Contemporary conflict lies at the heart of Christina Forrer’s narrative tapestries. Her fantastical compositions explore themes of family discord and environmental strife, using a visual language rooted in classical mythology and the regional folk traditions of her native Switzerland. A raw and energetic weaving style, vivid color palette, and intentionally misaligned panels combine effects of the handmade with the magical. Surprisingly, Forrer is relatively new to the craft of weaving. She initially moved to Los Angeles in 1999 to study industrial design at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. The influence of this instruction is apparent in her strong concepts, concise storytelling, realistic renderings, and work ethic. Her drawings are stylistically refined and brimming with details in comparison to the more informal tapestries. She began weaving on a floor loom under master weaver Babajan Lazar in 2004–05 at Pets with Fez Weaving Studio in the Highland Park section of Los Angeles. There she learned to weave fabric, tapestries, and rugs and to manipulate visual effects by using different colors and fibers.

Forrer’s unnatural, vivid sense of color derives from a German Expressionist palette. She specifically cites the influence of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938), who collaborated with Swiss weaver Lise Gujer (1893–1967) on a series of tapestries after he moved to Switzerland in 1917. The works share Forrer’s electric color, bold patterns, and a folk-art style, including flat figures and simplified forms. Forrer has also looked to the work of several other groundbreaking European textile artists from the twentieth century. German born, Swiss artist Gunta Stölzl (1897–1983) was a highly influential member of the Bauhaus weaving workshop, noted for her work developing modern industrial designs. Swedish born, Norwegian Hannah Ryggen (1894–1970) was a pacifist who fearlessly wove narrative tapestries with charged political commentary. Her weavings depict notable figures and current events from World War II through the Vietnam War, including Adolf Hitler, Winston Churchill, and Lyndon Johnson. Forrer addresses a different kind of conflict in her tapestries and drawings—more personal but just as charged. Tapping into her own fears and memories, Forrer’s work draws from shared contemporary life experiences. From tense interactions between family members and friends to humanity’s efforts to control nature, the artist’s stories foreground psychological drama and explosive emotions. They brim with absurd humor, anxious interactions, and disturbing aggression. In High Tide (big bow) (2021), a man stares out in wide-eyed alarm, trapped underwater by a woman standing unsteadily on his head, her face just outside the bounds of the composition. Elsewhere Forrer creates such disturbing imagery as a baby wailing endlessly, a father standing forever at a distance, and a daughter plaintively reprimanding her parents. These tense and destructive tendencies between people parallel humanity’s harmful treatment of the natural world. Despite threats
of deforestation, habitat loss, extinction, and pollution, Forrer’s art addresses how people continue to blindly abuse and deplete natural resources. This struggle is one of the central subjects in *Sepulcher* (2021).

*Sepulcher* is the centerpiece of the exhibition—four vertical panels stitched together in a monumental tapestry measuring eight by thirteen feet. The work is a tour de force, deftly combining elements of Greek myth, religious narrative, and allegorical fantasy, as well as Grand Manner and history painting. Forrer calls *Sepulcher* her “unicorn tapestry” after the iconic medieval masterpieces at The Cloisters of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Visual metaphors abound in Forrer’s tapestry and everything is interconnected. Yet from panel to panel, colors may abruptly change and imagery doesn’t always align. Forrer weaves quickly, apparent from the vigorous energy that bursts forth from the work. At first impression, Forrer’s bright and lively composition doesn’t lead the viewer to expect a bleak narrative but the title, *Sepulcher*, meaning tomb, sparks curiosity and hints at a darker theme.

In *Sepulcher*, earth, air, fire, and water become what Forrer calls “natural forces,” animating the composition as dominant, larger figures who radiate, strike, cascade, and burn. The sun sets fire to the Earth. Flora and fauna are plentiful, but dwarf the
smaller humans who have lost all agency and control. Instead of standing above and outside nature, trailing vines, fire lines, blowing winds, and waterfalls connect humans together with animals, plant life, and the elements. In the lower left, the figure paddling the boat evokes Charon of Greek mythology who ferries the dead across the River Styx to the Underworld. On the right, an Adam and Eve story unravels with Eve borne from Adam’s mouth, her arm wrapping the tree and becoming a snake. Is this a cautionary tale, a disaster painting, or the Fall of Man? Overseeing the action, a female figure on the left—perhaps Forrer?—calmly observes the commotion with radiating vision in the form of mourning hearts, a sign. A hopeful Phoenix appears.

With Forrer’s boundless curiosity in art, history, and culture—evident from her varied visual and literary references—her request to curate a complementary selection of objects from the Wadsworth’s permanent collection was enthusiastically received. Forrer searched through the immense collection via the online database, focusing largely on works from the costume & textiles collection and works with mythological subjects. Forrer stated:

“The Wadsworth’s collection is so expansive and multifaceted that it has been a beautiful cross-disciplinary voyage in time and place, and I think the joy for me was to find the connecting thread between the works from the collection in relation to my own practice. It has been really satisfying taking advantage of the vast knowledge of the staff at the museum helping me understand how the tune of “Rock-a-bye Baby” can carry an American cradle quilt from the nineteenth century, [and how] an Italian painting from the sixteenth century depicting the fall of Phaeton [speaks to] Jess’s The Lament of Icarus (1970) who [cites] Rilke’s words [on the back of the painting]: ‘All the worlds in the universe rush into the Invisible as into their next deeper reality.’”

GRENELL LABRADOR INDUSTRIES, CRADLE QUILT, LATE 19TH CENTURY
POLAR BEAR ON ICE FLOE TABLE MAT, C. 1930
Forrer designed her MATRIX installation, placing the collection objects in dialogue with her tapestries and drawings to draw out new layers of meaning. Early-twentieth-century Grenfell hooked mats of polar bears speak to current issues of climate change and extinction, as well as the breakdown of traditional social support networks. Paintings depicting the mythological stories of Icarus and Phaeton suggest persistent masculine hubris as much as the failings of father figures. The charming block-print wallpaper by the Folly Cove Designers that represents a bygone ideal of a family homestead suddenly becomes uncanny in proximity to Forrer’s unsettling and aggressive counterparts. Through her wondrous tapestries and drawings—and the raucous activities and anxious interactions depicted within them—Forrer crafts a startlingly candid vision of the world today.

Patricia Hickson
Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art

### Works in the Exhibition

**Sepulcher**, 2021  
Cotton, wool, and linen  
97 x 162 in.

**High Tide (big bow)**, 2021  
Cotton, wool, and linen  
83 x 41 in.

**Quick Face (or primeval worry)**, 2021  
Cotton, wool, and linen  
18 1/4 x 11 3/4 in.

**Pitiless**, 2021  
Cotton, wool, and linen  
17 x 10 1/2 in.

**High Tide (study without a bow)**, 2021  
Cotton and wool  
9 5/8 x 5 in.

**Between (menschliche Zukunft)**, 2021  
Watercolor and gouache on paper  
14 13/16 x 19 7/8 in.

**We are never there (much)**, 2021  
Watercolor and gouache on paper  
12 x 12 in.

**In Zeal**, 2021  
Watercolor and gouache on paper  
7 9/16 x 9 1/16 in.

**Untitled (vase)**, 2014  
Paint on ceramic  
16 x 17 x 11 in.

All works by the artist © Christina Forrer; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York, and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago. Photo: Joshua White.
Unidentified Artist

The Fall of Phaeton and the Metamorphosis of the Heliades, c. 1510–20
Oil on panel
17 x 32 in.
The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1934.291

Unidentified maker

Beadwork tray, 1662
Silk, satin, and glass beads on iron wire armature
3 1/2 x 24 x 20 in.

Thomas Cole
American, 1801–1848

Life, Death, and Immortality, 1844
Oil on panel
5 3/4 x 11 7/8 in.
The Dorothy Clark Archibald and Thomas L. Archibald Fund, 2008.8.1

Unidentified maker

Pair of Brooches, 1880–90
Taxidermy Hummingbird heads, rhinestones, gold wash, and gold mounts
3/4 x 15/16 x 1 in. ea. (Box: 2 1/2 x 3 1/4 x 1 in.)
Gift of Mrs. E. Sanderson Cushman, 1964.175a,b

Unidentified maker

Cradle quilt, late 19th century
Cotton appliquéd and quilted
40 1/2 x 30 1/2 in.
Gift of Mrs. Paul F. Kane, 1957.73

Table, c. 1900
Shaker (Mount Lebanon, New York Community)
Maple and pine
28 x 23 5/8 x 30 1/2 in.
Bequest of Mary Grace Carpenter, 1999.22.9a,b

Hooked Circular Chair Mat: White Polar Bear, c. 1935
Grenfell Labrador Industries
Silk and rayon on burlap base
10 1/4 in. diameter
Gift of Georgina M. Bissell, 2002.48.4

Hooked Mat, c. 1950
Grenfell Labrador Industries
Rayon hooked into a fine brin (burlap) base
9 in. diameter
Gift in memory of Georgina M. Bissell, 2021.3.5

Folly Cove Designers
Louise Kenyon
American, 1906–2000

Goose Cove Design, 1952
Digital print based on linoleum block print
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester, MA

Jess (Burgess Collins)
American, 1923–2004

The Lament for Icarus: Translation #25, 1970
Oil on canvas over wood
39 x 27 in.
The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1971.34

Arnold Odermatt
Swiss, 1926–2021

Beckenried, 1983, 1983
Color photograph
50 x 50 in.
Gift of Janice and Mickey Cartin, 2004.31.31

Unidentified maker

Large Brooch, mid 19th century
Gold frame and back, containing curls and locks of hair, gold wire, and seed pearls
2 3/8 x 1 7/8 in.
Gift of Mrs. William E. Bond, 1928.281

Giorgio de Chirico
Italian, born Greece, 1888–1978

Le Bal: Head of an Old Woman, before 1933
Watercolor on paper
6 3/8 x 4 7/8 in.
The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1933.452

Unidentified maker

Polar Bear on Ice Floe Table Mat, c. 1930
Grenfell Labrador Industries
Silk and rayon, dyed, on burlap
6 1/2 in. diameter
Bequest of Edward Gorey, 2001.13.46
ARTIST TALK
with Christina Forrer
Friday, August 13, 6pm

Join the artist for an introduction to the anxious and fantastic stories that she weaves into her tapestries. Free live program. Meet in Avery Court.

HARTFORD ARTISANS WEAVING CENTER DEMONSTRATIONS
Saturday, August 14 & Sunday, August 15, 1–4pm

Watch master weavers and artisans from the Hartford Artisans Weaving Center demonstrate the techniques of weaving on the floor loom to create fabric and tapestries. Free live program with museum admission.

ARTIST DISCUSSION
Thursday, November 11, 6pm

Listen to Christina Forrer in conversation with poet and fairytale author Sabrina Orah Mark, whose imaginative tales describe our contemporary familial and societal fears, which parallel Forrer’s visual narratives. Free virtual program. See thewadsworth.org for Zoom program links.

SECOND SATURDAYS FOR FAMILIES
Saturday, November 13, 12–2pm

Put your spin on a paper sampler designed by MATRIX artist Christina Forrer. Then help us complete a giant root vegetable artwork based on The Enormous Turnip, a classic folktale that has inspired the artist’s work. Free.