

Thom Ross

The Battle of the Little Bighorn, and especially that part of the famous fight known as “Custer’s Last Stand,” has long been a favorite subject for artists, and I’m no exception. My earliest drawing of the fight was done in 1961 when I was nine; I still have it in my scrapbook here in Seattle, old and faded, just like me. Over the years, I have returned, time and time again, to this celebrated event for artistic inspiration and subject matter. There is something haunting about both the story and its physical location in south-central Montana that captures my imagination as an artist and a history buff.

When Evan Connell released his book *Son of the Morning Star*, I was invited to a private party to celebrate its publication. During the course of the evening, I approached Evan and asked him, “Why did you, a noted American

easily recognized as “Custer’s Last Stand.” As knowledge about the Little Bighorn battle grew, artists began to concentrate on historical details, to such an extent, in fact, that some paintings came to be called “historically accurate,” which is odd since there is no way we will ever know precisely how the “Last Stand” looked. The more I thought about it, the more it began to bother me that these recreations, while loyal to known details, had become clichés. While it is true that there is only so much an artist can do with a traditional “Last Stand” grouping, I felt there were ways of stretching the subject beyond the boundaries artists had allowed to confine them. By creating artwork enslaved to a perceived historical reality, they were confining not only the subject, but the meaning of the event to that one day in June 1876.

I wanted to bring Custer and his “Last Stand” into the twenty-first century. To accomplish this, I knew I would have to do something more than just another painting on canvas. I decided that the time had come for me to attempt to produce something bigger and bolder: an installation of some two hundred life-sized “Last Stand” figures made from plywood. Why plywood? Plywood is cheap, durable, and working on plywood is just like painting on canvas with the added benefit that it can be cut into all sorts of shapes.

In thinking about the “Last Stand,” it must be understood first and foremost that when someone is discussing the fight in which General George Custer and 210 men lost their lives, they are talking about, in essence, two fights. One, the Battle of the Little Bighorn, is defined by known facts and

details. The other, “Custer’s Last Stand,” is defined by the social atmosphere at the time the discussion takes place. The facts about the actual battle and the mythology that has arisen through the different tellings are opposite sides of the same coin. Yet, people seem to flip back and forth when they want to make a point, and often their side does not supply the necessary ammunition.

I am reminded, for example, of a great painting by T. C. Cannon called *Zero Hero*. The painting is obviously intended to show Custer: the grim-visaged figure is clothed in a military uniform, has long blonde hair and a flowing mustache, and behind him is a swallow-tailed guidon bearing a bright white number seven that announces the troop as the Seventh Cavalry. Well, obviously, for T. C. Cannon, Custer was no hero. This is an understandable argument

‘CUSTER’S LAST AN ARTIST’S PERSPECTIVE STAND’

..... **by Thom Ross**

poet and novelist, decide to take on such a pop-culture subject as ‘Custer’s Last Stand?’” He told me that he had planned to write a book about American heroes; each hero was to have a single chapter. Billy the Kid and Wild Bill Hickok were completed. Custer was chapter 3. He then told me that as he researched the subject it grew deeper and deeper and seemed to expand the more he tried to contain it. “Thom,” he said, “there is a magic that rises from that river!” When he said that, I knew what he meant. But what is that magic? What is it about the desperate fight on a desolate hillside that grabs the imagination and won’t let go?

The early artists who painted the scene, having no real idea what the battlefield looked like or any information about myriad other details, did what they could, and their efforts, though of questionable historical merit, are still



The Battle of the Little Bighorn has long captured the imagination of artist Thom Ross. He is intrigued by the battle's mythic significance, especially the role of individuals in shaping this controversial fight. Ross will assemble his larger-than-life-sized painted figures on the Little Bighorn battleground this June.

Painting © 2005 Thom Ross, photograph © 2005 Patrick Bennett



Painting and photograph © 2004 Thom Ross

Custer's Last Stand. Ross and his crew conducted a "wind test" with the first forty-two figures on a Washington hillside. You can see two of the company guidons flapping in the wind.



Custer #4. The artist has painted four figures of George Custer, trying different stances. He likes this one best. Custer's wide-brimmed hat lies between his feet and next to it, his tossed-aside Remington sporting rifle.

Painting © 2005 Thom Ross,
photograph © 2005 Patrick Bennett

coming from Cannon's perspective; he was of Kiowa-Caddo descent. Yet, in the painting Custer's role as a Civil War hero is unacknowledged. Custer fought more battles and risked his life many more times between 1862 and 1865 than he ever did on the prairies between 1867 and his death in 1876. The results of his participation in the Civil War led to the preservation of the Union and the abolishment of slavery. In a purely historical assessment, Custer is much more important as a Civil War leader than he is as a man who contributed to the "winning of the West." If Custer is indeed a "zero hero," it should follow that everything he stood for, and fought for, must be wrong too, and that is just not the case.¹ This is not to knock Cannon's painting, which I love. I simply want to point out how specific images can capture and define a belief.

Cinema has likewise been both good and bad to the Boy General, and because this medium is the most influential teller of our national mythology in the modern era, it

1. Of course, Cannon's painting makes a statement that is based on the source of Custer's fame. As historian Brian Dippie noted in a letter to me, "As a Civil War officer, Custer would not command enduring attention." I agree with him wholeheartedly. I am merely suggesting that those who know nothing about Custer's Civil War service will remain uninformed because the painting makes a statement that these people already agree with, namely, that Custer was a bum.



Painting and photograph © 2005 Thom Ross



Painting and photograph © 2005 Thom Ross

When one understands the mythic power of the hero, one can see that Custer's popularity has very little to do with who he actually was. The elevation of Custer and his men to folkloric heroes is related more to overarching questions about human mortality than to the battle's historical importance.



Courtesy Brian Dippie

The heroic interpretation of the Custer battle in F. Otto Becker's *Custer's Last Fight* hints at the mythic quality that Thom Ross hopes to achieve with his own work.



The artist becomes “one” with his figures. He is holding to his back an arrow used in the movie *Dances with Wolves*.

has done the most to deflate Custer’s heroic image. But there is a danger here too. Writing about movies based on a historical event, Jon Tuska points out, “What is being

used, even exploited [by film makers] is the ignorance of history on the part of the audience in order not to interpret, but to distort.”²

Without question, the most famous artistic re-creation of “Custer’s Last Stand,” and one with its own interpretative problems, is F. Otto Becker’s *Custer’s Last Fight*, prints of which have hung in saloons across the country for over a hundred years. This painting too contains plenty of artistic license, but with its heroic interpretation of Custer, it hints at what I hope to do. What I want to concentrate on in my interpretive piece is the mythic quality of the event. By interpretive, I do not

According to Ross’s research, the Hunkpapa Moving Robe Woman (portrayed left) was one of four women who rode into battle at the Little Bighorn. Calf Trail Woman, a Cheyenne, will also appear in his twenty-first-century interpretation of the battle.



mean that I am trying to distort history. Rather, I want to celebrate the all-too-human urge, and need, for heroes. So, my piece, though inspired by the Battle of the Little Bighorn, is not just about that specific fight. When one understands the mythic power of the hero, then one can see that Custer's popularity has very little to do with who he actually was.

The celebration of the self-sacrificing hero and "last stands" throughout time suggests their importance to the societies that embrace them. "Custer's Last Stand" may be uniquely American, but an Israeli will readily recognize it as a variation on Saul's defeat on Mount Gilboa in 1013 B.C.E. or the siege of Masada in 73 A.D. A Greek might compare Custer's defeat to the Spartan defense at the pass at Thermopylae in 480 B.C.E. A Frenchman will see his own hero, Roland, battling away against overwhelming odds against the Saracens at Roncesvalles in 778. An Englishman might change the Lakotas and Northern Cheyennes to the Mahdist Sudanese and turn Custer into General Gordon, fighting to the death at Khartoum in 1885. What matters here is that the essential human story—the struggle against certain death and the hero's grace in facing it—is the same. Merely the names have been changed.

The elevation of Custer and his men to the level of folkloric heroes has little to do with the number of dead and historical importance. Almost any Revolutionary War or Civil War battle had far more fatalities and was of greater significance than Custer's skirmish on the Little Bighorn. To be sure, the Custer battle held great importance to the population in 1876 (as did Davy Crockett's Battle of the Alamo in 1836), but one would think that over time the fame of these men would fade. Yet, this is precisely the point: an insignificant battle can outlast, and become more enduring and memorable, than truly significant battles. Clearly, something else is at work here. That "something else" is the part of our psyche that cosmically, if unconsciously, recognizes that it is our own mortality represented by the "last stand." It is this part of our shared humanity that I choose to celebrate.

In my career as an artist, I have made many cut-out figures. "Dirty Harry" Callahan was my first plywood piece. It was inspired by the scene at the end of the movie in which Callahan jumps off a train trestle onto a bus to save the load of children the killer has high-jacked. Well, that bridge was right down the road from where I lived in



Painting and photograph © 2004 Thom Ross

Ross (right) and his assistant Guy Watkins (left) will complete over two hundred Indian and U.S. Seventh Cavalry figures for the installation at Medicine Tail Coulee in June 2005.

San Rafael, California. My pal Mike Shea and I got a piece of plywood and painted it up to look like Dirty Harry. One morning we went down and nailed it to the wooden edge of the train trestle. A cop on a motorcycle drove underneath us and gave us the "okay" sign by curling his index finger into a circle with his thumb. We were so excited and scared that we took it down after only two hours. Mike kept the thing and used to take it to softball games. At one game, a player on the opposing team actually attacked it with a small .22 caliber pistol! Later, Dirty Harry haunted the neighbors when we moved onto a houseboat in Sausalito. Obviously, these reactions were based on a gut-level recognition of the subject matter, which elicits a strong emotion, both good and bad.

It is this revealing reaction I hope to invoke with this interpretive piece of mine. It is my salute to the mythic tradition that "Custer's Last Stand" represents for many Little Bighorn battlefield visitors, both American and international, as well as a tribute to the creative personages who have helped create it. By the end of May 2005, I will, with the help of my studio assistant, Guy Watkins, have finished some two hundred Indian and U.S. Seventh Cavalry figures. These figures will be at Medicine Tail Coulee on the Little Bighorn Battlefield between June 23 and June 26. The installation will then travel to Sun Valley, Idaho, for a week-long visit between June 30 and July 4 and will finish its tour in Jackson, Wyoming, the following week. *MR*

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2. Jon Tuska, *The American West in Film: Critical Approaches to the Western* (Westport, Conn., 1985), 147.