

# In Practice: Covey Gong

May 9–Jun 17, 2024

**SculptureCenter**

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Covey Gong's work is attuned to fluctuating relationships between material goods, passing from novelty to familiarity. His recent sculpture has intricately taken stock of such transformations of the everyday via abstract metal armatures, disused fabrics, and extra lengths of thread. Building on an artistic interest in the life cycles of objects, Gong's work at SculptureCenter expands to a broader perspective on global cultural artifacts and the transpositions of difference achieved through scenography, architecture, decoration, and the costumed body. His new sculptures take as their subject the 1924-26 Giacomo Puccini opera *Turandot* and the many manifestations over the last century of its setting in an ornamented, imaginary imperial China. Briefly, *Turandot* follows the plot of a fairy tale in which a suitor must answer three riddles to win the hand of the princess Turandot.

Gong's three new works obliquely reference aspects of Franco Zeffirelli's bombastic design for the Metropolitan Opera's production (which includes a golden palace that seems to emerge from nowhere); all of them integrate delicate truss-like stands as structural elements, referencing the technical apparatus of stage design as well as the feeling of lightness, transparency, and fantasy achieved when set pieces are flown on and off stage.

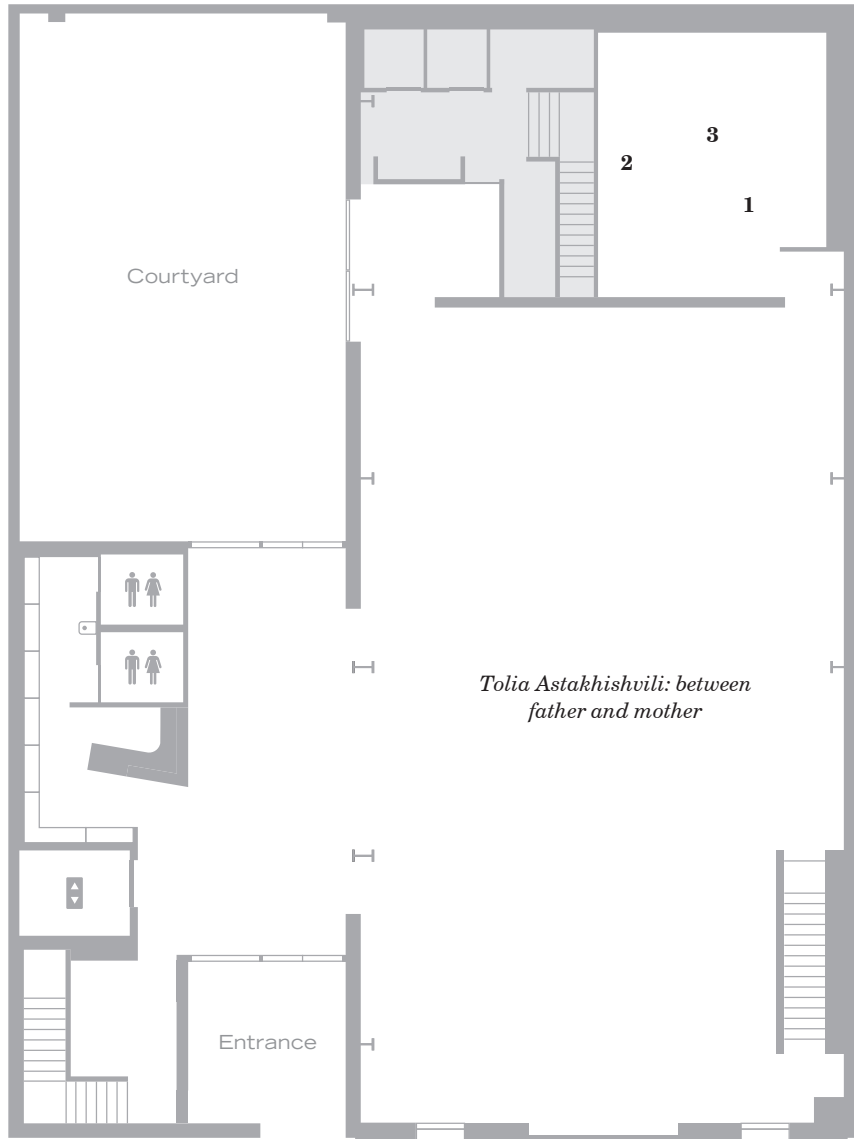
Working in light metals, linen panels, and acrylic to isolate architectural fragments, Gong refines and abstracts his source material, retaining some glints of brass while rendering surfaces in more muted fabrics. His work offers a pause to the frenzy of decor and aesthetic-cultural citations that flow freely across the settings of Western operas while considering principles of negative space familiar to traditional Chinese ink painting. On the backside of Gong's fan-shaped work, three small monitors show the interplay of set construction and backstage preparations of costumed actors from various global productions of *Turandot*. This parallel documentation of ritualistic character and scenographic construction contributes to the larger awe this opera is often built to inspire—awe of its own opulence, and also its live construction of a regal, mythical image of Asia.

By contrast, the reduced forms and limited ornament in Gong's work recall the spare sets and imagery of some contemporary Chinese theater. Gong's references, like Xinglin Liu's scenic design for the Northern Kunqu Opera Theatre in Beijing's production of *The Peony Pavilion* (2014), offer differing ideas for how set design functions: still, austere scenography offer symbols indicating space, time, and mood around which costumed actors are sources of movement and activation. Seen together as three atmospheric objects, Gong's installation as a whole picks up on this theatrical mode while directing his engagement with garments toward experimental fashion design of the late 1990s and early 2000s, specifically how designers approached body and its peripheral space. Together, Gong's works offer a glimpse

of narrative, a few parts or pieces of information, in contrast to a totalizing operatic space.

Gong's concern with *Turandot* as a subject comes from an ongoing engagement with different categories of production—art, design, costume, and architecture. More than this, *Turandot* offers a case study in how these elements converge to produce an unwieldy cultural artifact that travels both with and around channels of capital and diplomacy. Gong's research began with Zeffirelli's sparkling production for New York, but the opera's larger production history encompasses the plot's own transformation from a historically Persian tale to one recast in Italy as Chinese, to *Turandot at the Forbidden City* (1998), when the this globally-constructed aesthetic celebration of China was introduced to a Chinese audience in Beijing. Gong's interest in *Turandot* continues through the story's "authentication" via its subsequent productions in China, and its relationship to a larger "discourse of Chineseness" (as summarized by Nanjing-based theater scholar He Chengzhou) within China and abroad. To this fanfare of intercultural projection, Gong's works offer respite and reconsideration, and for the artist raise questions about his own attachment to these complex modes of aesthetic translation and consumption.

# Works in the Exhibition



Ground Floor Plan

# Ground Floor

- 1** Covey Gong  
*TRD-RF-052401, 2024*  
 Linen, cotton, stainless steel, brass, bronze, copper, tin  
 10 x 92 x 25 ½ inches (25 x 234 x 65 cm)
- 2** Covey Gong  
*TRD-CLD-052402, 2024*  
 Brass, copper, bronze, tin, acrylic, steel, aluminum  
 94 x 102 x 8 inches (239 x 259 x 20 cm)
- 3** Covey Gong  
*TRD-FN-052403, 2024*  
 Brass, bronze, copper, tin, linen, cotton, monitors, cables, footage—

  - 1. *Making of Turandot de Ópera de Tenerife*
  - 2. *Puccini- Turandot at the Forbidden City of Beijing—The Making of Turandot*
  - 3. *Behind the scenes of Turandot - Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires*
  - 4. *Royal Opera House Automated Rigging*
  - 5. *2021–22/ HGO (Houston Grand Opera) Turandot - Behind the Scenes*
  - 6. *A look at the stage and set of the Royal Operas Turandot*
  - 7. *An Introduction to the Royal Operas Turandot*
  - 8. *Making the dragon for Turandot on Sydney Harbour*

73 x 72 x 9 inches (185 x 183 x 23 cm)  
 Pedestal: 5 ½ x 18 x 12 ¾ inches (14 x 46 x 32 cm)

All works courtesy the artist and Derosia, New York

## On View Concurrently

*Tolia Astakhishvili: between father and mother*

May 9–Aug 12, 2024

## In Practice 2024

Covey Gong

May 11–Jun 19, 2023

Phoebe Collings-James

Jun 30–Aug 7, 2023

Bastien Gachet

Sep 2024

Tony Chrenka

Oct 2024

Anita Esfandiari

Jan 2025

Zishi Han and Wei Yang

Mar 2025

## About In Practice

In Practice 2024 marks the twenty-first anniversary of the program. Each exhibition is the artist's first solo exhibition in a New York City institution, and each artist will present new work commissioned by SculptureCenter.

SculptureCenter is a not-for-profit arts institution that takes the history and legacy of sculpture as a framework from which to consider the diverse activity taking place in the field of contemporary art. SculptureCenter's program encourages artists and audiences to explore the possibilities of sculpture and the multifarious ways in which sculpture is developing and connecting to other forms of expression, including installation, video, performance, architecture, and other media.

Since 2003, SculptureCenter's In Practice open call program has supported the production of new work by 250 artists.

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In Practice 2024 is organized by the SculptureCenter curatorial team.

*In Practice: Covey Gong* is curated by Kyle Dancewicz, Deputy Director, and Christopher Aque, Exhibition and Program Manager.

## Sponsors

In Practice is made possible by the Elaine Graham Weitzen Commissioning Fund for Emerging Artists, which supports the production of new work by artists selected from SculptureCenter's annual open call. This landmark endowment established in 2024 reflects Elaine Graham Weitzen's (1920–2017) lifelong commitment to emerging artists and her exuberant support of new ideas in art. Weitzen served as a devoted Trustee of SculptureCenter from 1987 to 2017.

Major support for the In Practice program is provided by the Pollock-Krasner Foundation. In Practice is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts.

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