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LAWEEKLY

March 15, 2017

Mark Ryden's Surrealist Vision Comes to Life in a Darkly Beautiful Ballet

Falling James



Whipped Cream Art by Mark Ryden

Reality and fantasy don't collide in Mark Ryden's art so much as they are equal halves of a more natural and dreamlike world. The longtime Angeleno, who recently moved to Portland, Oregon, has spent the past year on one of his most ambitious and unusual projects — working with the provocative Russian-American choreographer Alexei Ratmansky and American Ballet Theatre in creating the otherworldly costumes and set design for *Whipped Cream*, a new production of a 1924 Richard Strauss ballet that receives its world premiere this week at Segerstrom Hall in Costa Mesa. Ryden explained by email what it was like working in a completely unfamiliar milieu.

How much has the story of *Whipped Cream* changed from its original incarnation, Richard Strauss' 1924 ballet *Schlagobers*?

The original version of *Schlagobers* had some political undertones, with a subtext that involved conflict between the proletariat and the royal class. This is understandable with what was going on in the world in 1924. We chose to push our story toward the child's perspective of fantasy, imagination and dreams of the surreal. We kept all of the original cast of fantastical characters but added a few new ones of our own.

The ballet is described as being about a boy who "overindulges at a Vienna pastry shop and falls into a surreal delirium." What was it like for you to go wild in a candy shop, so to speak, and work on something so overtly fairy tale-like?

The storyline of a surreal delirium opens the door to unlimited possibilities, which is just the sort of thing that interests me creatively!

You've adapted your art into such elaborate past constructions as the *Memory Lane* diorama automaton. How does your work on the set of *Whipped Cream* compare in scale and size?

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I suppose one of the projects most similar to this ballet was my *Memory Lane* diorama. There were many parallels between that project and this one. In the diorama, I designed many characters and their costumes and created a “stage” set for them to occupy. I even incorporated stagelike lighting into the piece. ... I think when the team at ABT saw images of my *Memory Lane* diorama, it gave them confidence that I could do this work, even though I had not done any scenic design before. In some ways, I feel all my paintings are somewhat similar to this scenic-design work.

You’ve also previously worked with personalities from different fields, such as the very diverse lineup of musicians (Katy Perry; Nick Cave; Tyler, the Creator) who appeared on the album *The Gay Nineties Old Tyme Music: Daisy Bell*. What was the process like in working with Alexei Ratmansky and American Ballet Theatre?

The *Gay Nineties* album project was very different from this ballet. In that project, the parameters were more open-ended and much less collaborative. ... This ballet has been quite a bit different. Dozens of people were involved in the production, hundreds if you include all the artists at the many individual shops who fabricated all the costumes and sets. It has been well over a year of intensive work. I directed the creation of a myriad of items, from costumes and props to set pieces and backdrops. ... Alexei is a true genius. People use that term loosely, but in this case I say it with genuine sincerity. ... His creative process is a mystery. I can’t really tell you how much of the choreography was in his head beforehand or how much he created in response to the costumes and sets that I designed.



Sketch by Mark Ryden/photo by Doug Gifford

Were there any aspects of the ballet form that limited how you work visually?

This ballet had a wonderfully open-ended theme, which did not feel at all creatively constrictive, but I suppose it did feel somewhat similar to the commercial art I did when I first graduated college. ... For this project, I had to be a graphic designer in many instances, designing labels on bottles, graphics on signage, etc.

Your work has historically drawn from a wide range of influences, both highbrow and lowbrow, as well as popular culture, music, history and an appreciation of a kind of quaintly archaic, vanishing technology. In designing *Whipped Cream*, did you tap into any different inspirations than you had previously?

I began the overall aesthetic for this production with a foundation in classical theater imagery. I looked at historical set design and used that as reference for my starting point. I built upon this footing with more

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contemporary, surreal elements. I think the contrast between the classical and contemporary gives more gravity to the presentation overall. I hope we have achieved that here.

When did you first become interested in ballet?

I wasn't a frequent patron of the ballet, beyond the occasional *Nutcracker* or *Swan Lake*, but I always enjoyed the ballet whenever I would go. I have since become quite a fan! My wife and I were fortunate enough to see *Firebird* last spring at the Met, once from the regular vantage point of the audience and once from backstage off the wings. Seeing the show from that intimate vantage point was amazing. The dancers appear to float around the stage effortlessly, almost weightless. But when you see them come offstage and literally collapse in exhaustion, only then can you truly appreciate the superhuman effort they put into their work.

How much did Richard Strauss' music provide inspiration for your artistic approach?

The music is really wonderful, with a variety of moods and themes, from ethereal interludes to playful waltzes and dramatic marches. I think that is possibly why Alexei wanted to bring back this ballet — the music is fabulous. The music was the starting point for me. I would listen to a particular sequence and visualize what might be onstage.

Were there any design limitations in creating fanciful costumes that also have to work in the context of a ballet?

The functionality of the costumes was something I had no experience with. Very knowledgeable costume and set-design professionals, Holly Hynes and Camellia Koo, were there from the beginning of the project to make up for my lack of experience.

Have you had interest in designing for theater previously or was this a new direction for you?

I have always had interest in expanding the dimensions of a static painting and bringing in motion, action and music. I have played around with some personal video projects which expand creativity beyond a still image, but this ballet has truly taken me to uncharted territory.



Sketch by Mark Ryden/photo by Ruven Afanador

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Had you designed clothing before?

I do feel many of my paintings have figures wearing costumes, so in this way I feel I have designed costumes many times before. It is certainly similar to but not exactly the same as designing a functional costume to wear and dance in. There are dozens of different costumes in our production, many made in multiple quantities. All totaled, there are over 200 costumes that had to be produced. A myriad of types of fabrics and materials were used. This is where Holly Hynes, the costume expert, really needed to call the shots. Fabrics had to be comfortable to dance in and flexible to accommodate potentially different-sized dancers. The costumes had to be durable and washable.

In the past, you've populated your paintings with a fantastic assortment of real and mythical figures, including Abraham Lincoln and Jesus, as well as a parade of adorable animals, dolls, meat and other imagery. Do any of those icons recur in *Whipped Cream* or show up in any of the costumes you designed?

Trying to spot my recurring figures and icons tucked into the show is something people can have fun with.

In creating something for children, how do you avoid coming off as merely cute or, given the subject matter, saccharine?

In our current culture, people try to shield children from the darker or more disturbing parts of life. I feel this is mistaken. That side of life will not submit to suppression; it will always find a way to show itself. Children can handle more than many adults give them credit for. They have a natural, more honest connection to the world of soul, which necessarily contains darkness. Our story of *Whipped Cream* takes a dip into the murkier side of life and the dark recesses of the subconscious. There needs to be contrast between dark and light.

Do you have a favorite character in the ballet? What's your own favorite pastry?

I personally do not find sugar and sweets that irresistible. Sweets and desserts are a theme [that's] visually rich, but I am not susceptible to their temptations. My poison of choice is good old alcohol ... particularly vodka. And it so happens there are three characters in our ballet that are anthropomorphic bottles of alcohol. This trio of liquors includes a Russian vodka named Boris.

Segerstrom Hall, 600 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa; Wed.-Sat., March 15-18, 7:30 p.m.; Sat., March 18, 2 p.m.; Sun., March 19, 1 & 6:30 p.m.; \$29-\$129. (714) 556-2787.

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