BY HILARY PIERCE

LIBRETTO ART ILLUMINATING MUSIC

Music, art, and literature are often inextricably connected. Across centuries, each of these art forms has enriched the others, from ancient Greek dramas incorporating choruses and early operas with ornately designed sets to today's music videos and lavishly staged Broadway musicals. Artists, writers, composers, musicians, carpenters, and costume and set designers have long collaborated to create works that reflect both our realities and our fantasies.

The American Hotel in Sharon Springs, New York

This summer, an exhibition titled *Libretto: Art Illuminating Opera* will be hosted by The American Hotel at Sharon Springs in upstate New York (June 19–September 7). With its white Greek Revival facade and wide, welcoming porches, the hotel stands at the heart of this Victorian spa town's revitalized Main Street. Located nearby are a fine chocolatier, the flagship store for a popular beauty brand, and a developing arts center. This summer, the hotel will welcome its guests, tourists, and creative lifestyle seekers to enjoy a salon-style show that I have been honored to curate. The artworks will be on view not only in the lobby and dining room, but also in the hotel's beautifully appointed guest rooms.

Located just 20 minutes away in Cooperstown, the Glimmerglass Festival has presented live opera and musical theater for more than 50 years. This season's productions will cross boundaries of time, culture, and geography through world-class music composed by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Giacomo Puccini, and Richard Rodgers, among others. Most people know that Oscar Hammerstein II wrote the lyrics for Rodgers's music, but too often we overlook the librettists who wrote storylines and lyrics for legendary opera composers. The Italian word *libretto* translates to "little book," and indeed every opera and work of musical theater is guided by the librettist's storytelling, the result of countless layers of creative collaboration. This reality is the inspiration for the *Libretto* exhibition.

MOZART: LOVE, WIT & HUMAN NATURE

Mozart had been composing for 30 years when *Così fan tutte* debuted in Vienna in 1790. This opera was his third and final collaboration with the popular Italian librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte, who led a very theatrical life. Da Ponte converted from Judaism to Catholicism and became a priest, but was eventually exiled from Venice for running a brothel where musical performances took place. He moved to Prague, where he became acquainted with the infamous lover Casanova.

(RIGHT) **RAM SUENO** (b. 1968), *Outside Her Window, the World Waited*, 2025, mixed media, 36 x 30 in. ■ (FAR RIGHT) **RAM SUENO** (b. 1968), *The Virtuous Gaze*, 2025, mixed media, 20 x 16 in.

Scandals and debts did not keep Da Ponte from becoming a highly sought-after librettist. The Italian title *Così fan tutte* translates as "That's What They All Do," meaning that all lovers play fickle games, question their fidelity, and struggle with undeniable passions. The opera's enduring message is that, through the complexities of love, all people change and grow.

In the *Libretto* exhibition, the complex and romantic storyline of *Così fan tutte* is evoked visually by the mixed-media artworks of Ram Sueno. His curious and lush collages explore themes of self-love and self-realization, including the pieces entitled *Outside Her Window, the World Waited* and *The Virtuous Gaze*. Sueno describes the human experience eloquently in his artist's statement:

> We can be beautiful, weird, different... it's all a wonderful and joyous part of our journey. With hard work and trust in our nature, and with time, we can grow into what we dream. Chaotic, natural environments bring us closer to the power of creation, where we can see our shared beauty and humanity... where, for one moment, we allow ourselves to be anything and everything, and our true selves are revealed, as falling petals and undying gardens.

In New Mexico artist Rebecca Smith Ford's delightful *trompe l'oeil* painting entitled *The Souvenir*, themes of love and loyalty mix with playful artistic deception. Ford deftly recreates a work by Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806), a central figure in the court of the French king Louis XV. It depicts a young woman, dressed in sensual pink satin and carving the initial "F" on a tree while her faithful dog looks up at her adoringly. Ford seems to have attached her replica of Fragonard's famous image to a birchwood panel with a torn piece of masking tape, but in fact everything here is painted. The entire piece literally fools the eye and points out that love is sometimes an impermanent and delightful deception.

Ford's *Peonies and Paisley* is a still life painting that captures the soft translucence of

REBECCA SMITH FORD (b. 1966), *The Souvenir*, 2024, oil on birchwood panel, 20 x 16 in., private collection

REBECCA SMITH FORD (b. 1966), *Peonies and Paisley*, 2022, oil on panel, 24 x 18 in.

MARVIN ESPY (b. 1985), *Aliyah Enters*, 2026, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 18 in.

white peonies, arranged symmetrically in a glass vase against the backdrop of an ornate paisley textile. This piece, with its multiple reflective surfaces and complex patterns, is like an elaborate stage set that dazzles our eyes, just as an elegant soprano does, standing beautifully lit at center stage.

In one of the arias in *Così fan tutte*, Guglielmo sings to his beloved Dorabella: "Be not wayward, dear beguiling eyes; let two loving lightning flashes strike for a moment here."

PUCCINI: TRACING ROMANTIC TRAGEDY ACROSS CULTURES

One of the world's most performed operas is Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, which has made a lasting impact on fine art, fashion, and music since its premiere in 1904. New York's Metropolitan Opera, for example, has staged it more than 800 times, and it inspired the 1989 rock musical *Miss Saigon* (composed by Claude-Michel Schönberg with lyrics by Alain Boublil), which has been performed worldwide over 10,000 times. To underscore opera's impact on contemporary culture, visitors to the *Libretto* exhibition will enjoy a curated Spotify playlist with popular and classical music tracks that span eras and stylistic genres.

The libretto for the tragic, cross-cultural love story of Japanese geisha Cio Cio San and U.S. Navy Lieutenant B.F. Pinkerton was adapted from David Belasco's stage play, which Puccini saw in London. That script had been adapted from a short story by the American John Luther Long, who had discovered the tale in *Madame Chrysanthemum* (1887), authored by the Frenchman Pierre Loti. Loti's novel was based on his

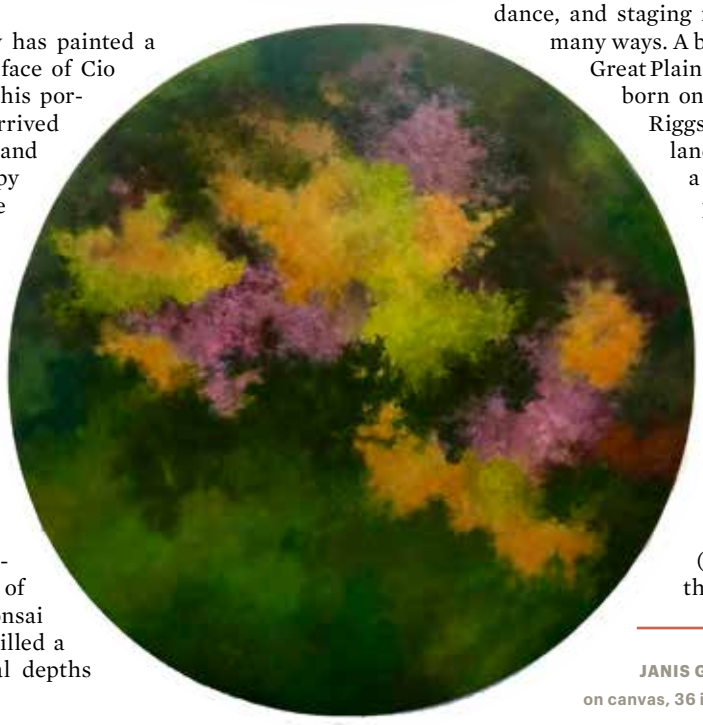
FREYA GRAND (b. 1947), *Wake*, 2025, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in.

JANIS GOODMAN (b. 1951), *Eastern Orbit*, 2022, oil on canvas, 36 in. (diameter)

own life as a naval officer stationed in Nagasaki, where he was briefly married to a Japanese woman. In this case, art truly did imitate life, perhaps one reason the tragic tale of *Madama Butterfly* endures.

In *Aliyah Enters*, Marvin Espy has painted a unique vision of the kind, hopeful face of Cio Cio San. He found inspiration for this portrayal when his studio assistant arrived one winter day wearing a headscarf and greeted him with a warm smile. Espy often finds his sitters among people he meets every day, deftly capturing their spirit and nature in paint.

Meanwhile, in Freya Grand's oil painting *Wake*, a gentle landscape fades from view along with the waves caused by the boat we seem to be on. Grand is a highly intuitive landscapist who imbues her scenes with the sensory experiences she has while working outdoors. Finally, Janis Goodman's oil paintings *Eastern Orbit* and *Bountiful Color* are Asian- and nature-inspired tondos that evoke scenes of Japanese cherry blossoms and bonsai trees. Each of these artists has distilled a compelling aspect of the emotional depths found in *Madama Butterfly*.



JANIS GOODMAN (b. 1951), *Bountiful Color*, 2021, oil on canvas, 36 in. (diameter)

RODGERS & HAMMERSTEIN: AN AMERICAN CLASSIC

Oklahoma! is not considered an opera, yet its groundbreaking blend of music, story-telling, dance, and staging resembles the structure of opera in many ways. A bright, spirited portrayal of life on the Great Plains, it started with Lynn Riggs, who was born on a farm near Claremore, Oklahoma. Riggs's Cherokee mother secured a federal land allotment for her son, providing a modest income that allowed him to pursue a career as a playwright. He produced more than 20 plays before achieving critical success in 1931 with *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the play that later inspired *Oklahoma!*

In 1943, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II debuted the first of their many collaborations, transforming Riggs's piece into a musical filled with clever cowboys, rugged ranch hands, and young lovers square dancing. From the descriptive opening number ("Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'") to the tender charm of "The Surrey with

FREYA GRAND (b. 1947), *Gully*, 2022, oil on canvas, 40 x 40 in.

the Fringe on Top," audiences are transported by music and lyrics that vividly conjure land, sky, and romantic possibilities.

In that same spirit, the *Libretto* exhibition gathers works that echo the main character described in *Oklahoma!* — the land itself. Ford's oil paintings *Pigeon* and *Bark and Moon* lift the viewer's gaze toward expansive skies, while Goodman's *Red Autumn*, Espy's *McCormick* (a watercolor of a red tractor resting in high grasses), and the earthen textures of Freya Grand's *Gully* ground viewers in the iron-rich land. Together they underscore the musical's triumphant closing refrain: "We know we belong to the land, And the land we belong to is grand!"

SETTING THE STAGE FOR A SALON

The setting for *Libretto* is both intimate and inviting. Marco Braeutigam and Michael Palaia acquired The American Hotel last year and envision it as a nexus for hospitality and culture in the region. Palaia says, "*Libretto* is a marvelous opportunity to enhance our guest experience at the hotel while supporting artists working nationwide by selling their pieces both on site and online through the Art Collector's Athenaeum portal. The *Libretto* theme devised by Hilary Pierce pays tribute to the immense talent of our friends and neighbors creating wonderful experiences at the Glimmerglass Opera Festival nearby." ●

Information: *americanhotelny.com. The exhibited artworks can be acquired onsite at The American Hotel or via artcollectors athenaeum.com. The American Hotel will host the exhibition's Reception Weekend July 17–20; see the hotel's website for information and reservations.*

HILARY PIERCE is a curator best known for creating multi-disciplinary art exhibitions in museums and other prestigious venues. In 2008, she established Art Collector's Athenaeum, a fine art advisory service specializing in museum-quality digital archives and curatorial services for private, corporate, and foundation collections. She was a founding curator of the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art and has guest-curated shows nationwide.

MARVIN ESPY (b. 1985), *Woke Love — Be Swift*, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 in.