

Western Landscapes



*An exhibit by Willem Volkersz at
the Montana Western Art Gallery & Museum*

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It has been said one of the greatest achievements of an artist is to be "of their own time." Willem Volkersz is just such an artist.

Cover:
Western Landscape
Willem Volkersz
2007, Mixed media

One way an artist can be of their time is to select contemporary subject matter. Born in Holland, Willem's earliest memories are of living under Nazi occupation during World War II. As a teenager in the 1950's he immigrated to Seattle with his family. Fascinated with America, as a young man he traveled extensively up and down the West coast, soaking up the natural wonders as well as the large and small symbols of American popular culture. All these experiences have found their way into Willem's work.

Yellowstone Wildlife
Willem Volkersz
2008, Mixed media



In the exhibit "Western Landscapes" Willem focuses on the images and objects relating to life in the American West: the landscape (both idealized and reflective of modern change) and the animals of the wild. Most of these things carry double meaning in Willem's work. Many of the animals are also tourist figurines reflective of modern America's love of travel. His landscapes are enlarged paint-by-number paintings which Willem says, "appeal to me (for) their idealized vision of my newly adopted country." Other landscape subject matter includes modern high rise buildings and tract houses.



Western Landscape #2
Willem Volkersz
2008, Mixed media

an artist?" Our traditional understanding of an artist is someone who both conceives and crafts the work of art. In contrast, the world most of us live in is a consumerist world – our main role is to select and purchase those objects we need or want. The objects, made en masse and identical, sit on retail shelves and racks and wait for us to purchase them to fulfill their purpose and meaning. What happens when the artist also acts as a consumer? Willem's tourist curios and toys are bought and used unaltered. He collects and incorporates existing paint-by-number paintings. His neon shapes are made by a sign maker. Are these lesser works of art because only part of them is made by the artist's hand? It is contemporary for artists to call into question their role in the making of art.

Often these two versions of the landscape – the beautiful and untouched versus the altered and developed – confront one another in the artwork. Also, one can not help notice that in Willem's work houses, birds, or even geysers are often made of neon, reflective of modern signage so prevalent when Willem first came to America. When looking at the artwork by Willem Volkersz one is always aware its modernity.

Historians and artists alike call our present time Post-modernism. One of the central questions of Post-modern art is "what is art and what is



Roadside Attractions
 Willem Volkersz
 2009, Mixed media

appeals to our sense of nature's beauty, but it also reminds us that there is no such thing as untouched nature – everything has been touched (and probably altered) by humans. Human additions, such as houses or buildings, are presented as colorful, or at least as clean and stately, calling into question our comfort level with urbanization. Can our sense of the modern West be reduced to souvenirs? In Willem's work it's all about the nature of ownership – the consumed West we live in.

– RANDY HORST

Willem Volkersz studied art and architecture at the University of Washington and received an MFA in painting at Mills College in 1967. Volkersz taught from 1986 until his retirement in 2001 at Montana State University where he was also Director of the School of Art for six years.

I think the most significant part of Willem's work is how it addresses today's Western issues. By incorporating neon in his work, Willem's art is both literally and figuratively a sign for our times. It speaks to the commodification of the West and our experiences of it. We are made to feel like tourists – to confront how we make meaning of the West as consumers. The images in Willem's work lack messy reality – cleaned up to reflect what we'd like to remember about our experiences of the West. Willem's work



Sanctuary
Willem Volkersz
2009, Mixed media



Safe Haven
Willem Volkersz
2009, Mixed media