



ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST
PAIN TINGS BY GORDON MCCONNELL

UCROSS FOUNDATION ART GALLERY

Everything about the Ucross Foundation speaks: *confluence*. Three creeks come together on our ranch and two highways converge. Ucross is a vibrant creative intersection, where individuals from all over the world cross paths and exchange ideas as artists-in-residence. Past, present and future meet as forward-thinking contemporary artists work at our historic ranch rooted in the 19th century. This summer marks the 25th anniversary of the first artists to cross the threshold of Big Red, and we are honored to have supported nearly 1,300 Fellows since 1983.

We are also fortunate to be at a confluence of what might be called a gift culture. In Lewis Hyde's book *The Gift*, which examines the value of creative work in a market economy, Hyde stresses, "*The gift must remain in motion.*" At Ucross, we are grateful for a national network of supporters, as well as many in the local community. We circulate those gifts, through residencies, to the 85 artists, writers and composers who come to Ucross each year. And their extraordinary gifts — expressed in visual art, books and music — return to the world, to expand the knowledge and invigorate the spirit of all who receive them.

The Ucross Foundation Art Gallery provides a vital opportunity to connect the gifts of artists with the public. This summer we are pleased to present Gordon McConnell's "Post-Western" paintings in *Once Upon a Time in the West*. Generosity and intersecting talents are emblematic of Gordon McConnell's artistic career. Through writing, speaking and curating, McConnell has supported the work of other artists, and advanced public understanding of the contemporary art of our region. Those who heard his talk at the Denver Art Museum's January 2008 symposium came away greatly enriched by his knowledge and experience.

McConnell served as curator of the Ucross gallery from 2000 to 2006, and his visionary thinking has made a lasting impact on our exhibition programming. He has also been an artist-in-residence at Ucross. We are grateful to him for sharing his art with us, and to Pulitzer Prize-winning author Mark Stevens for writing the exhibition essay. We also thank the Wyoming Arts Council, which has provided support for our gallery program in 2007-2008. We appreciate the ongoing efforts of the Ucross Foundation's Board of Trustees, who assist and guide the organization in so many ways. To them, to all of our Ucross Fellows, and to our supporters in Wyoming and throughout the United States, we extend our gratitude — for 25 years, you have helped Ucross keep the gift in motion.

Sharon Dynak
PRESIDENT

UCROSS HONORS THE MEMORY OF FORMER TRUSTEE VICTOR STEIN AND HIS WIFE, DOROTHY, WHO SUPPORTED THE UCROSS FOUNDATION FOR OVER 20 YEARS. THEY WILL BE MISSED.

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Opposite page: They Topped the Ridge, 3 April 2008, acrylic on canvas panel, 9 x 12 inches

Front Cover: Runaway Chase, 30 January 2008, acrylic on two hardboard panels, 30 x 48 inches overall

Back Cover Left: End Title #1, 16 March 2007, acrylic on hardboard, 18 x 24 inches

Back Cover Right: End Title #2, 19 April 2007, acrylic on hardboard, 18 x 24 inches



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ESSAY BY MARK STEVENS

JUNE 20 - AUGUST 22, 2008

UCROSS FOUNDATION ART GALLERY



Persistence of Vision: Cowboys, 28 July 2007, acrylic on nine 11 x 14 inch hardboard panels, 33 x 42 inches

DREAMING OF DREAMS: GORDON McCONNELL AND THE AMERICAN WEST

The American West has been dwindling. The cowboy is just another hired hand — he's been working as the Marlboro Man — and historians now routinely emphasize the barbarous rather than the honorable in the region's past, as do many fiction writers. (Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* presents the West as hell rather than paradise.) Red meat disturbs New York. Serious photographers depict the growth of highways and trailer ticky-tack in the shadow of those purple mountain majesties. What was large has become small; or at least darkened.

The revisionist view of the West is not wrong, but it represents a narrow response to a rich history of American dreaming. Edenic innocence, boundless possibility, the clash of good and evil, the existential cowboy — these things were always the stuff of myth. The cowboy came into his own, in dime store novels and Hollywood movies, when the open range closed. But ... so what. The Greek myths are inventions; but you don't, as a result, dismiss, criticize, doubt and mock Apollo for pulling the sun across the sky with his golden chariot. Irony and revision are always important, but they do not own the West.

The painter Gordon McConnell has this layered perspective. He brings into his work a rare fullness of mind, an unusual ability to understand the West in the round. He understands revisionist history, yet loves the grand old themes; he's adept at postmodern irony, yet does not condescend to the cowboy. A more conventional artist would express such tension by following the practice, now prevalent, of using collage-inspired techniques to jostle and bang contrary elements together. McConnell does something more interesting. He typically begins with an image taken from television or Hollywood Westerns, which is not in itself an unusual idea, and then steeps that image in a variety of moods, thoughts, and ideas. He resembles a director who, on stage, uses scrims to superimpose meaning upon meaning.

Consider what happens — to take a characteristic example — in the small pictures of Indian warriors on horseback. We instantly sense the classic cowboys-and-Indians movie.

We like the romantic poses. We rise to the heightened scale of the feeling. And we enjoy — even thrill — to the drama. But our initial response soon yields to a shifting reverie. This isn't a Hollywood product, of course, but the painting of a Hollywood product: an interpretation of an interpretation of an interpretation. Different levels of reality, at once ironic and poignant, come to mind. We might think, for example, of actual Native Americans: they are concealed below — way below — both the iconic Hollywood representation and the artist's painting of that presentation. But actual flesh and blood is not entirely absent. McConnell does not depend only upon stylized or abstracted forms to convey, say, a figure or a horse. He will sometimes use painterly means to capture how a horse or person moves. The flesh interrupts. Another layer.

In some pictures — the larger ones, especially — the narrative is similarly layered and develops an almost philosophical feel. In "Runaway Chase," we see a cowboy chasing after a runaway coach. The chase is a classic Western theme, as everyone knows, and in the movies we always know who's chasing who and what. Here, unless we know the actual movie the image is borrowed from, we cannot be certain whether the coach is being rescued or attacked; what in the movie is just an exciting chase becomes something more ambiguous. McConnell has also literally divided the image into two parts; the separation between rider and coach cannot, as a result, be overcome. The rider may catch the prize in the movie, but the two remain forever apart in the painting. The existential aura is further enhanced by the cloud of dust that surrounds him. In the painting, the dust does not read as simple dust, as it does in the movie, but as a strangely unfinished emptiness. The cowboy seems isolated in a void (the backgrounds of these paintings often have a sketchy mystery). The picture then becomes, among other things, a fresh depiction of the classical theme of the existential cowboy.

Although McConnell situates his paintings in the American West, the horse and rider can be understood as a universal symbol, even by those who know little of the region's mythology. Ideally, horse-and-rider represent an image of completion. The animal is

united with the human; passion and control, the horizontal and the vertical, conjoin. Behind the many filters and layerings in McConnell's work there remains this simple iconic image of the horse and rider that we instinctively understand. There is pathos in its buried position, as if the actual ideal cannot be attained behind its many representations. McConnell's own life, as he himself has emphasized, has been marked by a sense of separation — a particularly close separation — from the mythic West. He grew up on the range, but did not work as a cowboy. He was once given a horse that was subsequently taken away. He came to know the West not simply by looking out the window but by staring into a moody little black and white television set, which is an open dream box of static, magic, and white noise.

Artists who make a palette of blacks and whites and grays, as McConnell does, incline toward nuance and melancholy. They like the shadow play of memory. Whispers, mufflings, upwellings. McConnell's palette celebrates the old black and white movies, but also, in a color-saturated culture, creates an aura of time and distance and nostalgia. Like many artists with this palette, McConnell also makes relatively small pictures — for a culture that loves a big splash, about a West that once emphasized great scale. He has stilled the moving image. In the stillness, there is a memorial, and a mourning, for the dreams of the West.

Mark Stevens



Mark Stevens is the author, with Annalyn Swan, of the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography, *de Kooning: An American Master*. He has served as the art critic for *New York Magazine*, *Newsweek*, and *The New Republic* and has also written for such publications as *Vanity Fair*, *The New York Times*, and *The New Yorker*. He was recently named a 2007-2008 Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center Fellow of the New York Public Library, where he has been at work on a biography of Francis Bacon. He lives in New York.

Joy Ride, 10 August 2007, acrylic on canvas panel, 14 x 18 inches



They Raced to the Fight, 23 February 2008, acrylic on canvas panel, 9 x 12 inches



Souvenir of the Wild West: On the Stage, 29 March 2008, acrylic on hardboard panel, 18 x 24 inches



After the Stage: A Souvenir of the Wild West, 2 April 2008, acrylic on two hardboard panels, 12 x 32 inches



Light Horsemen, 7 April 2008, acrylic on canvas panel, 9 x 12 inches



One Tough Trip, 19 February 2008, acrylic on hardboard panel, 24 x 30 inches



They Sprinted Like Racers, 18 March 2008, acrylic on hardboard panel, 18 x 24 inches



Pounding Hearts, 28 November 2007, acrylic on two hardboard panels, 30 x 60 inches

GORDON McCONNELL

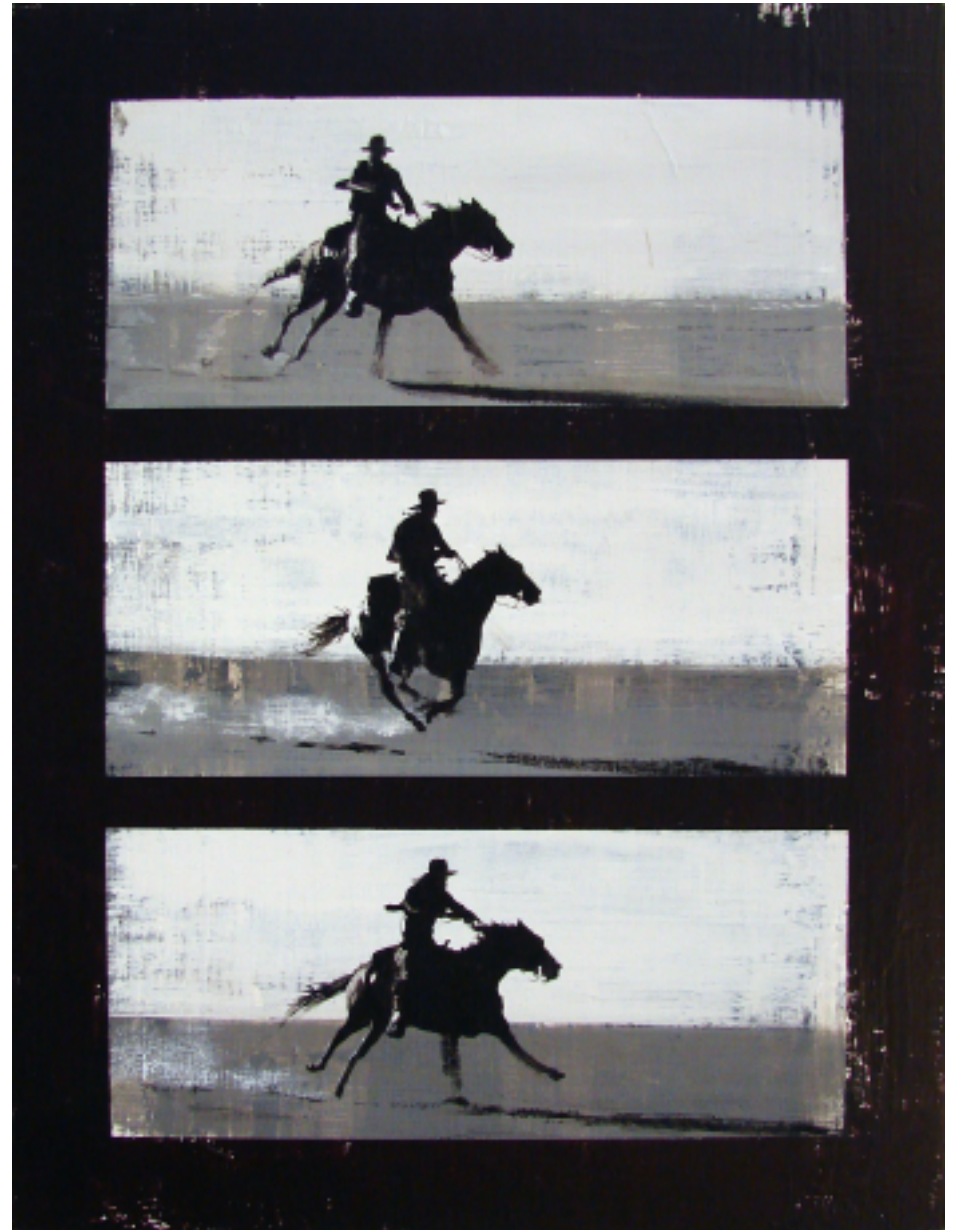
Gordon McConnell came to Montana in 1982 as the new assistant director of the Yellowstone Art Center in Billings. Ten years later he was given the additional title, senior curator, and he continued to work at the museum until shortly after the renovated, expanded and renamed Yellowstone Art Museum opened in 1998. During his sixteen years at the museum McConnell wrote and edited the majority of its publications, curated numerous exhibitions, and helped build the unparalleled Montana Collection of regional contemporary art.

Since leaving the museum, McConnell has continued to write and curate exhibitions and he is recognized as a leading authority on contemporary Western Art. Early this year, he spoke at a symposium at the Denver Art Museum on what he calls "Post-Western" art, and in October he will speak at the Booth Western Art Museum's annual symposium in Cartersville, Georgia.

Gordon McConnell now identifies himself primarily as a painter, and the past ten years have seen the fullest development of his work and vision. In the past two years, his work has been included in exhibitions at Mountain Trails Gallery, Jackson, Wyoming; Stremmel Gallery, Reno; Toucan Gallery, Billings; the Ucross Foundation; The Arts Center, St. Petersburg, Florida; the Belger Arts Center, Kansas City; g2 Gallery, Scottsdale; Visions West Gallery, Denver; Custer County Art and Heritage Center, Miles City, Montana; and the Meridian International Center, Washington, D.C., in an exhibition that traveled to the National Art Gallery, Beijing, and other museums in China.

In 2007, McConnell's work was included for the second time in the periodical *New American Paintings*, and in March 2008, *Southwest Art* ran a six-page feature article on his work. McConnell has been awarded several residencies at the Ucross Foundation, an individual artist fellowship from the Montana Arts Council, and the 2006 Artist of the Year Award from the Yellowstone Art Museum. His work is represented in the collections of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, the Art Museum of Missoula, and the Yellowstone Art Museum, among many other public and private collections.

Born in 1950 in La Junta, Colorado, and brought up in rural southeastern Colorado, Gordon McConnell studied art at Baylor University in Waco, Texas (B.A. 1972) and California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, and art history at the University of Colorado, Boulder (M.A., 1979).



On the Run, 19 March 2008, acrylic on hardboard panel, 24 x 18 inches



In the twentieth century the motion picture industry manufactured a prodigious archive of western frontier imagery. Often dismissed as 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, seeing them as degraded television signals and projections on the screens of small town theaters and drive-ins in Colorado and Texas. And once, on a trip to Europe in 1977, I saw Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* in a neo-baroque movie palace in Antwerp, Belgium.

My appreciation for the great film westerns has only grown with the years, enriched by readings in history, art history and literature, and a growing understanding of the connections between the formal and narrative devices of traditional pictorial art and the cinema. For the past twenty-five years, most of my paintings have been inspired by and derived from the western film images I love. I'm drawn particularly to action scenes – flying teams of horses, stagecoaches smothered in illuminated dust, desperate bandits on the run, cowboys, cavalry troopers, and fearless Indians – wild riders all.

Gordon McConnell



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