms. Unique as an example of a suburban private theater built by an amateur actor in 1763, implicit in Höfer's work is centuries of careful and ongoing restoration, inscribing, and securing a stable rendition of history, even as opera's relation to class and popularity has fluctuated.

Troubling these more stable perceptions of the theater is an entire room of drawings and collages by Guillermo Kuitca, including three large format collages from 2005. Entitled *Acoustic*

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Mass (Covent Garden) I, III, and IV, each captures a view of the London West End theater from the vantage point of the stage in a limited pallet of black, white, and red. Kuitca adeptly creates an illusion of space through a minimal visual repertoire of squares and lines that nevertheless fall out of sense. In *Acoustic Mass I*, white rectangles and periodically broken lines layer upon one another atop a black background, concentrating in a streak that travels, almost vertically, through the center of the audience. It looks as though an earthquake is erupting in the middle of the picture plane. Compositionally, it suggests that the viewer is witnessing the impact of sound as it ripples through a darkened room.

This last May, in Sydney, an opera called *Outback* closed its first act with the song of a stampede of kangaroos sung by a 100-person chorus. The sound was so big and low that it produced cracks in the foundation of the building such that the opera had to be rewritten. Kuitca's compositions remind us that these spaces have been created to house sound—that it is not enough to look at them. The sounds that are produced within the operatic theater are shattering—whether in music's ability to bridge the gap between the seduction of music and the heartbreak of weakness, or its societal and historic implications.

On another wall of the gallery, Kuitca includes large format drawings of three CD album covers of composer Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring Cycle*) (1874), including the company logos that produced, manufactured, and distributed these works. On the one hand, these covers present a different idea of sound—a flattened one-dimensional recording most often enjoyed by oneself, in one's own home or car. On the other, Kuitca recalls an epic work of the operatic tradition composed by one of the historically most controversial composers. In this way, Kuitca asks viewers whether artistic gestures can be separated from the politics of their time.

A nearby installation by Vasco Araújo, which consists of burgundy-painted walls that hold gold-framed black and white photographs, along with a clothing rack of costumes, depicts the dressing room of the artist as an imaginary diva. Underneath lie various vintage shoes—both men's and women's—as well as a small chair and ottoman with a bouquet, a vanity table with flowers, an electric shaver, makeup, and perfumes. Araújo's installation calls attention to the history of gender fluidity in operatic traditions; from the controversial role of the Castrati in Europe, which reached its peak in popularity in Italy in the eighteenth-century, to

the various female roles that were played by men. An adjacent and wonderfully intimate theater with roughly eight chairs features the artist-as-diva singing various arias. Part of what makes this room so special, however, is that we do not hear the artist's voice, but rather a female interpreter speaking a translated English libretto. The way in which this projected performance excludes its audience from sound compounds the performance of time and nostalgia that Araújo's objects present, especially because the crisp tones of the overvoice feel like such a contemporary intrusion. In this way, Araújo explores variations in how the operatic form plays with the time and repetition to dislocated audiences.

—The show includes more formal collaborations as well. For example, animations and drawings by William Kentridge that were produced when the artist was commissioned to work on *The Magic Flute* by the Belgian Opera House in 2003. Another video installation by Bill Viola, *Becoming Light* (2005) was produced in relation to a commissioned collaboration between Viola and director Peter Sellars for the Paris Opera's 2005 production of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. The room is empty and dark, with a large projection screen on which two figures—a man and a woman—float slowly and effortlessly in dark water. Viola's work often elicits highly produced emotions, and this is no exception. The figures are beautifully illuminated within the cross hairs of light, drifting closer and closer together until they disappear into a bubble of air. Still, as a response to Wagner's epic and difficult opera, Viola's installation lacks any awkward or trembling variables, interpreting a tragic love affair without either the grotesque stutters of drowning or the atonal disease of Wagner's compositions.

—At various times throughout *Bel Canto*, one hears the voice of Nadine Benjamin—a London-born soprano of Jamaican and Indian descent—singing an aria from *La Traviata*, infusing the air with a sense of beautiful yet profound tragedy. In a large screening room, she is seen singing throughout Yinka Shonibare CBE's *Addio del Passato* (2012), a film that plays with art historical tropes in order to call attention to racial and colonial hierarchies implicit within the Western Canon. The main focus of this piece is Benjamin and her aria; she plays the role of a Caribbean-born English lady, Frances Nesbit, lamenting the estrangement of her husband while singing the final song of *Violetta*, who dies of tuberculosis. Benjamin-as-

Nesbit sings Violetta's song while walking through a historic English manor, an English garden, and a greenhouse. The screen is periodically interrupted with still scenes of Lord Nesbit, positioned to reenact works paintings like Henry Wallis' *The Death of Chatterton* (1856), or François-Guillaume Ménégoz's *The Death of Leonardo da Vinci in the Arms of Francis I* (1781). The costumes within the work are fashioned out of Shonibare's signature Batik cloth, a fabric that is typically associated with African identity (despite being originally produced in Indonesia and circulated by Dutch colonial shipping routes). The film, as with every element of Shonibare's work, is a carefully crafted acknowledgment of complex layers of history, aesthetic aspiration, and political identity. It is a gut-wrenching masterpiece.

—Unlike a live production, Benjamin's character is doomed to iterate and reiterate this moment of suffering over and over again. She is not permitted to die. Even when she collapses, she is forced to rise again, making her way through the same garden path, past the same diasporic plants, through the same libraries of leather-bound volumes of white male opinion. This feels like a key point in the show—perhaps also the most incisive and importantly critical—for it asks the viewer what we are to do with the aesthetic forms and societal structures that we are at once attached to, critical of, but often doomed to repeat.

—Often, I find myself asking what art is for. What is it intended to accomplish? I do not mean this either as a rhetorical question or an embittered one, but *what does it do?* What *should* it do? As a birdwatcher maintains a divided mind, at the ready to see some new species arrive on their periphery when least expected, so I watch for answers to this question. I enjoy that opera has an origin story rooted in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice—the idea that music provides a chance for transformation—but such a reason for being is not what *Bel Canto* supplies. Perhaps because this exhibit was co-organized between such prominent cultural institutions, the show does not make a case for why opera, or art for that matter, is significant. Rather, it relies upon the individual contributions of its artists to share their own respective insights, troubles, refractions, and critiques of the form.

—Its ultimate expression is that opera is of interest. Fortunately, I would agree.

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Bel Canto: Contemporary Artists Explore Opera at SITE Sante Fe runs until January 5, 2020.

TITLE PAGE:

Aruaujo, Vasco\Divas, a portrait - foto 3.tif
Vasco Araújo, *Divas, A Portrait*, 2000. Installation: Dressing table, clothes rail hanger, items of clothing, props, fresh flowers, 16 black & white photographs. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of António Cachola Collection, Portugal.

PAGE 15:

Matthias Schaller, *Fratelli d'Italia*, Italy, (2005-2016). Photographic series of 150 Italian Opera Houses. Courtesy of the artist.

PREVIOUS SPREAD:

Detail view of *Bel Canto: Contemporary Artists Explore Opera*. 2019. Courtesy of Eric Swanson.

OPPOSITE:

Suzanne Bocanegra, *Dialogue of the Carmelites* (detail), 2018. Mixed media installation with sound. Fabric Workshop and museum commission. Courtesy of the artist.

BELOW:

Bill Viola, *Becoming Light*, 2005. Video installation, photo by Kira Perov, Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery.

