

---

# THE DENVER POST

---

## Artist doesn't paint himself into a Western corner

**By Kyle MacMillan**

*Denver Post Fine Arts Critic*

01/22/2010

Like many contemporary Western artists, Theodore Waddell focuses on many of the field's usual (some might say stereotypical) subjects: big skies, sweeping landscapes, and abundant cattle and horses.

But the 68-year-old painter, who splits his time between Idaho and Montana, manages to make the expected unexpected by putting every bit as much emphasis on the act of painting as what he is painting. Or, put differently, his medium is as important as his message.

In a branch of the art world where it is exceedingly easy to fall back on clichés, he has managed to push ahead and create a distinctive body of work that has gained him considerable recognition in Western art circles and, in many cases, beyond.



The largest work in a solo exhibition showcasing contemporary Western works by Theodore Waddell is "Ennis Horses No. 6 Diptych," oil and encaustic on canvas, 7 by 12 feet. ([www.visionswestgallery.com](http://www.visionswestgallery.com))

"Roam," a solo exhibition of nearly 45 of his paintings, drawings, sculptures and prints, has been extended through Feb. 28 at Visions West Gallery in LoDo. It could be the largest presentation of his work ever in Denver.

Waddell was born in Billings, Mont., and grew up in nearby Laurel, a small railroad town, but it is noteworthy that his early works bespeak not his Western heritage but rather then-contemporary currents in the larger art world.

From 1968 to 1976, when he was teaching at the University of Montana in Missoula, he concentrated on abstract, polished stainless-steel sculptures highly reminiscent of those by famed sculptor David Smith, who died in 1965.

It was only when he moved to an in-law's family ranch that he switched to drawing and, later, paintings on canvas, and began to be inspired by his natural surroundings and new way of life.

But, fortunately, he was unable to give up his early artistic foundation, creating dynamic compositions that blur partially and sometimes almost entirely into abstraction.

In his 1-foot-square etching (Waddell is a first-rate printmaker) "San Francisco Angus," it would be nearly impossible without the title to discern that the black masses of scribbles on a background of gray and tan splotches represent cattle.

Indeed, in many cases, his works that come closest to pure abstraction are the most compelling and enticingly mysterious. A good example is "Montana Spring No. 3," an 18-by-36-inch oil and encaustic diptych in which the cattle are just tiny black spots.

In pieces such as "Sagebrush Horses," a 60-by-66-inch oil and encaustic on canvas, he creates fascinating spatial configurations by compressing the perspective and setting aside traditional notions of grounding and modeling. Cows kind of float in the landscape, and rivers appear to fall off the edge of the painting.

Essayists writing about Waddell claim all manner of influences on him, from John Singer Sargent to Claude Monet to Willem de Kooning. Some of these allusions seem distant and overblown, but it is hard to ignore his obvious ties to abstract-expressionism, especially action painting.



Many of Waddell's works, such as the etching "San Francisco Angus," 11 by 12 inches, blur into abstraction. ([www.visionswestgallery.com](http://www.visionswestgallery.com))



His thick, impastoed surfaces vibrate with energy and movement. This master technician applies paint with big, gestural movements using a range of applicators, including brushes, trowels, rags and textured towels.

Also deserving note is Waddell's facility for the line, which can be seen in "Horizon Horse Dr. No. 1," oil, encaustic and graphite on paper. In this strikingly simple composition, a lone horse is spotlighted on the prow of a hill.

The horse is rendered with a series of loose yet telling lines, and Waddell has deftly added a freewheeling series of graphite lines as accents in his depiction of the terrain beneath the animal.

Some of the artist's most potent works have been sometimes stark compositions with the palette reduced to just black and white, or nearly so.

But in this latest show, perhaps to his detriment, Waddell employs some of his most vibrant colors ever, with an emphasis on yellows and blues. At times, he seems too eager to please, and, in some cases, he comes dangerously close to sinking to the commercial.

That said, it's hard not to admire the lush colors in selections such as "Beaverhead River," a 60-by-72-inch oil and encaustic on canvas, with its vibrantly stratified composition of water, trees, land and sky.

Opening earlier this month on the same weekend as the soon-to-close National Western Stock Show, Waddell's artistic ode to the West could not have come along at a better time.

*Kyle MacMillan: 303-954-1675 or [kmacmillan@denverpost.com](mailto:kmacmillan@denverpost.com)*

---

## "ROAM."

**Art.** Visions West Gallery, 1715 Wazee St. This solo exhibition features nearly 45 paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures by noted contemporary Western artist Theodore Waddell. Extended through Feb. 28. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays and 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. Free. 303-292-0909 or [visionswestgallery.com](http://visionswestgallery.com)



VISIONS WEST GALLERIES  
[www.visionswestgallery.com](http://www.visionswestgallery.com)

108 South Main St. Livingston, MT 406-222-0337  
34 West Main St. Bozeman, MT 406-522-9946  
1715 Wazee St. Denver, CO 303-292-0909