



REVIEWS NEW YORK

Thomas Woodruff

Vito Schnabel Gallery | Chelsea

By Dennis Kardon

Thomas Woodruff, *Angus D.*, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 48 × 60".

Once upon a time, beholding a Thomas Woodruff painting could be exhausting. So many invented details—even tiny ones have details. So many clever ideas. Then we notice the art-historical references both obvious and obscure. And the drawing—it's always flawless. Not a clumsy gesture anywhere; everything is exquisitely articulated and moves gracefully in space. So much diligent work and scholarship begging to be appreciated. No room for a viewer's thinking except as worshipful supplicant. Images so dense with incident they seem like armor created to protect, or repel, or hide . . . well, *what*, exactly? Criticism? Insecurity? Fear of losing control?

But these new paintings! "The Dinosaur Variations," Woodruff's solo exhibition at Vito Schnabel, crawled under the skin. The overweening control that has always held the artist back here became so dramatically supercharged, so excruciatingly over-the-top amazing, that you had to laugh. In one five-by-seven-foot canvas alone (*Maya Lacrimosa*, 2023) —while a flaming asteroid framed by a formation of flying pterosaurs exploded multiple sparks—lava spewed, lightning streaked, rainbow auroras pulsed, and hundreds of individually rendered raindrops fell on a terrified and brightly patterned mother pterodactyl with ten ptero-chicks flailing among tons of multihued and many-petaled flowers, all sheltered under Mama's bat-like wings. Amusing, because in the face of a world-destroying cataclysmic apocalypse foreclosing all possibility of control, the very demonstration of the *futility* of control—the irony at the heart of Woodruff's Fragonard-on-crack presentation—becomes a celebration of The End.

Though this particular extinction happened to dinosaurs millions of years ago, Armageddon thinking permeates our consciousness. With lethal climate change, children shot in school or murdered in war, ravaging deadly viruses, renewed threats of nuclear destruction—in addition to our own homegrown malignant orange planet-altering event possibly headed our way in November—a pessimism-induced lethargy is hard to overcome. But these works made you want to put on your red shoes and dance the blues away. Using fast-drying acrylic paint to create complex surfaces and multilayered rococo compositions, Woodruff looks for, in his words, "grace in the face of annihilation."

It might have been easy to shrug off these doomed and kitschy reptile remnants of childhood fascinations if they didn't also have something genuinely chilling about them. These paintings ached with pathos: Take *Angus D.*, 2022, which depicts a scared baby spinosaurid—a gator-like creature with a chromatic spinal display, newly hatched from its iridescent egg and flanked by erupting volcanoes—gazing piteously up at a throbbing night sky. The glowing-bronze ground, littered with pearly turquoise eggshell shards, is illuminated by a gigantic phallic fireball with a sinuous, smoky tail, which obscures the eyes of a glowing full moon (a portrait of the artist) that gazes mournfully down on this animal's precarious existence. The hopeful promise of birth dashed in one disastrous moment.

While art history abounds with memento mori tropes, reminding us that, in the midst of our pleasures, death always awaits, underneath the furious spectacular creativity of this work was a raw vulnerability. The sixty-seven-year-old Woodruff hears that incessant distant drumbeat. We can't prevent our own demise. No matter how hard we work, how loving we are, or how brilliant the inventions we may bring to our next project, the contradiction that everything simply stops, the complex world we have created in our mind just vanishes, seems unimaginable.

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Vera Molnar, *Transformation*, 1983, vinyl on canvas, 59 × 59". © Vera Molnar/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

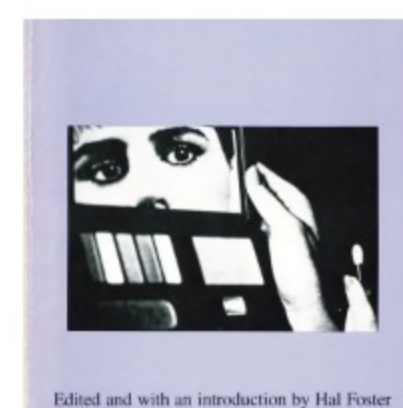
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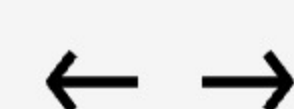
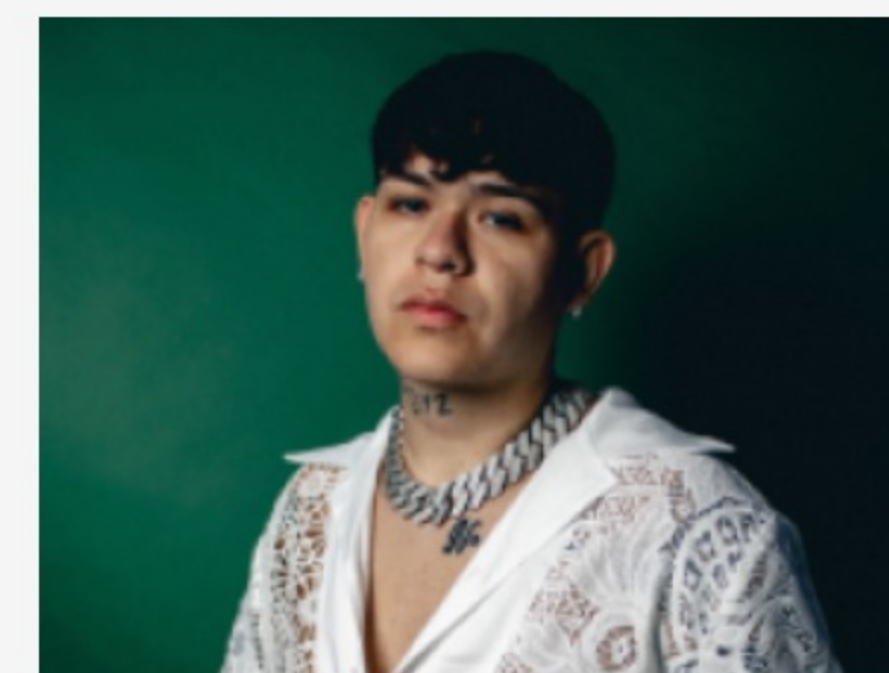
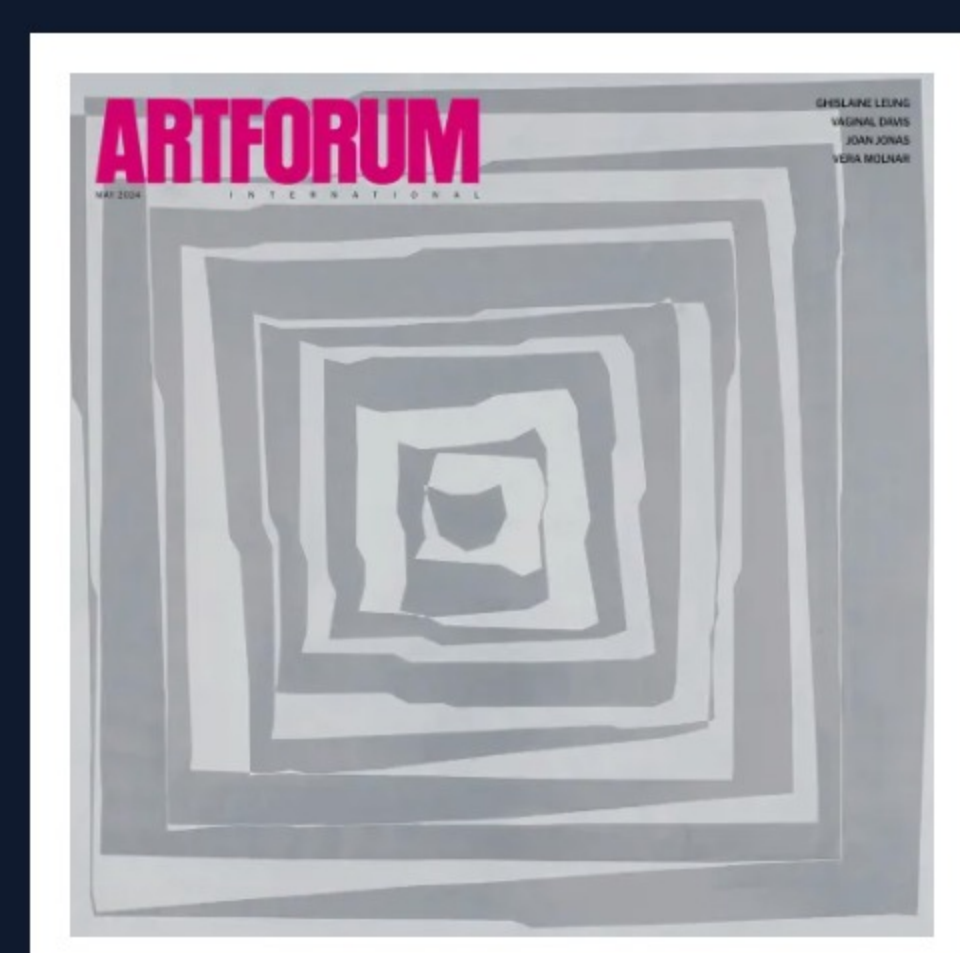
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