

# Montana Quarterly

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# On Home Ground

*Montana master Theodore Waddell embraces the contradictions of contemporary western art*

BY SAM CURTIS

**I**T WAS BY WAY OF A MISUNDERSTANDING THAT Theodore Waddell studied art in New York City in 1962. A year earlier he'd been an undergraduate, standing in a hallway at Eastern Montana College (now MSU-Billings) along with his art teacher, Isabelle Johnson, and a talented graduate student. Johnson said, "You really ought to apply for a scholarship at the Brooklyn Museum Art School." So Waddell applied and got a scholarship. Only later did he learn that Johnson had been speaking to the grad student.

"I went off to New York anyway," Waddell recalls. "I was 20. I'd never been out of Montana. And I was terrified."

The second night he was in Brooklyn, Waddell was mugged. "So I swung and hit the guy and ran out in about 12 lanes of traffic and hopped in a cab." Later, someone gave him a switchblade, which he carried around in his pocket for protection. "All I did was cut holes in the lining of my coat when the thing went off accidentally."

New York took some getting used to for a kid who grew up in Laurel. But Waddell learned his way around the city, working for an art dealer on 57th Street and soaking up the N.Y. art scene, which,

after World War II, had replaced Paris as the where-it's-happening center of contemporary art. Waddell arrived in New York little more than a decade after the first generation of Abstract Expressionists — artists like Jackson Pollack, Willem De Kooning and Mark Rothko — had reached full stride and when Minimalism was just getting underway.

"In about 1962, along came sculptor Donald Judd and painter Frank Stella, and they just turned the whole world in a different direction with their minimal approach to art," Waddell says. "For many years I made sculpture that was strongly influenced by Judd and David Smith."

Still, New York wore thin after a time. Waddell was sitting in a restaurant one night when he realized he was tired of living in the city. He flew home to Montana where his Army induction papers were waiting to put a two-year hiatus in his art schooling.

With Army life behind him, Waddell completed his undergraduate degree at Eastern, went on to get an M.F.A. in sculpture at Wayne State University and, in 1968, took a position teaching art at the University of Montana. He seemed to be on the evolutionary track for a career as an artist-educator, like many contemporary artists in a state historically dominated by western art.







J. Wooddell

WYOMING ANGUS





ROCKHILL ANGUS #3

“In those days, there were about 10 or 12 people in the state that I thought were serious artists,” Waddell says. “There was Rudy Autio (at UM), Isabelle Johnson (at Eastern), Bill Stockton, Bob and Gennie DeWeese (at MSU), Ray Campeau (at Bozeman High School) and Jessie Wilbur and Francis Senska (at MSU). Then there was Lyndon Pomeroy at Eastern. But (Pomeroy) finally said, ‘Enough’ to the academic world, called the chairman of the art department an SOB and quit teaching to make welded-steel sculpture. He kind of influenced all of us.”

Waddell taught at the University of Montana for eight years, making his minimalist-inspired steel sculptures. In 1970, Ivan Karp, an art dealer with New York’s prestigious O.K. Harris Gallery, approached him. “He looked at my work and really liked it,” Waddell recalls. “So I sent him five big pieces, which he sold in a few days. He said he wanted to do a show of my work. So I spent 18 months getting sculpture

ready for the show. And when he finally came out here again, he looked at 18 months of my work in about three minutes and said there would be no show. That really almost did me in with art.”

Instead, Waddell quit his teaching position in 1976, the same year he was granted tenure at the university. “I was just being perverse, I guess, but there was another reason. I think teaching is a contract between student and professor, and if somebody’s not holding up their end of the contract, they should quit. In this case, it was me. I wasn’t happy, and I really wasn’t doing well as a teacher. So I quit teaching and went into ranching with no experience whatsoever. None.”

Near the tiny town of Molt, north of Laurel, Waddell became a ranch manager for the family of his wife, Betty.

“They called us the egg-headed professors when we first started up. But I learned that ranching and making art are the same in that when you get up in the morning you don’t know



It will happen by the end of the day. You just know it's going to be different. I loved that."

Waddell's 11 years of ranching and making art in Molt were the most formative years in shaping the artist he has become. And things were different from the first day.

The change from living among the closed-in mountains of Missoula to the wide-open plains surrounding Molt came as a major jolt to Waddell's sense of scale.

"If you make sculpture on a human scale in the mountains, you can relate to it, and it can relate to its surroundings. In Molt, there were places on the ranch where you could go 100 miles in any direction. The idea of making sculpture that related to that environment wasn't realistic to me. I'd have made pieces that were hundreds of feet long in order to make them make sense in that landscape.

"So I returned to painting, where I'd started with Isabelle Johnson. When you look at a painting, you agree to accept an illusion. And I could create an illusion of the vast expanse of plains on a relatively small canvas."

A major ingredient in the vast expanse around Molt was a herd of Angus cattle Waddell had hired-on to feed, calve

and nurture. Every day he'd look out at the huge landscape. "And there were these cows, these beautiful, black cows," Waddell says. "I loved them." That was fortunate because the Angus were his anchor to that place for 11 years of ranching and painting and for 11 more years of ranching and painting in Ryegate.

"During those years in Molt, it was still commonly believed that to make it in the art world you had to live in New York. I knew I couldn't do that; I'd tried. And I knew that Montana, the West, was my place. That sense of place has been very important to me and my art, incredibly important."

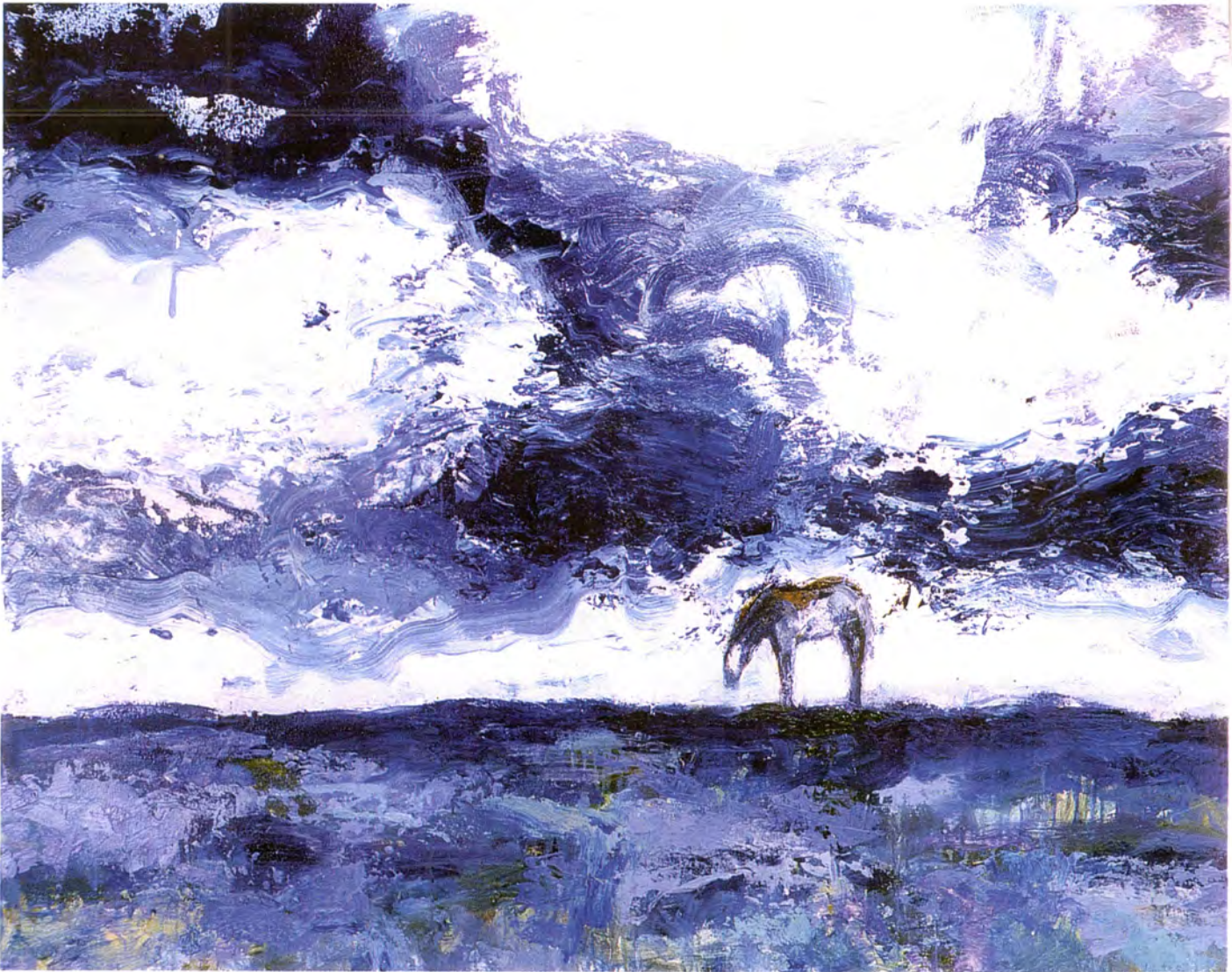
As Waddell ranched and painted, Angus (and to a lesser degree, sheep and horses) became almost synonymous with his sense of place. They also became important to the sense of space in his paintings.

"The cows bring a sense of focus to a landscape; they also bring a sense of scale. Over at Monida, when you come through the pass on the Montana side, you can see cows close-up on a life-sized scale, and then they recede in the distance to the point where they're just flyspecks. You get a



THOMAS LEE





THUNDERSTORM PAINTS

palpable, physical and intellectual understanding of scale. It's because of the cows. Without them you sort of say, 'eh' to the landscape."

The first paintings Waddell made in Molt were tight, stylized and minimal the way his sculptures had been. But the more he painted, the looser his work became. His Angus paintings were not cows influenced by Charlie Russell or Will James. They were (Robert) Motherwell's Angus, as he titled one of his paintings, and cattle influenced by Ad Reinhart. While Waddell's sculptures had been strongly influenced by minimalist artists, many of his paintings were more in the abstract vein. "My training in New York had been strongly influenced by the Abstract Expressionists. All of these artists were alive and working in New York when I was there," Waddell says.

But there were also some strong influences closer to home.

"Within two weeks of meeting Isabelle Johnson at Eastern in 1959, I'd decided I didn't care about doing anything except making art. That was her power," Waddell says of his first art teacher.

Johnson had grown up on her family's Montana homestead, the Stillwater Ranch, near Absarokee, and had studied art in New York and Los Angeles. Her impressionist paintings were largely of the home ranch with its old willows and cottonwoods, its rambling ranch buildings and, of course, its horses and cows. Her paintings' strong sense of attachment to landscapes where ranching had historic roots was not lost on Waddell.

Bill Stockton, an artist Johnson had invited to speak to her classes and who Waddell took a liking to, was also a rancher-painter who'd grown up on a Montana homestead, and





he'd studied art in Paris. Stockton's art focused on close-ups of ranch life and rural landscapes, and he helped Waddell understand the difficult rhythms involved in combining the full-time demands of ranching with the full-time demands of making art.

"Bill had a phrase, which I've adopted or stolen, and that is that January and February are 'the aesthetic months,' the time on the ranch when you are mainly focused on feeding the herd. It's a time when you can get more art work done." This may be one of the reasons why many of Waddell's Angus paintings, which run in the hundreds, depict cows in winter. "Another time for art was calving time, when I'd get up at 2 a.m., to check on the heifers and then stay up and paint."

Those years in Molt were years of isolation. The Waddells' nearest neighbors were six miles away; Molt was 10 miles away. Waddell kept in touch with only a handful of other

artists, showed his work rarely and simply hunkered down to run the ranch and paint.

"But in the middle of that time things started to happen," Waddell says. "Fred Longan, a photographer and independent curmudgeon, had a little gallery upstairs in the Stapleton Building in Billings, and I'd been selling a lot of cattle at the Billings Livestock Auction. So, in 1982, we did this combined show of my Angus paintings at Fred's and at the auction ring.

"I remember all the guys who were buying and selling cattle would come into the auction arena where the art was hung, and they'd puzzle over the paintings. One guy said, 'Well, what happened to the cows' eyes?' And another guy said, 'I think the wind blew 'em out.'

"Those shows were a big deal to me."

But a much bigger deal was right around the corner. Shortly after the stockyard show, Waddell was contacted by a curator from the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.'s oldest art museum, which for decades had showcased contemporary American art with its Biennial Exhibition of American Painting.

"This curator looked at my paintings and picked three (Angus #s 21, 23 and 24) to be in the Corcoran Biennial. I was so naive I didn't know anything about it. When the curator told me she'd need the paintings for 18 months, I said I didn't know if I wanted to let them go for that long. Donna Forbes, who was director of the Yellowstone Art Center at the time, just kicked me under the table."

The Second Western States Exhibition and 38th Corcoran Biennial Exhibition of American Painting toured the country in 1983. It was reviewed by the Washington Post and the New York Times, both reviews favorably singling out Waddell's work. Soon after, critic Mark Stevens wrote an article titled "Art Under the Big Sky" in an October 1983 issue of Newsweek in which Waddell figured prominently. "In Waddell's work," Stevens wrote, "a person can almost smell the manure and the hot sweet hay breath of a herd. (H)is brushy style, heavy but fast, evokes both the quirks of cattle and their almost eerie rootedness — their magnificently dumb, earthy force."

As a result of the Corcoran Biennial, galleries in San Francisco, Seattle, Santa Fe, Chicago and New York soon represented Waddell. "And so off I went. It was a big deal," Waddell says.

"Some people ask me how do you become successful. And I say, 'Well, you make art for 20 to 25 years and see if the phone rings.' That's about where I was with my career. But I would have continued to make art no matter what. The art world is so fickle there's no guarantee you'll be successful. But I've been really fortunate. I've been making my living with my art for 25 years. In the early days, the cows paid for





ANGUS 24

my paintings. Now, the paintings pay for the cows.”

In 1987, the Waddells moved to Ryegate where they ran their own smaller herd of Angus, giving Waddell more time for his art. “It allowed me to concentrate on my painting in a way that I hadn’t before. I was traveling; my work was selling. It was a real sort of blossoming for me. I painted in a 50-by-70-foot building, so I was making big paintings.”

And he was using lots of paint. Some of his 6-by-7-foot paintings weighed 200 pounds. “A friend once said he wouldn’t trust anybody who painted with a trowel. Well, I found when you put on paint with a masonry trowel, you can load it with different colors much the way John Singer Sergeant did when he loaded his brush and made those incredible brush strokes of his. I like that accumulation of colors; it’s sort of a history. I

love the nuances of that kind of layering.”

After 11 years in Ryegate, Waddell’s career was going well, but his marriage was not, and he moved to the Gallatin Valley, north of Manhattan, in 1995 after separating from his wife. “From my studio I could look out at Ross Peak. I did a whole bunch of paintings called Ross Peak Angus. And when I looked south at the Spanish Peaks, they inspired a lot of other paintings.”

Waddell stayed in the Gallatin Valley for 11 years and during that period married photographer and writer Lynn Campion from Hailey, Idaho. The couple left the Gallatin Valley last year, saddened by the pace of development. “I’m a Montana native, and it just makes me sick to see what we’re doing there. It’s some of the best ground in the world, and it’s getting covered with asphalt and houses.”

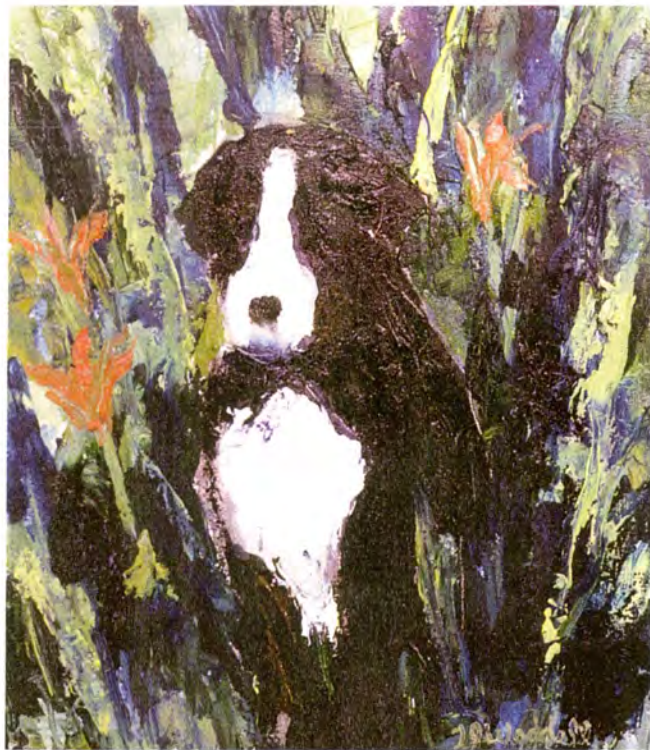


Waddell and Campion recently purchased a 1909 house on the outskirts of Sheridan, Mont., where they split their time with their ranch in Idaho. Standing there with Campion and their four Bernese mountain dogs, outside the old barn that will become his new studio, Waddell says, “I’m very anxious to paint around here. There are some incredible vistas. The willows are especially fascinating, and there are some pretty amazing horses and cattle.”

But ask Waddell if he considers himself a landscape painter and he says, “Gosh, I’ve been called many things in my life, but I guess I’ve never thought of myself in that way before. Still, everybody — at some point in his life — wants to reinvent the wheel, and I was certainly no exception. It’s like you’re going to make this wonderful new art, and somebody comes around the corner and says, ‘Now that’s a very nice landscape.’

“But, yes, I guess I am a landscape painter. When I look at myself historically, I’m part of a wonderful tradition. I think about Bill Stockton and Isabelle Johnson, Bob and Gennie DeWeese, Francis Senska and Jessie Wilbur, and I feel like I’m following in their footsteps, that they’re part of this wonderful slice of history, and I’m the next generation.

“On the other hand, I also feel that I don’t really fit anywhere.



MUFFIN, TOO



The western artists look at me like I'm a fox in the hen house. And some contemporary artists look at me and don't think I belong with them either. I have this same struggle with the galleries that represent me."

Waddell has just published a book titled *Tucker Gets Tuckered*, which features paintings of his dogs. "The book was 11 years in the making, again because of not fitting in. The



YOSEMITE FALLS #5

adult editors said the book was for kids; the kids' editors said it was for adults. I finally found a publisher in Phoenix who was willing to publish it."

But Waddell does not dwell on his career as a misfit. He's more concerned with his new landscape around Sheridan and with learning more about painting.

"I don't want my work to be static. There's so much that I don't know about oil painting. It's really humbling. All I want to do is make my next piece better than my last. And I know I'm in the right place; the cemetery is surrounded by pastures full of Angus." ■



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