

Korek, Bettina, "A Closer Look: Thomas Lawson Creates for The Met Opera," *Style.com*, March 17, 2014

STYLE

A CLOSER LOOK: THOMAS LAWSON CREATES FOR THE MET OPERA

BETTINA KOREK



Los Angeles-based artist Thomas Lawson is one of about twenty renowned contemporary artists included in a compelling exhibition currently on view at the Metropolitan Opera's Gallery Met at Lincoln Center. Dodie Kazanjian, director of the gallery since 2006, invited each artist to create "imagined portraits" based on the Met's new production of Alexander Borodin's *Prince Igor*. Lawson and I recently talked in his studio about the suite of six oil-on-canvas portraits titled *Prince Igor: The Inner Circle* that he created.

Lawson, the editor in chief of *East of Borneo*, cited the theatrical and transgender elements of Borodin's opera as his inspiration. He painted each character to mimic various personas that contemporary society has adopted, especially those related to photographs and the idea of being photographed.

Having worked at the crux of painting and photography throughout his career, Lawson described the barriers and facades that people

employ when having their photo taken—especially when producing the now ubiquitous selfie. He explained that he is "interested in translating photographic images into painted images—the back and forth between pictorial rhetoric that you understand as *you*." He investigated this concept a few years back by performing a Facebook search for other Thomas Lawsons, then producing a series of paintings derived from their profile pictures. Whether wearing sunglasses, covering their faces with their hair, or just working angles, people will find a way to dictate how they are being displayed.

The question that arises is whether people realize that they are engaging in this rhetoric of images. The "weirdly intrusive" crisis of the image, the craze for celebrity, and dealing with its consequences is no longer limited to movie stars. As a result, people begin to project their desired image onto the world—but is anyone even looking?

Korek, Bettina, "A Closer Look: Thomas Lawson Creates for The Met Opera," *Style.com*, March 17, 2014



The “glamour dream world” Lawson created for *Prince Igor: The Inner Circle* is moody and dark. He explains: “It features two outsiders, father and daughter, who are a little brighter than the other characters but not necessarily happier. They might be coming in from the light: He’s got light shining on his forehead, and she needs shades. The light disperses their gazes, diverging their encounters.” Though the characters Lawson has painted may form an inner circle, none of them make eye contact.

This concept of a parallel gaze—moving in the same direction but never crossing—serves as a metaphor for the detached relationships that people have within social media networks. You may acknowledge another’s existence, presenting as bright a picture of yourself as possible, but you never fully engage. The light shining off Lawson’s disconnected figures questions whether today’s process of calculated self-representation is a validating one. Are we receiving the attention we hope for by offering particular images of ourselves, or are we deflecting it?