

THEODORE WADDELL

HALLOWED ABSURDITIES

Mixed Media Sculpture

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Touring

AN INTRODUCTION TO *HALLOWED ABSURDITIES*

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It is fitting that *Hallowed Absurdities* should premiere at The Yellowstone Art Museum – an organization that has served as much as an epicenter for Theodore Waddell’s career as it has as a repository for many of his iconic and potent paintings inspired by the revered spaces and fauna found in the American West. To glean the artist’s vision of the vast landscape, one may look to Waddell’s painting *Montana*, a cherished object in the museum’s collection. The scale of the work combined with the artist’s reckoning of the subject is in keeping with the magnitude of Montana’s “big sky” and expansive borders. Working far from the cultural centers that have been meccas for notable modern and contemporary artists, Waddell purposefully elected to return to Montana after completing his service in the Army and his studies in New York and Detroit. He has remained a resident of the West where he honors the past and present lifestyles of this sparsely-populated portion of the United States. As a result of his commitment to an undeniable artistic vision tied to this place, Waddell’s oeuvre has become an identifiable benchmark of twentieth- and twentyfirst-century American painting of the West. He extends the visual vernacular of the historic canon of painting in the region. Though Waddell is best known for his Modernist paintings of vast landscapes and domestic livestock, he is driven and inspired by other interests that inform his primary work. *Hallowed Absurdities* is comprised of objects that may be surprising to viewers unaware of the artist’s roots as a sculptor, or may seem completely enigmatic to a viewer unaware of his significance as a painter. In either case, the exhibition

offers a variety of objects that connect to Waddell’s sense of self, place, history, and memory.

Michael S. Malone surmised in his book, *The Guardian of All Things: The Epic Story of Human Memory*, that the evolution of language was the primary ingredient required for human memory to form. Prior to the establishment of an abstract system in which to arrange one’s thoughts and communicate with others, the ancestors of *Homo sapiens* responded to the world on a purely instinctual level. *Hallowed Absurdities* is indicative of Waddell’s own sense of memory, invented visual language, and to a great extent his instinctual and intellectual responses to nature. As a rancher, Waddell was and is not only surrounded by pristine views, but also by the detritus that accumulates as a consequence of cattle operations and natural selection – animal carcasses, bleached bones, shed skin, and the like. All of this material is fodder for considering his place in the world, the natural order, and the results of habitation on the land. These remnants are powerful emblems, reminding the careful observer of his own mortality. Likewise, what may appear as refuse to the casual witness becomes, for the artist, the stuff of art-making – not for the sake of making art, but for the sake of exploring and communicating ideas, expressing a world view, and forming the basis for a conversation.

Hallowed Absurdities informs the viewer of Waddell’s sometimes playful and often ironic concerns that cannot be confined to the

space of the picture plane. The exhibition includes rarely-seen works produced over the past thirty years: painted cow skulls, body bag sculptures, roadkill paintings, and a selection of faux firearms. Perhaps disarming to some viewers due to the re-contextualization of the familiar, these objects reflect the artist's association with the "land" as well as other artists' work. The painted cow skulls recall Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings of floating skulls and Charlie Russell's monogram, while largely reflecting on Waddell's own paintings. The ironic twist is that Waddell's paintings often portray the cow in the landscape, whereas the "hallowed" cow skull is encapsulated in a skin of paint that refers to the landscape. Of this work, Waddell states,

I examine life and death and the connection of human and animal beings. My sculpture began with my collecting skulls that were on the ranch property, mostly cow skulls, but occasionally I found a deer or antelope skull. Initially these were just interesting to me and nothing more. I began to integrate them into my work as a method of dealing with death and our view of it. Our attitudes toward each other are reflected by our treatment of and response to animals.

Following this logical thread, Waddell's body bag sculptures muse on notions about hunting and the pride of a good kill. He irreverently turns the table on the hunter with these creations, and extends the satire with his series of firearms, remembering that time when a stick could become a gun.

Written from multiple perspectives, and by people who know him well, the essays included in this catalog provide a variety of clues to the artist's intentions in his sculptural works. Shanna Shelby provides insight that only a daughter of Waddell could possess, but frames her view through the lens of a curator. Former museum director Terry Melton, who has known Waddell since the early days in Billings, provides insight into the

difficulties of working as a Modernist artist in the wake of C.M. Russell's artistic production – a phenomenon that has daunted many living artists in the region. Coincidentally, the expansive cattle era and ranching life that initially drew Russell to Montana from St. Louis before the turn of the twentieth century also brought Waddell full circle back to painting. The essays by Billy Bliss, Bob Roughton, and the artist himself speak to the gun culture of agrarian life and outdoor sportsmanship. Through these readings, one may better appreciate the sculptural works included in *Hallowed Absurdities*. **To be clear, Waddell's aim is not to provoke negatively-charged discourse, but rather to invoke a conversation about serious issues.** This aim is linked to his rationale as a painter, in which he creates works on canvas and paper to invite the viewer to discover what the artist intuitively knows and genuinely observes to be true in his surroundings. Finally, Brian Petersen's essay poetically connotes what I've referred to, in a past exhibition and essay devoted to Waddell, as "The Weight of Memory" (Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art, Great Falls, Montana, 2011). Writing from the perspective of a friendship that has spanned many years and philosophical conversations, Petersen aptly conveys the balance Waddell seeks in life and art, noting that the two are inseparable, in these friends' mutual views.

Though this catalog cannot replace the experience of witnessing these objects in person, it documents an aspect of the artist's discipline that will more fully facilitate an understanding of Theodore Waddell's overarching artistic concerns. The conversation that he strives to invoke with these creations will not necessarily provide the answers to the complex questions he raises, but it may stir one's own memories and attitudes about living and dying with dignity and respect, coupled with a wink and a nod to the absurdities that pave the distance between those two points.



Rabbit #1 36" x 48" 1985



HALLOWED ABSURDITIES

Terry Melton

The talk of the West in these notes is the talk of the western United States. The great myth of the West, following early explorers, was centered primarily in the spaces passed through by nineteenth-century Eden-seekers on their way to Oregon and California and the promise of gold and fertile fields in the Far West. The Real West was a thousand or more miles inland, those Rocky Mountain States of Montana, the Dakotas, Wyoming, Idaho, and Nevada. Pass-through places. But there was a bounce-back when those coastal Edens began to fail and dreams began to fade. These notes are aimed primarily at Montana – a pass-through place in those earlier myths of the West, but the heartland for Ted Waddell.

The expansion of white settlers in the West often ignored the displacement and miseries inflicted upon native peoples. Many of the history notes generally obscured such errors, and the arts generally spoke of the Noble Savage. The painter George Catlin was possibly one of the few who was steeped in the telling of the elegance of tribal concepts and the beliefs of native peoples. . . the way things were. These stories now are mostly finished, along with lingering and deserved apologies.

Post-Catlin came both the sentimental and romantic picture-makers. C.M. Russell was possibly the best; Frederic Remington possibly the illustrative worst. (But a caveat here; Remington's field sketches, now at the Whitney Gallery of Western Art in Cody, are superb. He should have stopped there.) Carl Bodmer was early with his sentimental but important paintings of the Noble Savage. And there were others: Charles Weimar's landscapes and animalscapes,

and later, Joseph Henry Sharp. By the mid- nineteenth and into the twentieth century, there grew dozens of "Western" painters, most of them forgettable then and forgettable now. They perpetuated mythologies awash with nostalgia and invented facts.

After the trappers and the likes of George Armstrong Custer, an early and tough resident emerged: the rancher. By then, most of the native peoples had been defeated, rounded up, and assigned their land space. Sort of – out of sight, out of mind. In Montana, tribes like the Blackfeet were shunted to lands where few could thrive or endure. And it remains today. (The best writings about contemporary Blackfeet come from James Welch.) The Crow, however, generally solicitous to the white man's push because of their years of rivalry with the Blackfeet, were settled on their tribal lands. Then, as now, certain behaviors are either punished or rewarded. Allegiances remain curious motivators. And into those tribal and far-ranging spaces came the rancher. No apologies need be made for that; old spaces simply became spaces for another generation, another attitude; and those open spaces availed themselves to a new keeper of the land. The land, however changed, took on a different use. Such are lifecycles.

The rancher is a hard-nosed and usually compassionate keeper of the land and animals. He (and any number of she's) cares about vestiges of the Old West and the configurations of the New West. They have a romantic view of the West. . . fist into the storm, hailstones which batter feed crops, winters that try souls, a summer sun which scrambles brains, market ultimatums from



business and economics both local and far away. Along with all that is a sentimental slice of the rancher's world view, always just under the calluses of their hands and spirit.

This Intermountain West is possibly best written about by Wallace Stegner. If one is in the West and of the West, Stegner should be read and understood. No frills, no insipid poetry, just the West and Westness. . . and with that comes my encounters with certain ranchers, mostly in Montana. Isabelle Johnson was one, Bill Stockton was one, and Ted Waddell was and is one. They

encouraged life, were flummoxed with death, and held to the hard-knock resolution of the principles of life in that country where the wind blows and winters test their grit. And most interestingly, these three ranchers were painters of the land, the daily life and the death of it – painters of substance and ranchers of equal substance. Johnson and Stockton are now gone; Ted Waddell still makes art. And it is a curious occurrence, the rancher who can pull a breach calf, toss hay and feed in mid-winter, and also spend significant time making pictures.



Twelve Gauge Teresa 10" x 48" x 4" 2007

Ted Waddell and I met in 1964. We were in Billings. I, a neophyte director, had just taken a job at the fledgling Yellowstone Art Center (now Museum). I painted; Ted painted. He had a studio in a sort of raggedy neighborhood grocery store front. I had a makeshift studio in the art center building. We were young; we developed budding philosophies. We talked about art and artists, and we both wondered about the gods placing us in Billings. Years later I did an exhibition of Ted's sculpture at the new C.M. Russell Museum in Great Falls. His welded sculptures were beautiful and even wowed some of the locals. But in time

Ted realized that the work was more like Tony Smith's and the sculpture minimalists so prevalent at that time. Beautiful pieces they were, but he gave them up. Ted was made of prairie rather than stainless steel.

In those early Billings years, Ted was ranching a substantial acreage in Molt, Montana, just west and slightly north of Billings. I have no idea how many calves he pulled, how many blustery winters he encountered, how much ice he collected around his ears in the winter. But he not only did it, he also caught the



land images, the critter images, and segued into a painting mode which the Impressionists might have taken note of but also could have been a bit confused by. There are no prairie winters in France. His work became not so much of impressions but rather of glimpses of the land and animals, minus some of the specifics of the Impressionist landscape. When one sees (and understands) a cow-calf unit in a storm or in fat grass, all earlier visual notes are up for grabs.

Ted cannot understand life without the opposite understanding of death. Ranchers face it and know it every day. Such understandings have led him not only to paintings of life, but also art objects surrounding death. He has cared for his cattle (mostly Angus) the way a doting mother cares for her children. He has celebrated their life and, with an unjaundiced reality, coped with their death. And we know that life without death is an oxymoron... awkward, perhaps, often ignored, perhaps, but one of reality. Many hold death at bay awaiting some revelation



Prairie Placebo 5" x 21" x 3" 2007

which should come but never comes. God and Darwin bump noses.

Ted pushes the boundaries of liveness and deathness. Both are his subjects. His cattle, the land, roadkills, animals shot and left to rot by gun-toting city folks who just want to kill something – all are a part of his being. His mantra belies any fairness in love and war. But love has its enduring perils. An observer or philosophic-type holds sympathies for those which have gone

before, whether flattened by tires on a back road or simply having come to the end of their cycle. There is really no such thing as the end of the road. Just some stops along the way, some more terminal than others.

There are those who might question Ted's more recent subject matter. So be it. We have hundreds of years with images of an agonized Christ on the cross which celebrates that most certain warranted or unwarranted delivery of death. Such things bring

forth a system of values: Jesus on the cross, or a critter which either came to its end naturally or by being slaughtered by some idiot with a gun with no other drive than to kill. If one talks to a believer in Godness, both parties may be hard-pressed to argue the differences. One professes one sort of salvation, another, a different one. Distinctions sometimes blur.

There are the leavings of death. Some bodies as we know them go into graves, some in small niches for ashes, some just await their consumption by the side of the road. Any rancher can tell you of the importance of the carrion-eaters – the trickster raven, crows, magpies, buzzards, worms, flies – all those creatures in our lives which keep the place cleaned up and continue the lifecycle. All creatures eat. And without that condition we would be awash in residue. Humans may have crypts; critters have their remains otherwise accommodated and perhaps celebrated. Ted's recent work addresses the latter.

Many of Ted's more recent images are unsettling. In the long view, it's either art or it isn't. Others will sort that out. We, as civilized people, should embrace and celebrate the stuff which keeps us going. Such images are sometimes uncomfortable. And we must remain uncomfortable. Popeye says, "I yam wot I yam." I agree; we are what we are, for better or worse. And Popeye's spinach philosophies generally trump those of the politicians and pulpit messengers who tell us that all is well, send money, and the triumphs have just begun. And again, send money.

Ted's life-and-death cycles are a part of us. He puts forward the paradox of a Hallowed Absurdity. Some of his images bring forth a memory of painterliness and praise the traditional images of painting. Others interrupt our accepted conversations and may

astound us, make our scalp itch, make our eyes twitch, and turn our traditional attitudes inside out. And such views of death let us know a bit about the continuum. Accepted taste is fractured and art becomes the thing one puts in. The public may like it or not. It has been that way since Kandinsky. And a less-than-curious public continues to struggle with it all. The curious public does not.

Ted's more traditional paintings (and I don't yet know what that might mean) are loving pushes of paint offering up shorthand glimpses of the prairie and cattle. His more recent diversions of the past ten years or so give an insight to his often sardonic, tongue-in-cheek philosophies. His *Montana Pop Gun*, *Saturday Night Special*, *38 Caliber Derringer*, and *Firestone Single Shot* rail against killing. Others give a lick of the rough side of the tongue to trophy hunters. Those editorials include such works as *Anderson Deer*, *Body Bag for a White Tail Deer*, *King Deer and Trophy #3*. And he offers a sort of reincarnation of roadkill with his crafted images: *Body Bag for a Bullsnake*, *A Rabbit for Frank*, *Diamond Back Trout*, *Rabbit #1*, and *Coyote #1*.

These are among his pointed commentaries. And I find these works to be sobering and paradoxically honest. They are unsettling but not in the manner of the work of some current showmen who would call themselves artists. There are more than miles between Montana and New York's Manhattan.

These Hallowed Absurdities tell us of love and hate, life and death, understandings and misunderstandings. They are artistic statements and social statements. They are beautiful works which rub our noses in certain realities. And they deliver honest stories about the westness of the West.



A Rabbit for Frank 36" x 32" 1998



CONTRADICTIONS POSED IN SCULPTURE

Shanna Shelby

Artist Theodore Waddell explores dichotomous subjects through sculptures of roadkill, body bags, bone guns, and trophies. His animal-themed sculptural work represents many contradictions. The sculptures are beautiful and revolting, familiar and unfamiliar, humorous and disheartening. Over many years, the rancher-cattleman Waddell has seen dichotomy in the lifestyle of those who live in the West, and he has translated that knowledge into works of art. Many who are familiar with the Western lifestyle have experienced the very same opposites. From personal experience, I, too, know the beauty of the cow-calf image on the open range, and I also am disturbed by the heartbreak that often is the end of a cow's troubled labor. As a sculptor, Waddell is a conundrum himself. He cannot be categorized as a Western or a contemporary sculptor and, like the sculpture, that is what engages us.

Waddell's earliest exploration of animal sculptures began in the 1980s with his *Roadkill* series in which he uses real animal carcasses to create two-dimensional sculptural works. The sculptures/paintings are, for the most part, roadkill. Representing the animals in motion, Waddell captures the moment right before death and preserves it. Roadkill is disgusting, and yet when Waddell takes animal hides that are not mangled or dismembered and mounts them on canvas, somehow it is not. He has taken an event that is known to all of us and turned it into a thoughtful experience. Waddell represents the animals with respect and compassion as an act of remembrance.

Waddell's intense view of animals is further developed in the 1990s series titled *Body Bags*. This series of sculptures is inspired by game bags, which are used by hunters to transport their kill. The sculpture is canvas which is cut and sewn as a

bag, zipper and all, in the shape of a fairly ordinary Western animal. The artist then paints it in his distinctive painterly style. Sport hunters typically use game bags for large animals such as moose or elk. Waddell pokes fun at the hunters by making very small bags for less important "game," the snake, for example. Waddell calls attention to the sport of hunting and raises questions as to the dominance of man over animal.

While the inspiration for the sculptures in this series was the game bag, Waddell intentionally titles them as *body bags* and confronts us with a new idea. The sculpture resembles a body bag and symbolizes death. Just the sight of a human body bag triggers a host of distressing and depressing thoughts. Was the death caused by war? Famine? Tragedy? Who is inside? What happened to cause the death? Where is the body going now? Does the family know? Waddell's animal body bags inspire some of the same reactions. He makes us curious about the circumstances of the animal's death and leads us down a more reflective path: Does the animal deserve the same care in death as we do? While the body bag itself is disturbing, the artist suggests shame in our lack of care and respect for the animals. The sympathy Waddell feels for his subjects is apparent, and perhaps he hopes to inspire us, as human beings, to offer these creatures some respect even after it is too late. The body bags are an example of Waddell's examination of death as it relates to both animals and human beings.

Waddell's exploration of the human/animal relationship is also reflected in the artist's *Gun* series. These sculptural pieces are made with some element related to the animal, formed in the shape of a gun, and placed in a well-crafted wooden and felt-lined box. *Pearl Handle #45*, for example, is a particularly



Body Bag for a White Tail Deer 46" x 56" 1994

lighthearted sculpture: a cow's jaw bone becomes a weapon with delicate pearls glued to the handle. Another animal-themed gun is the *30-30 Combiotic*, a metallic vaccination needle in the shape of a gun used for cattle. The *R.45* is a long tube-like instrument used by cattlemen to give calves vitamins by shoving them directly into their bellies.

Western lifestyle almost certainly requires the use of a gun. In the United States, gun ownership sparks heated debate. Waddell's familiarity and understanding of something that is commonplace in the West has given him a comfort level with the sculpture which frees him to be humorous and allows him to treat the heated

topic lightheartedly and without trepidation. Waddell's intention, though, is not merely humor, and given the viewer's individual opinion related to guns, Waddell's sculptures can also be offensive. It is the artist's intention that his use of the symbol of the gun will cause the viewer to critically examine his/her views regarding hunting and shooting, as well as their responsibility with the end result.

Waddell's *Fish Trophies* are certainly the most amusing of his sculpture series. His fish are made with ordinary materials arranged on a simply-painted wood wall mount. With each fish sculpture, Waddell touches on a different theme. *Dry Land Trout* is



Diamondback Trout 9" x 24" x 2" 1989



Dryland Trout 18" x 55" x 6" 1989

a witty representation of a fish made out of tumbleweeds. The tumbleweed is a symbol of dry and dangerous conditions, and by shaping it into a fish, the artist creates a clever juxtaposition between water and drought.

Waddell's *Trophy* series, however, is not at all humorous. The artist takes a more serious approach in the mounted cattle and deer heads. The mounted cattle head forms are made from styrofoam that is shaped and then covered with canvas, which is then primed and painted. The beautifully painted cow and deer trophies are a sobering commentary on the mounting of prized "kills." Game and exotic animals that are shot and

mounted are symbols of conquest and dominance. Waddell takes "common" animals that are truly valued as part of the Western livelihood and mounts them in the supposedly honored fashion of prized game as a way of illuminating our relationship with and treatment of animals. Waddell challenges the viewer with a meaningful question: Are we living in harmony with animals, or are we simply dominating them for our own purposes?

Waddell's two most powerful and visually dramatic works from the trophy series are *King Deer* and *Anderson Deer*. Both dated 1991, the sculptures are portraits of two well-known African-American civil rights leaders and peace activists: Marian



Anderson Deer 12" x 32" x 21" 1991

Anderson (1897-1993), an acclaimed African-American singer who challenged racial barriers and helped initiate the Civil Rights movement in the first half of the twentieth century, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), who, of course, led the Civil Rights movement in the middle of the twentieth century .

The two mounted deer trophies were made from papier mâché forms used by taxidermists. Waddell covered the forms with a

black undercoat used to protect the undercarriage of cars, and then added some white touches of color. The artist's choice of contrasting colors is a reference to the African-American struggle in white America. Visually, the dramatic contrast between the beautiful and graceful form of the deer and the white painted areas on both pieces emphasizes the sobering quality and melancholic tone of the subject matter. Representative of the people Waddell honors, the two sculptures are examples



King Deer 31" x 20" x 22" 1991

of beauty in the face of struggle. Once again, Waddell uses the human/animal relationship to challenge our perceptions not only of animals but also of ourselves.

Ultimately, in all of his animal-themed sculptural work, Waddell invites us to react and consider our interactions with and concepts of animals and also of death. Whatever the viewer's response to the works, what is always present is Waddell's familiarity with the

animals and profound respect he feels for these creatures. The cycle of life and death is also the cycle of joy and sorrow, and while death is often viewed negatively, Waddell is not taking a negative position. The sculptures are simply the forms of the animals made from what has been left behind and transformed into something new. Through his compelling work, Waddell gives a voice to the animals and, hopefully, we can learn something from them about ourselves.



Diamondback Implant 4" x 10" x 14" 2000

SIGHTING IN: SHARED VISIONS

Bob Roughton

When I met Ted Waddell in 1991, it was just a case of one guy doing some work for another. Neither of us could have predicted the ongoing friendship and alliance that grew out of our first encounter, or the strange coincidence of ideas and attitudes about life, death, wastefulness, tragic violence, and the absurdity of killing animals primarily to be used as trophies. For one thing, Ted's art comes from a place in the human brain that is mostly dormant in my own. That's a fundamental difference, and there are others as well, but it is in the places where we coincide that excites us and makes our collaboration fun and fruitful.

I spent my teen years in a mountain village just north of the Mexican border with a wilderness of forest and chaparral outside our back door. With no 7-11 parking lot hangout, and only two kids my age in our one-room schoolhouse, the forest became my playground and refuge. In retrospect, I think the years of immersion in nature awakened in me a marrow-deep connection with all things wild, including the inanimate. It sounds corny, but Nature is in the very deepest sense my religion. But, I didn't have such thoughts then. I was just a child of the forest, dressed, when not in school, in clumsily-sewn buckskin moccasins and sparse clothing. Mom later told me we were poor, although like many poor kids, my sister and I didn't know it. So the small-game hunting and fishing I could do in those mountains were not only my greatest pleasures, but also put needed food on our table.

Sixty-odd years later, after an M.S. degree in wildlife science and a career in research, my connection to the natural world is more nuanced and informed. But it still feels innate, inseparable from the me I know. And I still prefer killing my own food, believing it to be more ethical than lulling domestic animals into a state of trust and dependency and then betraying them. This is a deeply

personal matter to me, and I neither condemn others for their choices nor beat myself up for buying pork, dairy, and poultry products that are produced under often deplorable conditions. But then, there are no wild chickens or pigs where I live now.

At the tender age of 14 years, I stopped killing anything I didn't plan to eat. One clear memory, like a photograph to this day, is when I had been shooting ground squirrels with my then-deadly accuracy. Suddenly felt like a murderer. I guess I sensed on some level that, in the great scheme of things, the life of that "lowly" rodent was no less important than my own. Now, through the lens of a biologist and decades more of experience afield, reading, arguing and engaging in occasional serious thought, my faith in that idea is unshakable. Soon after the ground squirrel incident, I stopped respecting celebrated outdoor writers who labeled non-game animals as "varmints" in order to forestall any guilt that a reader might feel as the prospect of killing something beautiful and vital, often just to watch it die. Later I came to despise competitive trophy hunting for the false bravado it engenders and for its encouragement of the immoral abandonment of kills that do not measure up to what is likely to win the new rifle or SUV put up by sporting good manufacturers and retailers. I further lament the linkage of "sport" with hunting, because to me "sport" is a (hopefully) non-lethal contest between more-or-less equally matched contestants. In my view, there is nothing sporting about killing a fellow creature, regardless the motive.

Native peoples worldwide and throughout history are not conflicted about killing for food or defending their interests from animal depredations. "Making meat," in mountain man or aboriginal parlance, may truly be a contest of skill versus wariness and keenly-evolved senses, but not likely viewed as sport. And to pass up a perfectly suitable animal for one of



"trophy" class would be downright silly to pioneers or native peoples (or me). Moreover, there is abundant evidence that some native peoples ritually honor the animal lives they take, and some even look upon a kill as a voluntary gift from the animal. I can't sign off on the voluntary part, but I have often spent a post-kill moment thinking about the life I have taken and how I fit into the big picture. I always feel a bit phony about my "gratitude" because, unlike native people, my life doesn't depend upon a successful hunt.

Nonetheless, if behavioral scientists and anthropologists are to be believed, hunting is part of human nature; our hunter-gatherer ancestry is still manifest in our genes. Whatever the case, as a former wildlife professional, I know that the absence of wildlife management would result in little to hunt or otherwise enjoy. Extreme and widespread suffering in many species, and the relegation of most wildlife to zoos and parks would result. You only have to travel to other developed countries to see what the absence of regulated hunting and public lands leaves behind. The anti-hunting sentiment, which I respectfully disagree with,



Snakecharmer 5" x 33" x 5" 1992

comes partly from not understanding these dynamics, but also from our increasingly urban lifestyle and concomitant separation from nature - our genetic roots.

Institutionalized religions have anointed humankind, I believe falsely, with the responsibility of stewardship over all the world and all its creatures. Gulp. This feels like a really heavy mantle and reeks of the self-importance, the hubris, that plagues many human societies and individuals. It cuts us off from other sentient beings, alienates us from the rest of God's creation, sets up an

"us vs. them" mentality that we also apply, tragically, to our own species. I reject this notion and enter a plea for us all being related and equal. All predators, being my equals, have a right to kill and eat me, my cat, or my chickens. And I have an equal right to protect myself against such depredations - without animosity - and to kill food, animal or vegetable, just as other animals do. I reached this conclusion even before my job educated me about the billions of dollars of damage that wild animals inflict on livestock, farming, forestry, food storage, human health, etc., every year. And that's just in the United States, where we have

the wherewithal and technology to alleviate at least some of the damage. Globally, uncontrolled animal damage is an important factor in widespread malnutrition and poverty.

Once, when friends lost all their chickens to a fox and said, "The fox was there first," I had to scratch my head. I absolutely love foxes and would first try to keep them away from my chickens. But if that failed, I would kill the depredating fox in a heartbeat and feel sad about it afterward. As for "stewardship." I don't have to feel like the Lord-over-all-things to see the sense in trying to preserve a vibrant and diverse biosphere.

My dad and I were members of the National Rifle Association for many years. Back then the NRA represented hunters and supported conservation. Later, they seemed to court gun fanatics that weren't necessarily hunters. I dropped my life-long membership the day an NRA editor, in a sweeping and absurd generalization, ridiculed non-gun owners – people who feared or had no interest in guns – as "little old ladies in tennis shoes." I'm one of those hardheads whose guns would have to be pried out of my cold dead fingers, but I despise the NRA for using scare tactics and distortion to advance their flag-wrapped "anything goes" agenda. They could, instead, use their political clout to encourage a national dialogue to help resolve our horrendous track record for shooting each other. On the other hand, I agree with the NRA that if it were politically and physically feasible to ban all privately-owned guns, criminals would still own and use guns to commit crime. Most deliberate violence is neither random nor crime-related, but between people that know each other. There's no doubt in my mind that, absent a gun in the drawer or closet, other weapons would replace guns. Violence is the issue, not guns.

Enough of the rant; back to the bio. When I hired on as a government scientist, I regarded my work as a wildlife biologist as my contribution to conserving the untamed natural world I have loved since childhood. Even as a teenager I felt a responsibility to "leave the campsite cleaner than I found it." My gurus were Aldo Leopold, Adolph Murie, and Sigurd Olson. I planned to give it twelve to fourteen years, then find something

that didn't involve job security. Instead, it took twenty years to make that move, to go to the place where my soul resided – Montana.

I built a home on the edge of another wilderness, easy walking distance from the Montana-Idaho divide. There was little work available in that sparsely-settled logging country, so I hired out as a carpenter, somewhat qualified by decades of woodworking, remodeling houses, and building cabinets, furniture, small buildings, and other stuff. I declared myself a furniture and custom cabinet maker and finish carpenter. It didn't pay much in Heron, Montana, (or anywhere, for that matter) but I loved it. When my wife and I got fed up with the total disconnect from the outside world, (we had no TV reception, no newspaper, no radio) we moved to Bozeman where we could breathe again and feel part of a culture that wasn't anarchist, isolationist, or white supremacist. There, I could again do what I loved: woodwork.

I met Ted Waddell in 1991. A dear and mutual friend, Rick Pope, knew that Ted was looking for a woodworker who could help translate the wood elements of his sculptural inspirations into something palpable. Rick set up the meeting in a Bozeman bar. After twenty-two years, that meeting place still seems perfect for our first conversation. But at the time, given the noisy setting and complex subject matter, I wasn't sure I understood what Ted wanted. A few hours and a few beers later, I was intrigued and ready to start making sawdust. I wasn't counting on anything big coming of a barroom encounter, so it came as a surprise when Ted called the next day. He was serious. I think our first collaboration was *Snake Charmer* (1992). Ours has been a great alliance. We enjoy every meeting and every piece we work on. Moreover, Ted is the only person besides me who cares about roadkill; that alone is a weird but serendipitous coincidence.

Anyone who knows Ted, or who has read some of the many attempts by critics to figure out what his animal and gun pieces are about, will see that we have come to our collaboration from different perspectives. Nonetheless, we agree more than disagree about our place on the planet, our kinship with all life, and our conservation ethic. We share similar views on death,



BONE HANDLE .45
THEODORE WADDELL
1992

Bone Handle .45 11" x 17" x 4" 1992





cruelty, waste, human vanity, wanton killing, trophy hunting, and the inevitable, if fleeting, sadness that arises when we pass a roadkilled *anything*. As Terry Melton implies, humans and sometimes their pets are memorialized by crypts, headstones, or lovingly-scattered ashes, but the death of individual wild things is scarcely noticed. Ted makes sculptures to remind us.

I sometimes salvage a fresh roadkill hide and tan it to hang on my wall as a tribute to the beauty not only of the immediate life lost, but as a reminder of its living kin, my neighbors on this planet.

That fascination started as a small child on road trips with my family. I would see a roadkilled something and beg my father to go back so I could see what it was. One of the great things about being a grownup child is that I can damn well stop and turn around if I want to. Like the time in southern Arizona, doing coyote research, when I saw a really flat roadkill whose size and color didn't fit the usual suspects. I turned around and went back and discovered it was one of the rarest mammals in the United States, Coati mundi, a Central American relative to the raccoon. By some miracle the skull was intact, so I cleaned it up, bleached it and displayed it in a case.

Even better was the time on the treacherous, two thousand-foot plunge of hairpin-curved Highway 89A outside Jerome, Arizona, when I saw a fresh roadkilled ringtail, one of my favorite critters. This is an uncommon and secretive, mostly nocturnal small mammal of the Southwest, a total omnivore that specializes in catching bats – in midair, mind you – in caves. In all my years as a field biologist, I never saw a live one. I literally risked my life and that of my disgusted and freaked-out girlfriend by parking in the traffic lane (there being no shoulder on the road), and sprinted back to pick it up. What an unexpected treasure! I put it in an ice chest for the ride back to Montana, then skinned and tanned it. Now it hangs on my wall like prized art. In a similar vein, I have a couple of mounted game heads, not as proof of my virility or prowess, both of which are dubious these days, but as evidence of the Creator. Not Manitou or Vishnu or the angry God of the Old Testament, but the indisputable, irreducible, and unknowable life force we should all be able to agree upon.

After the past twenty-two years and the coincidental parts of our histories, it no longer surprises me that Ted Waddell and I connect. Our collaboration seems inevitable, and I look forward to working with him for as long as we can both see to work.

Trophy #14 19" x 33" x 34" 1986

Body Bag for a Bull Snake 9" x 42" 1995



Previous page: Coyote #1 48" x 72" 1982-1986

Firestone Single-Shot 8" x 15" x 3" 2007

MY LIFE WITH GUNS

Theodore Waddell

Before I had my first gun, we all had toy guns – from little cork popguns to dart guns, which were great favorites. Occasionally, one of us would get a cap gun that was really cool. The best cap gun I ever had was a double-barreled pirate gun. We had torn the caps off the roll one at a time and put them in place so they popped. We all loved to shoot our cap guns. Brent, my neighbor, had a repeater cap gun. We put the roll of caps into the area where the cylinder was, and the used paper roll popped out the top as we shot. It was really neat, especially the smell of the burnt caps.

Roy Rogers and Red Ryder, with his wonderful Winchester Repeater, were our heroes. We tried to have holsters for quick draws and the big wide belts, but no one really had anything like that, so we improvised with rope sling-like things. Once I think I had a holster that was close to the real deal, and I vaguely remember using a shoelace to tie it down.

The first real gun that I remember having was a single shot BB gun, which I kept around for most of my life. It was basically worthless. The BBs often fell out the end of the barrel and when anyone shot it there was no telling where it would go, totally out of kilter, as much as six inches off at thirty feet. But I learned about guns with that BB gun. Brent also had a pump BB gun. We would load a long tube with about fifty BBs and then we pumped to cock it. My uncle Tom had a BB gun that looked like the old model 93 or whatever 30-30 that was featured in the movies forever. It would break windows (which we did). Once in a while, we would sneak over to the new school that was just being built, and we'd shoot out a few windows. The gun made a cool sound when it was shot – a pneumatic poof – and a little hole would appear in the window. I have always associated the sound with the hole, or vice versa.

After what seemed like endless years to a twelve year-old, my

dad gave me his old 20-gauge bolt action shotgun. I still have it. He bought a 16-gauge Winchester pump for about eighty dollars. He took a long time to decide what to get... and a long time to pay for it. These guns are highly prized, maybe even more so today than when new. I still have that gun too. Dad bought the 16 because he was small and he thought that a 12-gauge would be too much for him. The stock was too long for him, so he cut off about three inches of it and put a different butt plate and a neat new cover on it. He saved the three-inch piece; why, who knows. Those guns are sort of like keeping your dad's watch or something.

I was also fascinated by the shells. They were sized, it seemed, to your fingers or your thumb, with the twelve being the size of a big thumb and the effete 4-10 being little-fingered elegance. My friend Brent had a 4-10 single shot that was really cool. In later life, I acquired a 4-10 bolt action which was never really used because I was at the end of much of my gun days. I also had a 4-10 pistol called a snake charmer – highly illegal. I made a sculpture about it. Still have the sculpture.

Much of my interest in hunting as a kid was in the process, not the activity as much. To get ready to go hunting was a big deal. As with fishing, preparations started about the middle of the week, with clothes. What to wear? How cold would it be? How wet would it be? We made sure that our long underwear was ready. I loved the cotton long johns, especially when it was cold. Early in the morning, they seemed to hug my legs in such a way as to make me feel stronger than I actually was. Towards noon, though, they got clammy and made me more tired and uncomfortable. All I had for pants were overalls (the precursor to the 501's I always wear now), so that's what I wore. I had two coats: a cold winter coat, and a not-so-cold coat. Boots vs. overshoes was a big deal, too. I really liked the idea of wearing leather boots. We spent half the winter one year looking in the Herter's catalogue



for insulated boots. Herter's was a sporting goods mail order place in Minnesota, and it presented a fascinating array of things for a twelve-year-old to dream about and long for. I could get a lot done by fantasizing about things in that catalogue, from boats to bass fishing (which I never have done), to hunting for white tails in the hardwood forests in Michigan.

Getting the leather boots ready was a ritual that went on for at least a couple of days, maybe three. First we cleaned them, including the shoestrings – although it was cool to replace fabric

strings with leather ones, picked from the rack at Wold's. Next, I would get out the Hubbard's shoe grease, which had a great smell and slippery feeling to it. I would stuff my shoes with newspapers, to make them hold their shape, and take out the laces. Then, with an old toothbrush, I'd fill the soles with grease, and I'd rub the uppers by hand – no rags, just hands. Then the boots were put in front of the stove to dry – a gas stove with a real burner and visible heat. This would take a day, and then the whole process was repeated. Most of the time, at the end of it all, there still would be a hole left in the tongue area, which



Montana Poppun 10" x "58 1992

would let water into the boot, and the excellent waterproofing job would keep that water inside, soaking my feet all day. When the hunt was over, the boots would be stuffed once again with newspaper, this time to dry out the insides. On hunting days, it sure was cool to wear those beautiful boots with gray wool socks, their red tops carefully folded over above the boots. At least, it was nice until about 10 a.m., and then it was too hot with those heavy socks and boots for the rest of the day, not to mention the stickers which inevitably collected on those wool red tops and worked their way to my toes.

Cleaning the guns and deciding on shells were the last rites before the hunt, usually starting late Saturday afternoon and ending with everything carefully draped over the chair for quick assembly and departure in the early morning. There was a generic one-size-fits-all for shotguns, so my dad and I shared the same old shotgun cleaning kit, with its three wooden sections and threaded brass fittings, which were screwed together to achieve the proper length. The brass fittings weren't all that great, so the assembled rod wobbled a bit and the edge of the brass threads would drag at the top of the barrel with a sound



R.45 11" x 17" x 5" 1992

that would make my teeth chatter. At one end of the rod was a threaded fitting with a steel brush. We dipped this brush in Hoppe's No. 9 and pulled it back and forth through the bore of the gun many times. Then, we replaced the brush with a rod that had a long slit in it, through which a piece of rag was pulled so it stuck out both sides. We used old diapers (my sister's) or old T-shirts. The size of the rag was critical. If the rag was too small, it wouldn't clean the sides properly, and if it was too large, it couldn't be pulled through the bore of the gun. After we pulled several rags dipped in Hoppe's No. 9 through the bore, we pulled a clean rag through and then inspected it for dark blue-black gunpowder stains. Next we put a piece of white paper into the breach and held the gun up to the light, barrel first, to see how clean the barrel was. Usually, it sparkled – a beautiful machined-steel polished tube. The worst thing that could happen was for the barrel to have pits in it, caused by moisture and rust and who knows what. In all the years that I cleaned my guns, I never saw even a hint of pits inside the barrel (though the outside had plenty). Finally, after the inspection was complete, a rag with a coat of light gun oil was drawn through the barrel to prevent rust and protect it from moisture. In contrast, our neighbors the Noels never cleaned their guns at all, to my knowledge, and yet they had beautiful, well-kept equipment that never rusted.

The final preparation was to decide on shells: how many, what size. We used size six shot for pheasants, size four for ducks, and size two for geese. Goose-hunting involved more elaborate plans for the shells: my dad would load a size two shell in the magazine of his shotgun, so it would be the last shell he shot after the lighter shells. His theory was that if he hit a goose, then

the last shell with the heaviest shot would bring it down. Later, magnum loads were available, which was just more powder in the same-sized casings, but the funniest part was that none of it helped because we rarely saw geese and the ones we did see were too smart to fly low enough to allow such shots as my dad dreamed about. It was a great theory, though, and led to many daydreams.

The shells were beautiful with different colors: red, green, a beautiful muted blue, and yellow. Nowadays, it seems like they are just basic green and red. I loved the different kinds and brands – the names themselves, like Remington and Winchester, conjured up dreams of John Wayne, Red Ryder, and later, for me, the painter Albert Pinkham Ryder. The gun names, too, were evocative – the poorest name included Stephens and all of the foreign guns. My dad had the theory that the Fox double barrel was made of faulty steel and would blow up in your face. On the other hand, we both coveted the Browning Automatic.

Before hunting day, we would pick what guns we wanted to take and my dad would put a whole box of brass-topped shells in the loops of his hunting coat. Since we weren't very good hunters, we shot little (only once in my life did I shoot more than a few times on a hunt, and then it made my shoulder hurt), so the idea of putting a whole box of shells in this coat was absurd. But we were always optimistic, and the shell loops looked dramatic. My dad's hunting coat was the most beautiful coat I've ever seen: it was made from a brownish, yellow-ochre canvas, and after it was washed many times and faded from the sun, the creases and wrinkles stayed dark and the rest became a wonderful

variety of subtle earth tones, like coffee with cream in it. It had slits in the back with a big rubber-lined pocket that would hold any game we got, but I only remember seeing a bird in it once – a pheasant, with its bright tail sticking out the side.

My shells went into an olive green shell belt which was strapped to my waist. I lost more shells than I shot because the loops were not closed at the bottom. My shotgun, the 20-gauge Stephens bolt action, had two clips. The clips were poorly-designed, so if I put in two shells, which it was supposed to hold, it would always jam. My dad had some guy braze it to keep it from splitting apart and jamming, but that didn't work. So, I put one shell in the clip and one in the chamber, instead of two in the clip. State regulations forbid more than two shells in the magazine even though all pumps and automatics have magazines that hold five and (I think) sometimes six shells, in addition to one in the chamber. Some cockamamie notion about being fair to the ducks and geese we're trying to kill. When Dad first gave me the gun, it had a sort of chipped, varnished finish. I decided to refinish it, so I spent hours and hours sanding the stock and rubbing the barrel with steel wool to get rid of the rust. I never finished it, and it is still sanded-looking to this day. I did learn to "cold-blue" the barrel, and I spent considerable time later in life "cold-bluing" sculpture. Still like that process.

With those preparations complete, we turned our attention to making lunch for the next day. My favorite sandwiches were Spam and mustard, or bologna and mustard, or cold meatloaf. I hated peanut butter and jelly, and straight jelly would make my teeth chatter. My dad would open a beer and pour it in a glass. He would tap a few grains of salt from the shaker into the glass – I always liked to watch the salt grains settle, like slowly sinking shooting stars. He would pour a glass for me, and I would do the same thing, most of the time with way too much

salt, which settled to the bottom in a white mush, but I drank it anyway. Mom made cookies and added our own apples, which I didn't like very much because we had them all the time – apple sauce, apple butter, apple pies, apple strudel, deep dish apple pie, and one disastrous attempt at cider.

At last came the actual hunting day. My dad would set the alarm, but I don't think he ever let it go off because he always got up early, a habit from work at the train yard. He would drink coffee and smoke cigarettes and I would have hot chocolate and a piece of toast with cinnamon and sugar on it, or, once in a while, cold cereal. In the last of our hunts together, which probably happened when I was sixteen or so, I was used to staying out late the night before, carousing with my friends, and in the morning, my dad would wait patiently for me, every once in awhile saying, "If you don't get up now, we won't go." I'd get up, tired and sometimes hungover, and go with him. We would load everything in the car, guns carefully positioned with barrels down and double-checked to make sure they weren't loaded. We always left in the dark so that we could be in our favorite place by daylight. I don't ever remember it making any difference whatsoever, but that's what we did.

I have never hunted much. But I do remember fondly those days with my dad and all that he taught me about guns, and game, and reverence, and how to be treated, and how to treat others.

Guns continue to fascinate me to this day, more as tools or pieces of art than anything else, and as weapons of harm in that, today, the only reason I would use a gun is to protect my family and myself from other human beings. I hope this show will help people expose their feelings about guns and what they think about having them or not having them. Whatever their opinions are, what matters to me is the hope that we can talk about it.



SATURDAY NIGHT
SPECIAL

THEODORE WADDELL 2002[®]
CRAFTED BY BOB ROUGHEN

Saturday Night Special 4" x 10" x 14" 2002

THE BONE GUNS: MYTHOLOGY MEETS MORTALITY

Billy Bliss

"My optimistic nature is not incompatible with a constant awareness of death."

~ artist Francis Bacon

I have known Ted Waddell for roughly thirty-two years, from Molt, Montana, to Hailey, Idaho. From my perspective, aside from great artistic success and new zip codes, I don't see any change in him. He has been intertwined with the landscape of the American West all his life, and this is a most obvious asset to keep one grounded. There are so many alleyways to go in an essay about this exhibit; I'll just focus on the bone guns.

These guns aren't going to be understood by everybody, and I am certain Ted knows this with a smile. I imagine one demographic would yield pure praise – the male crowd, ten years-old and under. I've painted these little curvilinear lines on small canvas panels for decades, ad nauseam, and those lines come from a reduced form of the AK-47's I would religiously sketch in my grade school notebook margins. It is fortunate fifth grade was in 1980 for me; if I was caught sketching those in one of today's classrooms, my future may have involved a lot of time laying on a couch, talking to bearded men about how I feel. I just thought the guns were "cool." For many cultures around the world, hunting is synonymous with masculinity. From Boones Mill, Virginia, to Wigan, England, and well beyond, a boy killing his first deer, duck, grouse, or other prey was a "clear indication of coming-of-age."

From the bone and pearl-handled 45's to the 12-gauge Teresa, Ted packs some serious abstract hardware. He is neither a hunter nor an avid shooting range guy, but he also has real rifles and pistols in various strategic places, I believe primarily for self-defense and secondarily because he considers them sculptural, though I may have the order wrong. When our Second Amendment was ratified in 1791, the colonial governments in place considered bearing arms a citizen's right. It was also *mandatory*. This carries on today in countries like Switzerland and Denmark, who do not have standing armies.

Aside from the clichéd Glock-in-the-saggy-pants urban gangster, a fascinating quality to guns and gun ownership is the way people have presented them. In private homes, unused arms are often hung on a wall with artistic geometry, maybe adjacent to a painted hunting scene or a mounted trophy. If ever there was an indicator of how a majority of gun owners feel about their active weapons, it is the walnut-glassed and lighted gun case. Why do we do this? A gun is essentially another tool in the shed, but one never sees a private collection of hammers and wrenches hung from the wall with gallery-quality lighting shining down on some elaborate display. Although self-preservation through arms has been important for our country, building a structure or using

a tool for repairs has been just as vital as a gun throughout American history. I believe the gun wins appreciative first place because of its mythology, but more so because the knowledge of its capability instantly connects the viewer with his or her own mortality. Ted has nailed this theme with these works by outsourcing the production of the elegant boxes in which these pieces are displayed. Between the actual bone guns and their velvet-lined boxes, Ted has arrived at both points of mythology and mortality.

In terms of capability, our society can only pray that the use of the gun for hunting will always outweigh other reasons. In his book *Guns in American Society: An Encyclopedia of History, Politics, Culture, and the Law*,¹ Gregg Carter mentions hunting as being clearly divided into two schools of thought. The first is that hunting is a "barbaric holdover from pagan centuries." Gun rights groups, such as major hunting clubs and the NRA, have released many statements to counter that opinion by using it. They say the "barbaric holdover embodies the anachronistic quality of truly connecting man with nature." In his artist's statement of 1992, Ted mentions artists in cities being one step away from real life-and-death issues. There are tragic vehicle-related accidents, a myriad of cancers, friends or immediate family members whose funerals request your presence, muggings, etc. I disagree to a point there; I do think artists living in cities have a perhaps more immediate notion of life and death. What I wholeheartedly agree with is that growing up collecting cow skulls on your ranch gives you a much better perspective on the natural lifecycle than seeing someone shot outside a Quick-E-Mart in the Bronx.

The musician Johnny Cash was interviewed in the height of the flower-power years, and he was asked why he thought urban violence and hunting were still so prevalent. He replied, "It's because we haven't been out of the woods that long." In his book, Gregg Carter quotes a hunter regarding the dichotomy between those with guns in the outdoors and those without: "To many hunters, anti-hunters seem well-meaning, but are essentially voyeurs of nature, refraining from participating in the

cycles of death and regeneration that inform natural processes." To me, that's most objective and well-spoken. Don't ever judge a man in a beater pickup just because he has a gun rack, dons full camouflage, and may have deer urine on his boots. He could be the town philosopher.

On the urban notion: since 2005, the right-to-carry laws have been passed in thirty-four states in the United States. Since then, violent crime is down, rape is down roughly 20%, aggravated assault is down 30%, as are the statistics of larceny, burglary, and auto theft. The only statistics that have remained steady for years are those of hunters *not* committing crimes and face-to-face robberies. Although on opposite ends of ethical behavior, they are statistically holding the steadiest percentages since the gun laws passed.

Do yourself a favor if you have the interest and the internet. Go to youtube.com and key in "Guns of the West." These are videos of the best shooters in today's American West using yesteryear's equipment. Listen to the teachings, and watch the fervid joy these guys take in shooting various single- and lever-action guns. Take in their names: "Wild" Bill Hickok, "Wayne 'Depot Slough,'" "Mustang Bill," and "Bob 'Vaquero' Munden" top the list. Look at their outfits, their conviction. The myth is alive.

Ted's bone guns incorporate human creations (bullets and cases) and animal forms, yet are not focused on either. They point to the human condition in relation to our natural surroundings. They highlight realities such as necessity, male bravado, self-defense, and the inherent desire for humans to make their treasured possessions appear to be treasure. The clearest message sent in Ted's show, guns and body bags and all, is to be cognizant of your mortality. The beautiful deal is that it's delivered with a Tabasco injection of levity. The thought of mortality without a sense of humor is an unenviable way to live.

¹ Gregg Lee Carter, ed., *Guns in American Society: An Encyclopedia of History, Politics, Culture, and the Law*. (California: ABC-CLIO Publications, 2012)



.38 Caliber Derringer 3" x 7" x 9" 1999



GUNS OF PLENTY, BONES OF DUST

Brian Petersen

There's a ghostly aspect to much of this: memories, near memories, the inkling of something almost seen from the corner of your eye. Not far from where Theodore Waddell was raised, in Laurel, Montana, lies the Little Big Horn Battlefield National Monument – the site of Custer's Last Stand – with its modest, solemn visitors' center and rumpled, windswept hills, the small stone memorial markers white as communion wafers, the earth still seemingly damp with the wine squeezed from hundreds of young lives. South and west a few hours is the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, in Cody, Wyoming, featuring cowboy and Indian artifacts and memorabilia, western and native art, a vast gun collection and more. Great Falls, Montana, boasts the Charles M. Russell Museum, and down closer to home in Billings there are the Western Heritage Center, Yellowstone County Museum, Women's History Museum, the Moss Mansion – on and on. The seminal critic Leslie Fielder once famously decried the Mountain West as so raw and recently settled that to study its history one had only to go out to field and kick at the dirt. The idea here was that Montana and other borderlands like it had leapt from frontier status directly to grandeur, enshrinement and self-mythologizing without any respectable interval of civilization in between.

Enter the artist Theodore Waddell and his bones, bullets, and back roads reveries. He's treading some different ground, to be sure, kicking up a separate dust. But there are similarities, certain parallels, at least. An exhibit of his sculptures and mixed media works might evoke a western historical museum, or perhaps the den or smoking room of a great white hunter, with trophy mounts, pelts and plumages, and prized small-arms-rarities in their cased displays. Except – except – for the otherliness, that eldritch quality, which is precisely Waddell's art.

Through metaphor, the *mimesis* of Aristotle's *Poetics*, through

what Waddell himself has called "manipulating the information," he addresses head-on the constant yet oft-unacknowledged, "What was that? Out of the corner of my eye?" issues of non-city western life: violence, mortality, development, greed, poverty, the intersection of man and beast, too many people and too few beasts, too many people and too many people. The invocation of poetry is apt given the deftness and acuity of his visual language, which allows him to bring humor, pathos, elegance, farce and, alternately, ferocity to his subjects, while staying the heavy hand. "Poems," writes the scholar Helen Vendler, "are hypothetical sites of speculation, not position papers. They do not exist on the same plane as actual life; they are not votes, they are not uttered from a podium or pulpit; they are not essays. They are products of reverie."

I first met Ted Waddell years ago in a bookstore in Billings. He was a small, mustachioed, wild-haired figure in paint and manure-spattered Carhartts and four-buckle overshoes, who had taken to appearing regularly and ordering poetry, two or three volumes at a time, and quite fine poetry at that: Maxine Kumin, Jim Harrison, William Stafford, Diana DerHovanessian. Finally, I realized that his growing reading list corresponded closely to the poems read by Garrison Keillor on public radio's *Writer's Almanac*, which I inquired about and we discussed. Introductions followed, and I had to hazard:

"What do you do, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I'm a *painter*," came the answer, "I *paint*."

"You mean," I said, noting the coveralls, his hands, the red, green, and white flecks even in his hair, "like...barns?"

Thus ensues an episode typical of Waddell and his assiduous approach to his work: something catches his eye (or in this case his ear), a possibility is broached, and he begins a prolonged, if

eclectic, study of contemporary poetry and fiction.

The same patterns, these purposeful forays, can be glimpsed behind virtually every work. The old skulls and snakeskins, the carcasses and cartridges, are collected, combed, shaped and aimed toward animating the heart of the matter. As Hemingway put it in regard to writers, "Everything you do and see you use in your work;" and Picasso, in an appropriately zoological trope, spoke of art not only guiding or illuminating a life – animating it, you might say – but also subsuming it: "The cat eats the bird; Picasso eats the cat; painting eats Picasso."

"Animated," in its root meaning – from *anima*, life, soul, spirit – is no doubt a better term than "ghostly" or "otherly" in that Waddell's sculptures and roadkill art suggest a certain abiding presence, a sentience even, a sense of silent witness. The writer Ben Mitchell, a past curator of Waddell's work, has noted the influence, particularly on the trophy sculptures, of New York's Pop Art scene of the early 1960s, when Waddell was studying at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. The elevation of the mundane to art; the color, stylishness and audacity; the inescapable suggestion of a send-up or spoof – all are as evident in the trophies and roadkill works as in Warhol's Coke bottles, Campbell's soup cans or the moody, moving Marilyn Monroe post-mortem dreams (Waddell, as it happens, owns one such print).

It's a happy fact, the presence of this Warholian wit and slyness, for the subject matter of Waddell's work is otherwise serious, solemn, even deathly, in a word. Of the sculptures, roadkill art, and mixed-media assemblages, he has written:

I examine life and death and the connection of human and animal beings. . . .

Death is an integral part of life in the country and is reflected in the most obvious ways by our relationship with animals as experienced in raising cattle, hunting wild animals, or in killing animals accidentally in road-kills. We are constantly confronted by our own mortality by being a part of the food chain and our interdependence on animals. It extends in a direct way to our intentional ecological choices of allowing agriculture, mining and industry to pollute our streams, air and land. On a ranch death is always with us. . . .

Absent the wit, the style and the potent hand of the artist – in other words, absent the art – the sculptures and other works would be gloomy at best, macabre or even morbid. As it is, Waddell addresses mortality while conveying the essential appeal, attractiveness and oddness of the beast – Waddell calls them "animal beings" – in a moment of its being. Few of us in the West have avoided entering the home of a hunter, or a lodge, or a tavern, the walls of which are adorned by actual stuffed trophies: deer, elk, bear, moose, fowl, fish, the entire gallery of the doomed. After the initial shrug or murmur or even compliment – "That is one bodacious beaver you got up 'ere in your room, Earl!" – the swift and irremediable impression is one of dusty, glassy-eyed death. These babies are as cold and bloodless and, ultimately, storyless as a supermarket cod. Beyond the visual novelty (and on occasion, outright burlesque) Waddell's trophies, to the contrary, seemingly offer a narrative, a back story of their own. The poise, stately jawlines, pensive silence, implacable eyes: you almost expect a pithy comment or thoughtful aside. A few minutes in front of the one-horned *Trophy #3* and you can imagine yourself asking, "What do you



think, Uncle Vincent, should we keep the old home place or find something closer to town?"

The beauty of the pieces, as opposed to humor or mere visual charm, flows directly from the artist-as-archivist. One can imagine Warhol gathering ideas from the streets he walked and company he kept: a case of soup in a grocery window, Coca-Cola on a billboard, the Little Red Book of Chairman Mao in the coin-purses of the friendly Manhattanite *soi disant* proletariat. Likewise – and to the contrary – Waddell can be pictured discovering, literally unearthing, inspiration and raw materials in his own bailiwick: the fields and prairies, the killing floors and carrion dumps, the roadsides where the birds and beasts have been battered and flung.

It's no surprise that the Warhol works that carry an emotional weight and complexity comparable to that of Waddell's work happen to be the parti-colored Marilyn Monroe silk screens, displaying the woozy, nearly funereal expression (she had died even as Warhol was beginning his efforts with the silkscreen process), the tragic vulnerability in her eyes, her lips pursed as if for speech. "What was she about to say?" we find ourselves wondering. "And what could she tell me now?" Neither is it an accident that Waddell's trophy and roadkill pieces impart a quality of otherworldliness, of an afterlife even, given that their rudest of components are in effect disinterred, cleansed and polished, then – lo the creator! – reshaped and remade by the hand and eye of one who knows, indeed who has lived their story, their history, and has put himself to the retelling of it here. Of course, in Waddell's unblinking view, the story includes not only the quick and the dead but also the human role in the transitional stage, that is, in the act of killing. Like many good ranchers, he has spoken of the doubt and regret on sale day, when the calves and culls are herded from the ring and hauled toward slaughter. In his art as in his world, the machines of killing are seen to be many, including the bolt gun of the butcher, the rifles of the hunters who shoot for food or fun or out of ego (or lack of same), and also the churning Firestones on the SUV of some Billings soccer mom who runs down the fox,

fawn, pheasant, foal or even the poor flat-footed farmer himself (it happens).

There is also here a question of love, the natural antecedent of care, concern, doubt, and guilt. The very bringing forth of these beings (see the spectral *Ghost Cow*, its gaunt, graying insubstantiality) surely summoned from beyond the veil, suggesting a powerful emotional reach and touch. And the attentiveness and devotion implicit in the works, the glossy finish of the trophy mounts, the sleek contours, call to mind nothing so much as a 4-H calf or colt bucket-fed and hand-groomed for the big show. That hint of disapprobation in the air derives not only from our deep involvement in their deaths but also in their lives. The faithful old mama cow finally culled, the aged brood mare come up lame, the family dog that needs putting down – look around the ranch at the raiding skunks and coons, marauding jays and magpies and woodpeckers, snakes and mice and feral cats, even the weary hired man, the haggard spouse, the children always subject to accident and injury. Any good rancher knows that he or she is always another heartbeat away from killing, in effect, something else beloved.

Again a parallel might be drawn with Warhol's ultimately forlorn Marilyn print: even the dandy Andy had to be aware that however the actress lived and died, she always had plenty of help. Beyond this point, though, Waddell is largely on his own. Livestock ("meat, milk and shit machines," in the parlance of the writer Jim Harrison) and roadkill being what they are, these works afford scant opportunity for contemplation of lust, sensuality or romance. And yet the scent of it is there, as it should be, at this nexus, on these trailways, of love and death, specifically in the two bookend pieces, *Anderson Deer* and *King Deer*, dark, anomalous, regal, a class apart, any pairing between them having "burned out...from its previous Keatsian fire into a remote...elegance" (Harrison again). Indeed, the two look very much as though they've endured and returned from the fires of Hell, bare shadows of themselves, yet still they display much dignity and grace, she with her chin up, head held high,



Previous page: Kingfisher Bird Stamp 14" x 18" 1990

30 - 30 Combiotic 4" x 15" x 9" 2000



Body Bag for a Rattlesnake 19" x 33" 1995

the string of pearls at the base of her delicate throat; he with his crown of horns, his snow-white Arthurian (Warholian?) thatch, his own head held low, wise, wary, no longer ruttish but rather attuned to the fate that befell him once and perhaps will again: another bullet to the neck.

Which brings us to the gun pieces. Waddell has spoken of his upbringing in a hunting and gun-owning home and culture, and also of his own delight in the "juxtaposition of the fine craftsmanship (of the displays) and the quasi-crude presentation" of the weapons themselves. At first glance the satirical thrust seems paramount, the unmistakable message being that for many of the armed louts in question, the weapon of preference will always be the jawbone of an ass. But those raised in a similar setting may draw other inferences, take other memory cues: the suggestion, for instance, of a gun rack or gun cabinet in the household den or basement, with its stained hardwoods and sturdy hinges and locks, the many adventures and tall tales safely stored there amid the smell of polish and gun oil; or a father's or grandfather's wooden desk or dresser with its keepsakes and mementos inside, a pocketknife in a carved case, an heirloom ring or watch, old keys, medallions, maybe actual medals. The totems of adulthood. Talismans and possibles. The real Big Game, indeed.

Obviously there's an element of casketry here, too, in the finely crafted wooden boxes, the plush linings. And most of the weapons are composed, at least in part, of skin and bone. The tombstones are on the hillside, the sagebrush rustles, and all the artifacts are here: ammo, marrow, tissue, teeth. The literal

jaws of death. Yet in Waddell's art, any mortuary aspect is always outweighed by the promise of renewal and rejuvenation, resurrection even, the creation ethos at work. In public and private, he has often mentioned his admiration for the people he has lived and worked with in the rural West, "who can do almost anything" when the need arises: build a home, overhaul an engine, machine a part, make a corral, weld a gate, drill a well, break a mule, shoe a horse, pull a calf, save a life. In the gun pieces and the others, we see Waddell's similar fondness for and skill at making do with what he *has*, and making what he has *work*.

Throughout the collection, we see the products of retrieval and reclamation, but also a kind of reconfiguration of the familiar into something new and different, into avatars of a place and perhaps a state-of-being yet to come. Of course, the allure of the pieces comes not only from their totemic significance but also their variety, originality, and sheer loveliness as art. "Death is the mother of beauty," said Wallace Stevens, that most painterly of poets, but this may be a trifle gothic for the undertakings at hand. For us, the image still holds of the artist traversing field and plain, his senses keen, his hopes high, a bit of oddment or remnant already in hand, like Picasso on the trail of his latest conceptual cat. The fact is that, in both materials and message, Waddell has less in common with Warhol than with Whitman, with Woody Guthrie, or for that matter with Huck Finn: a hard-knocks local boy finding his own path, making a name, turning a few heads, uncovering a few truths, kicking up his many small treasures along the way. The bones of plenty here. Light and life. Leaves and grasses. Dust and ashes.



Ursus Smith 9" x 14" x 9" 2007

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Terry Melton - Terry Melton is a painter, printmaker, writer and occasional photographer. He has been the director of several museums and has worked for the National Endowment for the Arts. He has also served as Executive Director for the Western States Arts Federation and the Oregon Arts Commission. His friendship and tracking of Theodore Waddell's work date back to 1965.

Shanna Shelby - Shanna Shelby is the Cultural Programs Coordinator for the City of Denver in the Arts & Venues Office. A wide variety of programs include art exhibitions, jazz concerts, and literary festivals which connect the broad and diverse communities of the region. Shanna, Theodore's daughter, has contributed to other catalogs about his work.

Bob Roughton - Bob Roughton lives on the outskirts of Bozeman, MT. He is a retired wildlife biologist, a retired carpenter, a retired custom cabinet and furniture maker, but he willingly leaves retirement to do fine woodworking jobs. Bob calls his shop his chapel because of the serenity he enjoys there, despite the recurring frustration of getting wood to do what he wants it to do. His friendship with Ted Waddell dates back 22 years. With each piece of art, their brainstorming and collaboration seems to have cemented a truly creative relationship.

Billy Bliss - Billy Bliss has taught art history for twelve years at the college level in Montana, Lake Tahoe, and Iowa. During the past decade, he has taught art appreciation at the high school level, in settings ranging from after-school programs in the Bronx to courses at juvenile detention centers in Nevada. He currently lives and paints in Los Angeles.

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