

## *Paintings 2006: A Portfolio*

Gordon McConnell

*Is there anything more beautiful than a long shot of a man riding a horse well, or a horse racing free across a plain? Is there anything wrong with people loving such beauty, whether they experience it personally or absorb it through the medium of a movie?*—John Ford

In the twentieth century the motion picture industry manufactured a prodigious archive of western frontier imagery. A popular genre of escapist and juvenile entertainment, the western also provided a vehicle of expression for some of the great film artists, particularly directors like John Ford, Anthony Mann, Sergio Leone, and Sam Peckinpah. I grew up with their films and countless others, seeing them as degraded television signals and projections on the screens of small-town theaters and drive-ins in Colorado and Texas. Now, I relish the restored films available on DVD and the occasional additions to the canon like *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, *Broken Trail*, and *The Proposition*.

My appreciation for the great film westerns has only grown with the years, enriched by cross-disciplinary readings in history and literature, and a growing understanding of the connections between the formal and narrative devices of traditional pictorial art and those of the cinema. I've also benefited from the exhibitions and programs at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center and other museums and my ongoing associations with artists and scholars in the field. For the past twenty-five years, most of my paintings have been inspired by and derived from western film images. I'm drawn

particularly to the action scenes of black and white westerns dating from the late 1930s through the early 1950s. Flying teams of horses, stagecoaches smothered in illuminated dust, desperate bandits on the run, cowboys, cavalry troopers, and fearless Indians—wild riders all—are the main subjects in my work.

Like John Ford, who may be the greatest artist of the West in any medium, I find the beauty of a horse running across an open plain to be irresistible. I strive to capture this furious action and suspend it in a matrix of dancing paint. Distinct from traditional western genre pictures—which endlessly inventory the minutia of period gear and settings in high-keyed color—I attempt in my paintings to embody something that is more elemental and timeless, animated and abstract. Distilled to black and white and tinted shades of gray between the two, the images in my paintings are stark, graphic, and charged with painterly energy. Though they are derived from fugitive television images, the paintings, as paintings, are still, silent, and non-ephemeral. They register the technological transfer of primal shadows onto electro-luminescent screens and our collective, national consciousness. A shimmering blur of perception, passion, and memory is transposed in an interchange of gesture and description, painted marks loosely defining familiar forms and simultaneously arresting and embodying movement.

My work is informed by a post-modernist aesthetic of appropriation, allegory, and mediated experience. At first, I had a subversive or satirical intention. The early work was intentionally crude and also tended toward darkness and expressionistic violence. I've always liked what painter Marc Vischer wrote in 1988 about an early group of my western paintings. "For McConnell, a

searing light emanates from a new desert: that of television. And from that most desolate backdrop, he salvages fragments from a movie world that spoke of honor in a land that was lawless. In a romantic sense, McConnell's works are a visual séance. Figures, like specters distorted through intense heat waves, are captured from their eternity of 24 frames a second. Their shapes and shadows are brought back into a radically different world and given substance and texture. It is an impossible attempt to freeze them, to arrest the present's ceaseless molestation of the past, to close off the continuum. Sometimes this is done darkly and thickly as an emphatic gesture of permanence. In other works a few light strokes quickly applied suggest the ephemeral nature of film and perhaps the fleeting nature of our own lives."

As I've matured as an artist, my intentions have become more constructive and my inclination is to honor the heritage of the West, the cinema, and the tradition of the great painters—Remington and Russell, yes, but also Manet and Sargent, Pollock and de Kooning, Kiefer and Richter. In the brochure that accompanied my exhibition at the Yellowstone Art Museum in

2005, curator Elizabeth Guheen wrote: "Like the work of John Ford, Gordon McConnell's narrative paintings are thematic and allegorical. They are a continuum of expression and painterly gist, serial explorations of the character and shape of space, light, motion and place. His landscapes are views of a multi-faceted terrain of action, melancholia, and weather and dust where narrative is parsed and strung out like the film stills that have inspired them. However, their rhythm is more Pollock-like than technologically driven. While pictorially reconciled with their cropped, film-frame compositions, these are restless, gestural paintings. . . . The strength of Gordon McConnell's work flows from an authentic, intellectual curiosity, and a conviction about painting and what it means. From his improvisational use of appropriated source material and characteristic (ostensibly) black and white environment he creates evanescent, allegorical landscapes that alternately evoke both the old and new geography of the West."

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*Gordon McConnell, **Look at 'em Run**, 2006, acrylic on two canvas panels, 16 x 40 inches overall. © 2006 Gordon McConnell.*



*Gordon McConnell, Runnin'*

**Gun #4**, 2006, acrylic on  
hardboard, 12 x 12 inches.

*Collection of Billings Clinic. ©*

*2006 Gordon McConnell.*



*Gordon McConnell, **Runnin'***

**Gun #5**, 2006, acrylic on  
hardboard, 12 x 12 inches.

*Collection of Billings Clinic. ©*

*2006 Gordon McConnell.*



*Gordon McConnell, **Runnin' Gun**  
#6, 2006, acrylic on hardboard, 12  
x 12 inches. Collection of Billings  
Clinic. © 2006 Gordon McConnell.*



*Gordon McConnell, Runnin' Gun  
#7, 2006, acrylic on hardboard, 12  
x 12 inches. Collection of Billings  
Clinic. © 2006 Gordon McConnell.*



*Gordon McConnell, Runnin' Gun  
#8, 2006, acrylic on hardboard,  
12 x 12 inches. Collection of  
Billings Clinic. © 2006 Gordon  
McConnell.*





*Gordon McConnell, **Three Pairs Coming On**, 2006, acrylic on two canvases, 18 x 48 inches overall. © 2006 Gordon McConnell.*



*Gordon McConnell, Column of Twos, Escort, 2006, acrylic on canvas panel, 16 x 20 inches. © 2006 Gordon McConnell.*



*Gordon McConnell, **By Stage #2**, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 24 inches. © 2006 Gordon McConnell.*



*Gordon McConnell, Meeting the Evening Stage, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 30 inches. Collection of Nate McGrew, Fort Worth, Texas. © 2006 Gordon McConnell.*



*Gordon McConnell, Gallant Sergeant, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 36 inches. Private Collection. © 2006 Gordon McConnell.*



*Gordon McConnell, **Patrol**, 2006, acrylic on canvas panel, 12 x 16 inches. © 2006 Gordon McConnell.*



*Gordon McConnell, **Into the Night**, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 32 inches. © 2006 Gordon McConnell.*



*Gordon McConnell, In Hot Pursuit, 2006, acrylic on hardboard panel, 18 x 24 inches. © 2006 Gordon McConnell.*





*Gordon McConnell, Lordsburg Stage, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches. © 2006 Gordon McConnell.*



*Gordon McConnell, **Trailing Across the Flat**, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 36 inches. Collection of Hannah M. Swett, New York, New York.*

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