



# Making the Mummies Wince: Cocktails at the Met Launch New Video Series

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by Charles A. Riley II

The stars were out for an after-hours cocktail party at the Met on March 25, 2015 to launch a new online video series featuring artists talking about their favorite works at the museum.

Reflected in the glass canopy over the Temple of Dendur, some of the art scene's hottest talent was gathered for the event, including Itzhar Patkin, Lisa Yuskavage, Kehinde Wiley, Pat Steir, George Condo, Sarah Sze, and Nayland Blake. After dutifully sitting through a brief presentation by director Thomas Campbell and producer Christopher Noey, the talent cavorted with sharply dressed contemporary art curators, interns and PR flaks until chucked out by apologetic guards.

The Artist Project aims to release 100 videos in five seasons of 20 episodes each. The lead-off roster includes Cory Arcangel, John Baldessari, Nayland Blake, Nick Cave, Enrique Chagoya, George Condo, Walton Ford, Natalie Frank, Zarina Hashmi, Deborah Kass, Nina Katchadourian, Nicola López, Alexander Melamid, Izhar Patkin, Tom Sachs, Katrín Sigurdardóttir, Mickalene Thomas, Kehinde Wiley, Xu Bing, and Lisa Yuskavage.



Nayland Blake, Izhar Patkin, Thomas P. Campbell, Christopher Noey, Hank Willis Thomas, Teresita Fernandez, Deborah Kass, Sheila Pepe, Alexander Melamid, Pat Steir, Zarina Hashmi, Il Lee, Kalup Linzy. Photo by Ryan Kobane/BFAnyc.com.

At the podium, Campbell archly pointed out that contemporary artists have been an essential part of the Met's audience from the time of Frederick Church, and praised them as "fearless explorers" of the collection. Then he uncertainly picked his way through prepared remarks (you can always hear the register shift when a Renaissance expert is handed copy from tech support—it surfaces in such unhappy phrases as "populating the Internet with meaningful content"). When the Met takes this tack, it is more "Mad Men" than Malraux.

Former Met director Philippe de Montebello, no fan anyway of contemporary art, would have grimaced. But Thomas Hoving, shameless showman, would have cackled with delight at sticking the Bloomberg Philanthropies with the bill for what is essentially an online ad campaign.

This writer, an acknowledged Luddite, is struggling not to be too critical of the videos. The look is

tame, because they use more still photography than moving image, with the artists assuming the five basic positions of the Professional Viewer. Hands cup chins and noses are perilously close to impasto at several moments. Much of the time we are treated to the unattractive behinds and scruffy shopping bags (don't they have to check them?) of ordinary museum-goers "interacting" with the pictures while the voice-over intones the artist's observations.

The aesthetic is reminiscent of the museum photographs of Thomas Struth, a darling of the Met's photography and contemporary departments who just had a show there. As with Struth, there is something disingenuous going on—not one of the gallery scenes has the ubiquitous upraised arm of the selfie salute or quick reference shot on smartphone that, if this were accurate, would dominate and ruin the feeling.

The use of detail close-ups is nothing new. Kenneth Clark pioneered this approach, and documentaries rely upon it. Why not let the lens rove over the canvas as it so often does in the (much more substantive and sexy) films Simon Schama made with the BBC?

"When you use stills, it's a more immersive experience. You are not distracted by the moving camera," the Met's Helena Guzik patiently explained. An assistant editor of online publications, she was involved in creating the series, the third 100-part video collection (two earlier ones featured Met employees and curators picking their favorite works). The artists were prompted by questions posed by Noey, who studied art history at Williams College.

Getting the right take is hard work, according to Il Lee, who is in season two and who chose Rembrandt portraits and spent two full days in the galleries.

Many who attended were enthusiastic. Barbra Ernst Prey, a masterful watercolorist (The New Yorker once called her "the most widely viewed painter in the world" when her work was on the White House Christmas card) was there en route to a power-players' meeting to vote on National Council for the Arts grants. Although she would be a strong choice for the next roster, she was not involved in the series. As she observed, "It's a way of seeing, and this is the place for the greatest educational experience for any artist in New York."

Perhaps the ideal viewer is Tia Walker, who has plenty of experience in front of the cameras as a reporter and blogger, usually from the red carpet during fashion week. Her pick was the video on the Shaker reading room by Tom Sachs. "It's youthful and brave, and a lot of people think of the Met as stuffy," she points out. She is seeking information on the contemporary artists.



Tia Walker. Photo by Ryan Kobane/BFAnyc.com.

"What does this person have to say? What inspires him and makes him want to paint?" she asked. She briskly noted that for all the times Campbell and Noey mentioned "diversity" in their speeches,

the two videos screened featured paintings of affluent white males.

Much of the fun (and possibly the value for students and critics) is seeing what each famous artist picks. When in 1997 Michael Kimmelman of The New York Times conducted a vastly more intellectual series of stories walking through the Metropolitan and other museums with such thinkers as Lucian Freud, Richard Serra and Brice Marden, the connections were breathtakingly original. The Met's new series has some provocative incongruities.

Wiley boldly chose John Singer Sargent's portraits, while Xu Bing, who has worked in the fields in China, picked Jean-François Millet's *Haystacks: Autumn*, about which he said: "He paints the human subject, the animal world, haystacks, and farmhouses with equality. We see a passion and a respect for the farmer, for the peasant, and that passion and respect is actually a passion and respect for nature."

George Condo played for yucks on Claude Monet's *The Path through the Irises*: "Suddenly I got to this painting and I thought, 'This is a really wild piece.' I mean, this is some of the ugliest combinations of colors I've ever seen in my life."

Although there are a few gems, as expected when an artist is your docent, the commentary is often sophomoric. A terrific drinking game would require an alert spectator to down a shot every time an infelicitous expression is uttered ("stuff" and "incredible" recurred with troubling frequency in the videos screened). Since hipsters are unlikely to huddle at art viewing parties in bars under bridges, most online viewers will be solo. Maybe the cat would take up the challenge if rum raisin ice cream is substituted for tequila.

Speaking of alcohol, the gossip kicked in once the bar was open. Soft-spoken knots of artists with entourages noted which rival in the room had paintings shipped in from Chinese workshops, were jumping galleries, or pumping and dumping at auction. Nayland Blake's beard was fingered by several.



Nayland Blake, Izhar Patkin. Photo by Ryan Kobane/BFAnyc.com.

It was a field day for eager eyes and ears, sadly all off the record. A stunning muse and her genius repaired to a little table in the shadows with Malbec and cheddar until a veteran guard announced last call. They wondered aloud about the prospect of a night at the museum, deep in the temple of Dendur, and the friendly guard, stifling a smile, pointed out that there are cameras everywhere. Brilliant!

How about a season with 100 candid clips that would handily win the battle for eyeballs? "What artists do when nobody is looking at the Met."

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**BASIC FACTS:** “The Artist Project” began in March 2015 and continues for one year.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art is located at 1000 5th Ave, New York, NY 10028.  
[www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org).

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