

# THOM ROSS: REEXAMINING HEROS

*Artist looks at the Battle of Little Bighorn as historical metaphor.*

By John Holt



There are those among us who feel the age of heroes is over, long gone, a sadly dead issue. Many believe that larger-than-life role models no longer exist. Simon and Garfunkel are no doubt still plaintively looking for Joe DiMaggio. Others wonder if we'll ever see the likes of Disraeli, the Allman Brothers or Ernest Hemingway wander down our lunatic road again.



Clockwise from left: Thom Ross with Custer. Young Little Wolf, a Cheyenne warrior who went into battle with his most prized possession, a sword his uncle had given him. He lost the red and blue sword during the battle. Ross adds the final touches to a cutout of a warrior.





ARTIST PHOTOS BY PATRICK BENNETT, YOUNG LITTLE WOLF BY THOM ROSS

There are times when I sincerely doubt that heroes the size of those and others I can think of who peopled my past with visions of such immense talent, personality and wit will ever walk the earth again, but talking with artist Thom Ross goes a long way towards re-instilling optimism on this front.

"There are so many opinions on our history and so many people from our country are given absolutely no credit for being heroes," Ross said. "Don't tell me about Che Guevara, Castro or Genghis Khan. George Washington was the baddest of them all. Look what he accomplished—holding together a ragtag army that ultimately defeated the strongest military force in the world. Then he helped forge one of the finest documents ever conceived (the Constitution). Washington is a classic example of both an unrecognized hero and paradoxically a leading participant in an act in history that now is recognizable as metaphor as an example of the human drive to prevail, to succeed."

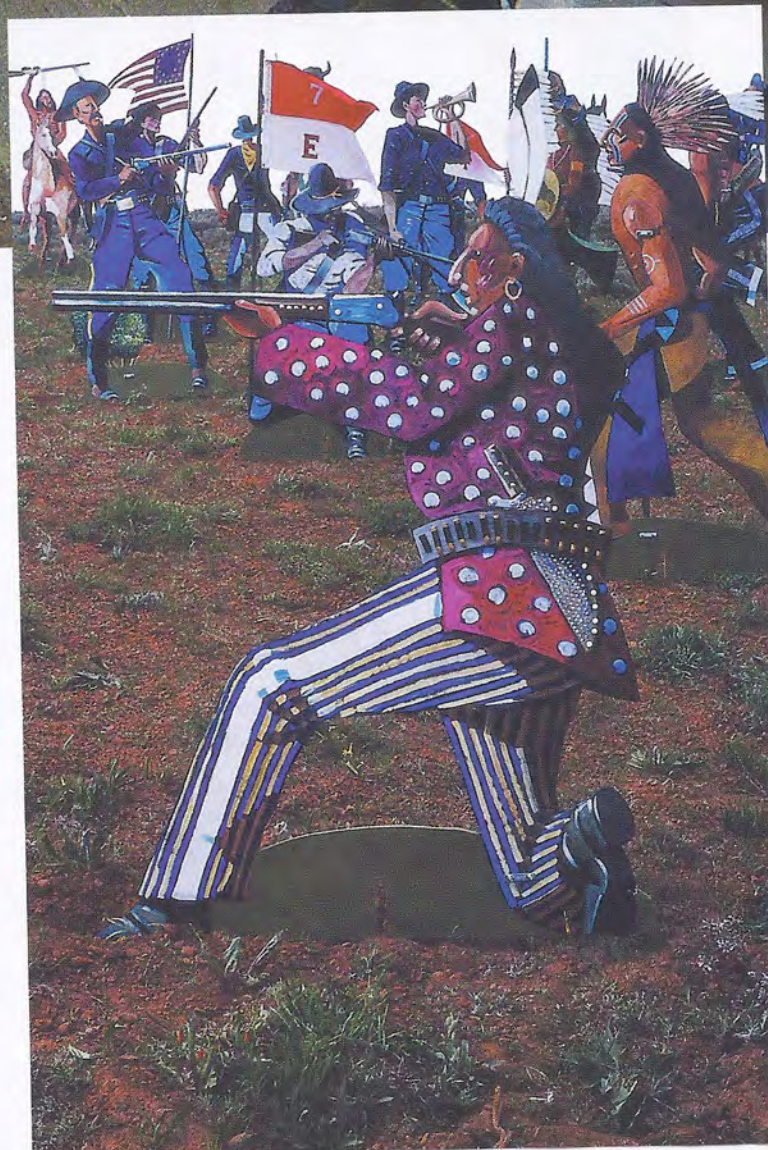
Ross, a Seattle-based artist, is creating a unique, vision-driven, life-size modeling of many of the participants in The Battle of Little Bighorn. He fervently believes that our heroes have never left us, but rather, we've left them. Among many interrelated causes-projects-beliefs is Ross' over-the-top enthusiasm for bringing about a new awareness of history and of those who whiled away in so many of these memorable events. He hopes that this project along with past efforts and future creations, provides some slight expansion of our often limited awareness of what gives an incident the legs to march through

time. He also wants us to reexamine our definitions and perceptions of heroes and in the process to look at the way we conduct our lives and create our dreams.

So right now Ross is reviving, in a way that only he can, Custer, the Crow warriors, Northern Cheyenne, Reno, Benteen and others for a still-life, multifaceted, many-pieced sculpture that is filled with motion. If you can suspend traditional beliefs and "try to see without directly looking," as a Blackfeet friend once said to me as we staggered through the heat near the Alberta border one hot September day vainly looking for upland birds.

"It's definitely not fashionable to say anything good about Custer, let alone champion him as a hero in this day of political correctness," Ross said. "But when you get right down to it he was just another lonely guy on a hill, in this case a hill surrounded by thousands of Crow, Northern Cheyenne and other warriors. That moment comes to all of us. Death





comes to all of us and I see the Indians as cosmic warriors."

Before anyone takes Ross to task for using the word "Indians" instead of "Native Americans," consider the response to the question I posed to another Blackfeet friend of mine concerning which term they prefer.

"Indians, Native Americans, it makes no difference to us," he said. "Those are white words, not ours. You can call us Buicks for all I care."

"And everybody is down on Custer for how he handled the strategy or lack of it at Little Bighorn," Ross said. "Yeah, he sure had a bad day and made a terrible error in judgment, but remember this was a 23-year-old Ohio farm boy who led three charges at Gettysburg in the Civil War. For four years he was a hero in this war. I remember watching the movie 'The Last Samurai' where one of the actors said 'Custer was a murderer.' He was, and so were the Indians at that time. The West was a harsh, brutal place.

"I abhor the way the whites took the West, that they even took it at all, but that's the way things are now."

This attitude and approach is Ross' way of trying to get





Left: In the studio, cutouts stand ready for the installation along the Little Bighorn River. Below: Figures were placed during a trial installation in May 2004.

others to look at history and the people that made it in a different light, not to see things his way, but to just observe things from a different, even oblique, angle to expand their perspective on way back then, the present and possible futures.

Bruce Rosenberg wrote a book called "Custer and the Epic of Defeat," where he explained that down through history many cultures faced the same thing ours has and does concerning Custer and Little Bighorn. It's a cultural superiority complex. He's not saying that whites are better people

than Indians. Rosenberg's saying that technologically we were far more advanced and as a result we thought that we were superior, that we would be able to move through the Crow or Northern Cheyenne at will. Then this national moment almost instantly is transformed into a national myth that clearly transcends reality.

Ross' enormous undertaking was unveiled June 23 - 26, 2005. It is just south and adjacent to the National battle sight along the Little Bighorn River on the Real Bird's Ranch. The Real Birds are Crow tribal members.

"He's been very positive about the whole thing," said Ross of Ken Real Bird. "And when we showed photos of the project to a tribal elder, he loved the work."

The soldiers face life-size figures of Crazy Horse, Lame White Man and many warriors—all together 200 plus figures. These simple figures are a modern but unique approach for interpreting Custer's Last Stand. The figures are not stone-cold realistic nor are they in any way cartoon-like. If anything they radiate a sense of hyper realism much the way Diego Rivera did in his paintings. There have already been general

Hawkman rides into battle with his power animal, a hawk, hovering over him. Far right: Lt. John Jordon Crittenden fought with Company L. He fell on Calhoun Hill, not far from Lt. Calhoun, Custer's brother-in-law.



complaints from historians that Ross has taken artistic license with the figures' designs; they're not accurate, the soldiers didn't dress that way, the warriors didn't look like that, and the list goes on and on. Yet, these same people find pleasure in watching Errol Flynn's "They Died with Their Boots On"—a film that bears at best a passing acquaintance with historical accuracy, yet it

influenced many viewers to learn more about Custer and the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

So, Ross is finding a way to do the same for a new generation. And if those who come and move through Ross' figures do so with an attitude of critiquing for accuracy, they'll be missing the whole point of Ross' project. Ross doesn't believe it's necessary to get every bit of detail in a painting accurate and he doesn't believe that every historical artist needs to.

As stated on the Friends of the Little Bighorn Battlefield Web site (the group is promoting Ross' project) "What art does best is convey emotion, create interest, ask questions, and spark imagination. It's a fantastic medium to draw attention to the Custer story, which includes life as an Indian on the vast American plains of the 19th century, soldiers marching hundreds of miles through



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thunderstorms, across raging rivers, and under the blazing heat of the sun only to meet an untimely death."

WHEN ASKED HOW HE CAME TO THE CUSTER project Ross said, "First of all I'm a long-time Custer fan, ever since as a little kid I saw the Anheuser-Busch painting "Custer's Last Fight" by Otto Becker based on the original painting by Cassidy Adams in 1884. And I've still got on fading paper some of the countless drawings I did as a nine or ten year-old kid of how I thought things went with people slaughtered everywhere.

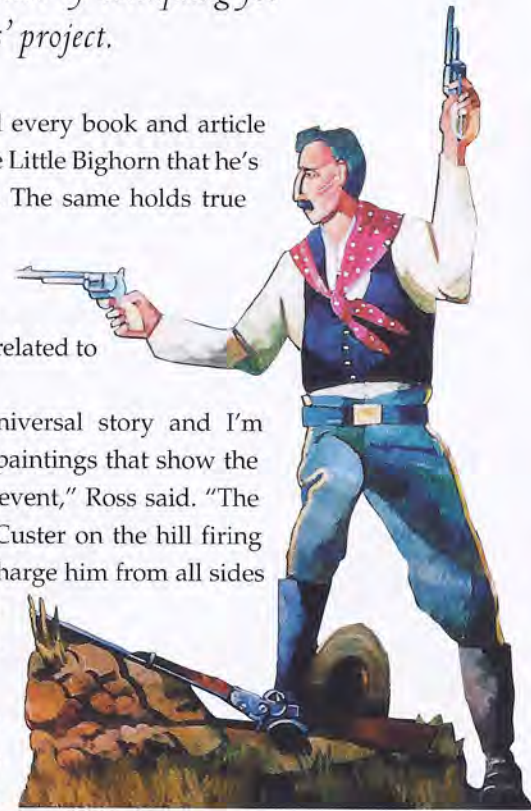
"The 100th anniversary of the battle in 1976 was the single most important day in my life," Ross said. "I went to the battlefield and it blew me away. Here's a little Marin County boy who thought he knew it all and suddenly I realized that he didn't. This affected me so strongly, so much, that I moved to Wyoming.

"Don't ask me what the battle means to a little Indian boy on the reservation, because I don't know. All I know is what it means to me as a San Francisco white boy."

Ross has read every book and article on the Battle of the Little Bighorn that he's been able to find. The same holds true when it comes to intensely examining paintings and photographs related to the subject.

"This is a universal story and I'm tired of all of the paintings that show the same view of the event," Ross said. "The same scene with Custer on the hill firing away as Indians charge him from all sides and all of them done on some little canvas.

"Essentially what I've done is to reproduce that



Anheuser-Busch lithograph in large plywood figures. The project is really a huge painting you can walk into, a form of physical interpretation.

"Who controls the meaning of an event like Custer's Last Stand? Those who control the perspective of the event like the painters I just mentioned," Ross said. "We're dealing with mythology, history as allegory—striving for meaning not historical fact or accuracy, whatever that is.

"All paintings show basically the same view of this event and that's why I'm doing this project, to offer a different perspective and approach," Ross said. "When people walk through these figures on Real Bird's land right next to the battle field, not only do I hope that they see all of this change but I want them to, in at least some small way, become for a brief time part of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Then they will be forced by their own feelings and thoughts to examine and ultimately look at this differently."

ROSS WAS BORN IN 1952 and his interest in art, the West and related subjects began several years later. As explained on Gunnar Nordstrom Gallery Web site where his work appears, he's had a lifelong interest in American History and the "folk hero" who is a product of that history and has long been the motivating force behind his work. His emphasis however is focused on the historical folk hero as compared to the mythical folk hero. (An example of the historical folk hero would be Jesse James, a mythical folk hero would be Paul Bunyan; one actually existed while the other is a product of tall tales.)

His desire is to produce a work of art that requires the viewer to reexamine either what he knows about history, or what he thinks he knows about history. Ross has done paintings of Indians playing croquet; Indians playing ping pong; a camel walking through the deserts of Arizona with a human skeleton strapped to his back; an outlaw member of Butch Cassidy's "Wild Bunch" gang in the quick-draw stance of the gunfighter where his opponent is a skunk; General Custer standing next to his pet pelican; and each of these images is based on an actual incident.

In 1977 he moved to Jackson, Wyo., and in eight years of living there he produced some fun, and controversial, cutout art pieces. The most popular was "154 Nevermore." This piece consisted of 154 plywood raven cutouts, which were nailed to fence posts along Highway 22, which runs



from Teton Pass to the town of Jackson. The 154 ravens were divided in two groups and set up so that they faced each other, 77 on one side of the road, 77 on the other. In the summer of 2000 he returned to Jackson, Wyo., and installed a second version of the "154 Nevermore" raven piece. The birds were installed on the same fence posts he had used for the original installation 18 years before. This time the ravens were fabricated out of steel and were auctioned off at a local art gallery to raise money for the Jackson Hole Art Association.

His next piece was "Willie Mays: The Catch" which was a five-paneled piece showing Mays making his famous catch off the bat of Vie Wertz in the first game of the 1954 World Series. The catch was only possible because the game was played in the old Polo Grounds in Manhattan. The centerfield fence was about 485 feet from home plate; hence, Wertz's drive would have been an easy home run in any other park. But due to the depth of the centerfield fence, Mays was able to race back to the fence and make his now famous catch. This piece first appeared outside of Petaluma, Calif., on May 6, 1984, to commemorate Mays' 53rd birthday. He then returned to Wyoming and placed the "Mays" piece on a hillside above Spring Creek Gulch. To view this work is an exercise in delightful fantasy as five cutouts of Mays are viewed like a connected series of free-form photographs running full tilt up a dry grass hill, the ball approaching, then caught and then Mays turning and launching a throw towards distant home plate. Looking at the multitude of assembled ravens produces feelings of laughter at the audacity of the work and a slight touch of terror reminiscent of Hitchcock's classic movie "The Birds."

Whatever piece or collection of pieces Ross completes is adventurous. Whether it is Willie Mays, a bunch of slightly crazed ravens or 11 steel cut-outs showing the Seattle Mariners' most cherished moment; Ken Griffey Jr. sliding across the plate to complete a come-from-behind victory which eliminated the New York Yankees from playoff contention in October 1995, or his latest and most ambitious project of Custer's Last Stand, the viewer will walk away with an overpowering sensation that he has taken in a work that is honest, energetic and unique.

That's how Thom Ross views our world and approaches his art. **BSJ**



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