

ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST

Movie westerns and TV shows of his youth infuse the post-modern paintings of **Gordon McConnell**
By Virginia Campbell



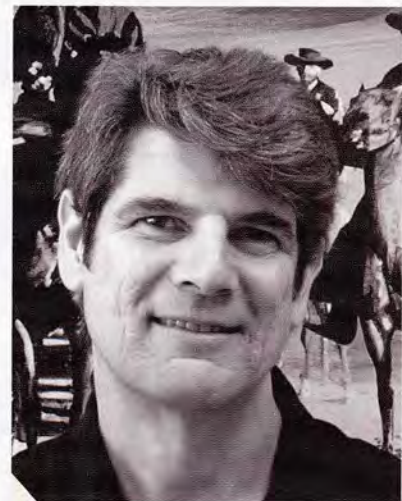


NO MATTER HOW often you've see that moment in a TV crime show when the detectives lean over a computer screen, waiting for the fingerprint match to come up as the machine shuffles through its massive database, it's always gripping. That little drama mimics what our brains do all the time—sorting through a vast store of images and making connections. Looking at the works of Montana artist Gordon McConnell, whose monochromatic acrylic paintings depict iconic, split-second scenes from western movies, gets our mental search engines going click-click-click, finding matches galore. Most post-modern art plays with this process, adding its own commentary with doses of insight, wit, polemic, and, very often, irony. McConnell is enough of a post-modernist to describe his art as “post-westernist.” But, he declares in almost the same breath, “I’m not ironic.”

It is because of that statement that you can invoke the sincerest aspects of the western tradition in looking at McConnell's pictures. In playing with appropriated media images of a fictionalized legendary Frontierland, McConnell is not making fun of the Wild West. The legitimacy of the West as subject matter is real to him: “The culture of the West is something that is accruing a self-consciousness that's going to be revealed over time,” he says. Neither is he indulging in fantasy. “I hope more artists will look at the West in a less sentimental way, at what our heritage in all its conflicted forms represents,” he says. What consumes his imagination is how fantasy and reality collide in all of our memories and perceptions of the West, and how this collision is a crucial, dynamic aspect of the American identity.

“I'm interested in how the history of the West, the post-Civil War frontier, was instantly dramatized and sensationalized,” explains McConnell. “Particularly how one frontier personality, Buffalo Bill Cody, codified western incidents and activities and turned them into common themes and set-pieces that soon began to play out in motion pictures.”

◀SEVEN ROUGH MEN, ACRYLIC, 30 X 40.
SPIRITS OF THE WILD RIDERS, ACRYLIC, 24 X 36.▲



JANE WAGGONER DESCHNER

**DOSSIER
REPRESENTATION**

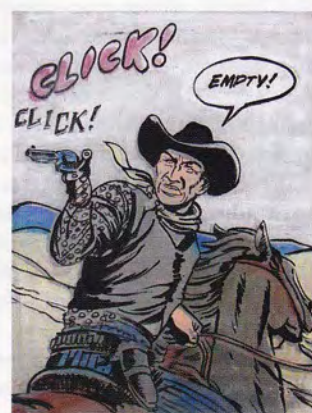


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▲ BY STAGE, ACRYLIC, 24 X 36.



HORSE THIEF, ACRYLIC, EACH PANEL 16 X 12. ▲

“Maybe I’m starved for color. Maybe I’m looking for a way to expand the narrative in my work. I’ve been revisiting comic books from the 1950s, which tell nearly the same stories as the movies. The two riders in the center panel could be the two posse members witnessing the hanging on the left, but the relationship between the images in the montage remains ambiguous. In this piece the same characters move from one medium to another, from film to graphic art to painting and back again.”

McConnell borrows images from movies by John Ford and other masters of the cinematic West, then recreates them in painterly gestures that, examined close-up, are almost abstract. The figures are more like shadows that magically reflect light than solid figures. He then presents them on canvas, paper, or masonite within a space even more two-dimensional than the movie frames from which he borrowed them. Moreover, his two-dimensional space is brushed on in layers, effaced, and otherwise worked over in a way that, in good post-modernist style, mimics and comments on the tradition of painting.

His techniques typically take abstract expressionist turns in paintings as different as *ONSLAUGHT*, in which a charging band of Indian warriors attacks the viewer head-on in blurs of shadow, light, and dust; *RUNNIN' GUN*, which shows a cowboy caught in mid-stride, gun in hand; and *AT A GALLOP*, where the legs of horses hover over their own shadows. In all these paintings, iconic familiarity combines with frozen action and fleeting painterly effects to create a moment of timelessness in which we can play with our own responses.

MCCONNELL WAS born in 1950, right smack in the mid-century era when all that Buffalo Bill represented was coming into artistic flower in classic Hollywood movies like "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon," in Sergio Leone's shoot-'em-up spaghetti westerns, and in a host of TV shows such as "Gunsmoke," "Bonanza," and "The Lone Ranger." McConnell's family lived in rural Colorado, where these entertainments resonated with real-life relevance.

"I grew up where the landscape was austere and simple," he recalls. "My father's farm backed up to the open prairie, and I could see Pikes Peak 70 miles away. My grandfather had a cattle ranch next to our farm." Though McConnell's father eventually left farming to go into teaching, the family stayed in the area.

In high school, McConnell had the advantage of an art teacher who introduced her students to Picasso and Klee, as well as an art club that went on field trips to Taos, NM. Equally important was his involvement with a Boy Scout troop called the Koshare Indian Dancers, which performed traditional Indian dances in a kiva where the walls were adorned with the paintings of Taos greats like Joseph Henry Sharp. In addition to all this, explains McConnell, "Some of my aesthetic education comes from graduating from juvenile movies and television programs to more sophisticated films like Howard Hawks' 'Red River,' where the quality of story, direction, acting, and cinematography was on a different level." Though McConnell's subsequent art education would take him far conceptually from traditional western art, he would eventually return to the familiar ground of these early experiences.

At Baylor University in Texas, McConnell was on parallel tracks in pre-med and art when art won out. He attended the California Institute of the Arts for a semester, studying with John Baldessari, but left there for the University of Colorado, where he broadened his perspective with courses in Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque art and worked toward his master's degree. He explored earthworks, minimalist sculpture, and color-field painting while maintaining a constant involvement with abstract expressionism. It was during this period that he spent a summer in Italy, where he saw firsthand the importance



▲ **THAT OLD SILHOUETTE, ACRYLIC, 24 X 30.**
BUCKHEAD POSSE #2, ACRYLIC, 30 X 30. ▼





DESERT FASTNESS, ACRYLIC, 16 X 20. ▲

of the civic role of art, particularly, he says, “figurative art with narrative and symbolic content. Seeing monumental romantic images projected at mural scale in baroque palaces, I began to realize that movies had taken over the popular narrative function of art in the modern era.”

After attaining his master’s (his thesis was on Joseph Beuys), McConnell relocated to Texas to work at Art Center Waco as a writer and curator. He helped set up about two shows a month, a pace that left less time for his own painting than he had hoped. In 1982, he moved to Billings, MT, where he had been hired by the Yellowstone Art Museum, an ambitious regional museum with a commitment to both historical and forward-thinking contemporary western art. He worked there as a curator and writer during museum’s formative years, and as senior curator saw the institution through to a new 10,000-square-foot building. In 1998, after 16 years, he left the museum to paint full time.

“I’ve had studio space downtown since 1984,” says McConnell, who still lives in Billings, where his wife is a dancer and teacher. “I’d begun working in film-related images in the late ’80s, a direction I’ve been probing ever since.”

Though McConnell’s active pursuit of his art was delayed by a nearly 20-year involvement with art institutions, his extensive curatorial experience seems to have enriched the tone and textures he brings to his paintings—from the ’70s, when he was influenced by artists like Vernon Fisher, Ed Blackburn, Luis

Jimenez, Bill Schenck, and Robert Wade (for whom he worked as an assistant), through the ’80s, when Robert Longo and Susan Rothenberg impressed him, and into the ’90s, when he caught up with the painter who remains his favorite, Gerhard Richter. Watching the art world partly as an artist and partly as a professional curator, McConnell is well positioned to participate in the ongoing creation of the contemporary culture of West. In addition to painting, he continues to write and lecture and curate shows.

In an essay he penned for a show he conceived and curated, McConnell chose to quote photographer Robert Adams about the importance of art. It is a manifesto of sorts that is a complexly optimistic view of the developing culture of the West, and it probably sums up McConnell’s view too: “If the state of our geography appears to be newly chaotic because of our heedlessness, the problem that this presents to the spirit is, it seems to me, an old one that art has long addressed. As defined by hundreds of years of practice ... art is a discovery of harmony, a vision of disparities reconciled...”

What McConnell refers to as the “dark nostalgia” of his mature work comes from reconciling his early experience of the dream of the West with all that has happened to the West ever since. ❖

Virginia Campbell, the former editor in chief of *Movieline*, has also written for *Elle Décor*, *Departures*, and *Traditional Home*.



▲ JACKASS MAIL,
ACRYLIC, 9 X 12.
◀ DOUBLE RIDER,
ACRYLIC, 18 X 24.