NOCTURNES

Tracy Stuckey

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American Progress, 2018, oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches $14,800

American Progress 2, 2018, oil on canvas, 54 x 84 inches $15,000

Buck Jones in the Burning Forest, 2018, oil on canvas,
60 x 48 inches $10,000

Pink Guns, 2018,oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches $2,200 SOLD

Waiting in the Moonlight, 2018, oil on canvas, 54 x 60 inches $11,000

The Scout, 2018, oil on canvas, 48 x 72 inches $12,000

16 Fight Over Water, 2018, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches $10,000

Evening in the Desert, 2018, oil on canvas, 42 x 72 inches $10,600

A Night of Uncertainty, 2017, oil on canvas, 42 x 72 inches $10,600

Shoot Out at the Drive In, 2017, oil on canvas, 36 x 42 inches $5,200 SOLD

Sunset Rider, 2018, oil on canvas, 45 x 60 inches $9,500 SOLD

The Night Riders, 2018, oil on canvas, 54 x 72 inches $13,600

The End, 2018, oil on canvas, 45 x 60 inches $9,500

Nocturnes

by

Zoe Larkins

Those familiar with Tracy Stuckey's work will recognize in his new paintings something of a shift. Compared with the glamorous frontier fantasies he has been painting for more than half a decade, these are somber. In many of them, cool hues and dim light replace the bright colors of the Hollywood West that characterize his earlier paintings. The figures that populate the new works are pensive, not playful; static, or nearly so; and unsmiling. As a whole, the series has a new tenor—a deeper, minor tone. Even without a point of comparison, viewers heretofore unfamiliar with Stuckey's work can surely sense the unease that underlies these images.

That Frederic Remington's night paintings inspired the new works helps to explain their darker mood and palette. Stuckey looked to Remington's nocturnes in the wake of the unsettling and, for him, creatively stultifying, political events of 2016. Remington made his night paintings in the last decade of his career and life, when he, too, was disillusioned by a changing America. The majority of his late works depict nighttime in the western landscape that he had previously portrayed primarily in daylight. They are more painterly than the illustrative drawings and paintings that made him the frontier's most famous documentarian. Still, contemplative tableaux, they lack the blustering action of his earlier works. That bravado and the heroic figures that exude it in his best-known works are the clichés of the American West that Stuckey's earlier works parody. In contrast, the nocturnes are stoic and reflective. They depict, for example, a wolf howling skyward; a solitary rider, weary from the day, listening closely to the night; and a sentry leaning against the covered wagon he is guarding. [1]

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1 For a thorough discussion of Remington's nocturnes, see Frederic Remington: The Color of Night, ed. Nancy K. Anderson (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2003).

The quiet nostalgia of these scenes expresses Remington's regret about the disappearing frontier, according to William C. Sharpe. In explaining this, Sharpe quotes an entry in Remington's diary, dated March 8, 1908, in which the artist wrote, "What is America done with its forests gone and the scum of Europe in its place. It may be someone else's America but it isn't mine. I guess mine is about dead anyway and I seem to be doing an obituary." [2] By the aughts, when Remington was making his "moonlights," settlers, municipalities, and industrialists were rapidly developing the western United States.[3] He seems to have made the nocturnes as a final goodbye to the West that he remembered, glorified, and popularized.

Viewed with Remington's sentiments in mind, Stuckey's new paintings certainly have an elegiac quality. But, rather than depict a rugged, romantic frontier, as Remington's paintings do, Stuckey's new works portray a changing West. In Stuckey's American Progress, a riff on John Gast's iconic painting of the same title, a woman in an evening gown shepherds a herd of buffalo out of the picture plane to make way for a steam engine, factory, and telephone cables—signs of the industrialization that Remington lamented.[4] Other paintings, such as Evening in the Desert, The Scout, and The End, might refer to the wave of "settlers" that are currently flocking to cities such as Boise, Dallas, Las Vegas, Phoenix in pu[1]rsuit of work, spacious homes, and a relatively low cost of living. That Stuckey superimposed "The End," in the style of vintage film titles, on the eponymous painting underscores this interpretation.

To read these paintings as an obituary, however, would be reductive and would ignore something that is essential to Stuckey's practice. The new series does not memorialize the West for the simple reason that one cannot commemorate the death of something that has never existed. The West that Stuckey depicts here and in earlier works is not a historical or current reality but a myth. In his paintings, Stuckey approaches the frontier as a fictionalization and cultural

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2 Sharpe, William C., "What's Out There? Frederic Remington's Art of Darkness," in Frederic Remington: The Color of Night, ed. Nancy K. Anderson (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2003), 45.

3 Ibid, 21. Whistler referred to his night scenes as "moonlights," and Sharpe quotes Remington referring to his night scenes with the same term.

4 Gast's painting, dated 1872, depicts Progress personified in the form of a white-robed goddess, floating above Native Americas, settlers, a covered wagon, stagecoach, steam engines, and telegraph lines, all of which move left, or westward, across the picture plane.

phenomenon—one that Remington helped create—that exists only in illustrations, novels, and films, on television, and in the pages of glossy magazines. He does not glorify or perpetuate the myth but deconstructs it and exposes its continued influence on American popular culture.

Stuckey's night scenes, then, are not real or remembered. Neither are they the banal fantasies, made familiar by fashion advertisements and celebrity-studded editorial photo spreads, that his earlier paintings satirize. His nocturnes depict an imagined West that has not been produced and edited for mass consumption. "Moonlights" of a different type, they are eerie dreamscapes—figments of an unsettled mind—that have as much in common with surrealist land- and cityscapes as they do with Remington's late works.

In Fight Over Water, a cigarette girl walks on a shallow puddle without breaking its surface, a kind of divine mirage, and is flanked by two men—in fact the same man, Stuckey himself—who face off like id and ego with toy bows and arrows. Stuckey appears again in The Night Riders, where his figure is not just doubled but quadrupled. Each of the four figures sits atop a playground donkey spring rider and aims a toy pistol at an invisible enemy. Backed into a cluster and defenseless, they are helpless in the entirely futile, darkly humorous way one might be in a nightmare. These scenes are not derivations of a young boy's daydreams or a grown man's fantasy, but the product of an uneasy subconscious.

Why, one might ask in viewing Stuckey's new works, paint dreams at a time when calls for action sound almost daily? What is the significance of these enigmatic scenes to those who more than anything want plain answers and explanations? As in real, waking life and with dreams, Stuckey's paintings do not give answers but prompt reflection, interpretation, and further questioning. Instead of depicting obvious or didactic imagery, they manifest the surreal absurdity of current events and the sense of helplessness and disbelief that they engender. They encourage examination and contemplation.

Of course, dreams end upon waking, and the rosy band that hovers above the mountains in Fight Over Water promises a sunrise. But dawn is not Stuckey's subject. Though they hint at that, these works do not illustrate trite truisms that promise brighter mornings after dark nights. Instead, like Remington's nocturnes, they dwell in the quiet uncertainty of night.

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