

INSTITUTION The Morgan Library & Museum

LOCATION New York City, New York

Storytelling Takes the Stage



As a longtime admirer of Maurice Sendak, I was eager to visit the Morgan Library's presentation of Sendak's designs for opera and ballet. *Drawing the Curtain: Maurice Sendak's Designs for Opera and Ballet* (fig. 1) offers an inspiring introduction to Sendak's lesser known works for the stage, created in the latter half of his artistic career. His first opera commission was *The Magic Flute*, which was a particular thrill for him as he worshipped Mozart as a composer. Among the operas that followed were *Where the Wild Things Are*, based on his beloved children's book, Janáček's *Cunning Little Vixen*, Prokofiev's *Love for Three Oranges*, and Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*. This exhibition offers a unique opportunity to explore these operas anew through the lens of Sendak's magical imagination.

Drawing the Curtain is an intimate exhibition that is best experienced through close looking and close reading, even for those familiar with the operas featured. The details within each drawing and study include discreet reflections of consideration and intention that enable the visitor insight into Sendak's artistic process. The Morgan's arrangement of the exhibition by opera enables a holistic sense of the process – from concept and through various iterations of design

Fig. 1. Gallery view: *Drawing the Curtain: Maurice Sendak's Designs for Opera and Ballet*.

and prototyping. A small color photograph of each production is included in each area text to reflect the final production, but the emphasis of the exhibition is clearly on the process. In Sendak's interpretations, characters take on new personas and forms derived from the depths of his creative imagination. The story of each opera is visually told through Sendak's storyboards, detailed costume designs (fig. 2), dioramas, watercolors, and what he called *fantasy sketches*, "spontaneous

PHOTO CREDITS: FIG. 1, 2, 4, 5: HANA ELWELL; FIG. 3: GRAHAM HABER, DIGITAL IMAGE COURTESY OF THE MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM



sequential narratives” he drew while listening to a piece of music he loved (fig. 3). As I looked closely, I was reminded of Sendak’s agile artistic hand that could just as easily render a woodland animal with naturalistic precision as anthropomorphize the same animal through a costume design with a familiar mischievous face peeking out of the pelt (fig. 4).

Though I admired all the work, I was most drawn to the dioramas on display. They are beautifully arranged within inset vitrines,



Fig. 4. Watercolor costume sketches for *Cunning Little Vixen*.



Fig. 2. Maurice Sendak, study for *Wild Things* costume, with notes, for the opera *Where the Wild Things Are* (1979). Costumes could weigh as much as 150 pounds, and each character required three operators – a voice actor, a puppeteer, and someone off stage to orchestrate the moving eyes.

Fig. 3. Maurice Sendak, *Fantasy Sketch* (Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Der Schauspieldirektor*), 1987. ©The Maurice Sendak Foundation.

crisply lit so the meticulously rendered characters are illuminated with layered backdrops rich in texture and detail. Though there is a video loop of performances playing at the exhibition’s entrance, these dioramas reflect the depth of Sendak’s vision even more than the actual performance on the proscenium stage (fig. 5).

I left the exhibition with a greater appreciation of Sendak’s range, an artist whose work can be experienced in so many ways, with different layers revealed over

time. Just as his children’s books are only partially for children, Sendak’s stage designs reveal a personal passion and a unique synthesis of his characteristic style, toothy-grinned humor, and creative genius that lead me to think the creation of this body of work was as much for himself as for his audience’s enjoyment.

Hana Elwell is Vice President of Exhibits and Education at the Brooklyn Children’s Museum.



Fig. 5. Maurice Sendak, diorama for the opera *Where the Wild Things Are* (1979).

INSTITUTION Denver Art Museum

LOCATION Denver, Colorado

Intimate Connections



In May 2019 I had the opportunity to visit the Denver Art Museum and explore the incredible exhibition *Returning the Gaze* by Jordan Casteel. The exhibition was open, airy, and bright, the perfect location to showcase the larger-than-life, vibrant paintings.

The exhibition design draws the visitor in and creates a sense of connection through direct eye contact with the paintings' subjects – community members, family, and friends (figs. 1, 2, 3). This intimacy is amplified by the simplicity of the exhibition design with white backgrounds and unobtrusive signage, encouraging visitors to become enveloped within the paintings. This layout echoes Casteel's focus on providing space for black people within white-owned, white-walled spaces by keeping the paintings as the focal point.

Fig. 1. Installation view of Jordan Casteel: *Returning the Gaze* at the Denver Art Museum.



COURTESY DENVER ART MUSEUM; PHOTO BY CHRISTINA JACKSON



Fig. 2. Jordan Casteel, *Benyam*, 2018. Oil on canvas; 90 x 78 in. The Komal Shah & Gaurav Garg Collection.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CASEY KAPLAN, NEW YORK © JORDAN CASTEEL



Fig. 3. Jordan Casteel, *Charles*, 2016. Oil on canvas; 78 x 60 in. Collection of Jordan Casteel.

stories from the subjects of their experiences with Casteel. These create connections between painter, subject, and visitor through personal stories.

Throughout the exhibition are plenty of benches, providing the opportunity to contemplate the empathy and care with which each painting was created. The end of the exhibit includes a short video of Casteel describing her work, journey, and goals. The video brings the exhibition full circle. As you exit there are small takeaway cards with images of the paintings on the front and a suggestion on the back to visitors to “Make eye contact with someone and SMILE.” A wonderful reminder to *Return the Gaze*.

Annie Young is an Education Coordinator at the Natural History Museum of Utah.

As you move through the exhibition, the paintings are grouped to portray Casteel’s changing focuses and emphasize her goal of bringing humanity to often overlooked members of her community. One section of the exhibition focuses on nude

portraits of black men in Casteel’s life. The vulnerability and intimacy of these paintings are augmented by their placement in the middle of the exhibit – surrounded by store owners, neighbors, and subway patrons (fig. 4). Included are interpretive signs with

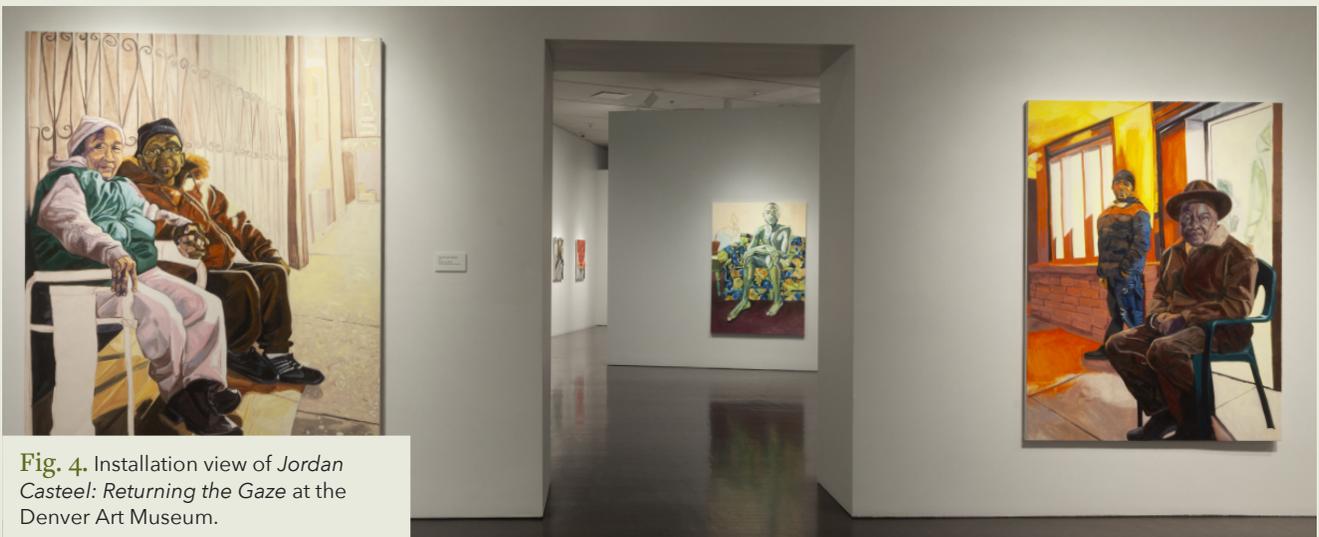


Fig. 4. Installation view of Jordan Casteel: *Returning the Gaze* at the Denver Art Museum.

Packing a Lot into a Small Space



The mission of the Staten Island Museum is to explore the “dynamic connections between natural science, art and history,” and its recently opened exhibition, *Field Notes: Seed Stories and the Power of Plants* does just that. As the introductory label states, this temporary installation not only captures 138 years of collecting and studying Staten Island’s diverse flora, but aligns this seminal work with that of many others: local gardeners, plant biologists and artists, as well as the nurturers and propagators of heirloom seeds for future growth and harvests.

Field Notes brings all this to life in one gallery which tells multiple and varied stories. Through video and audio, photograms and illustrations, and an amazing

display from the museum’s local botanical collection (fig. 1) – which includes specimens gathered since the mid-19th century, as well as some wonderful “field notes” from one of the museum’s founders – visitors can explore four projects that highlight the cultural, artistic, and scientific impact of collecting plant life. These projects include the photograms of local flora by contemporary Staten Island artist, Gale Wisdom; documentary videos by Jay Weichun of Staten Islanders who grow crops in backyards and unused places; and seed histories, seed-packet art, and the work of the Greenbelt Native Plant Center whose mission is “to provide native plants and seeds from local plant populations in support of the restoration and management of many of the City’s most valuable natural areas.”

Fig. 1. Displays from the museum’s Staten Island herbarium collection.

Several interactive exhibits, including tactile seed, art-making and scientific observation activities, along with diverse displays – such as pressed botanical specimens and contemporary works of art – are all easily accessible in this one gallery. Truly something is here for everyone: the naturalist, farmer and part-time gardener as well as the artist, humanist, and history buff.



Fig. 2. View into an interactivity exhibit on the Hudson Valley Seed Company.



Fig. 3. Display of seeds and original "seed-packet art."

I was especially drawn to the amazing exhibit of "seed-packet art." A semi-enclosed "room" created in the middle of the gallery houses an intimate display of the commissioned art of the Hudson Valley Seed Company (HVSC) along with information about the HVSC, which, the exhibition states, "combines the science of organic cultivation with the history of seeds and the power of art" (figs. 2 & 3). What began as a "seed library" in upstate New York turned into a national heirloom seed-awareness program. The diversity of the artworks, each representative of a seed's history, heritage, and myths, is captured in very striking and poetic

illustrations. I was also intrigued by the photograms (a silhouette photograph made by placing an object directly on sensitized paper and exposing it to light) created by Staten Island artist Gale Wisdom. Wisdom gathers roadside "weeds," such as wild onion, asters, and witchgrass, and arranges beautiful "bouquets" to create her photograms. Through this moving work, one senses both the immediacy and fragility of her subjects (fig. 4).

For visitors to this small yet precious exhibition, there is a lot to learn, to look at, and to experience...pick up a specimen of seeds, roots, or leaves to

investigate under a macro zoom lens, design your own seed packet, or relax in a wheelbarrow chair as you ponder the diversity of contemporary artworks, the specimens that adorn the walls and cases, and the history that unfolds....there is so much wonder packed into *Field Notes* (fig. 5).

Jo Ann Secor is a Principal and Director of Interpretive Services at SKOLNICK Architecture + Design in New York City.

Have you seen an interesting new exhibition lately - something that touched you, made you laugh, or moved you to action?

Consider writing about it for Exhibits Newsline! Entries should be brief (300 words max), breezy (tell what made it so great), and include three to four high-res images.

For more information, email: NAMENewsline@gmail.com.



Fig. 4. Overview of gallery with a display of photograms on far wall.



Fig. 5. Video viewing area with wheelbarrow seating.