When the West Was Won

RECENT WORKS BY GORDON McCONNELL

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Curator's Acknowledgments

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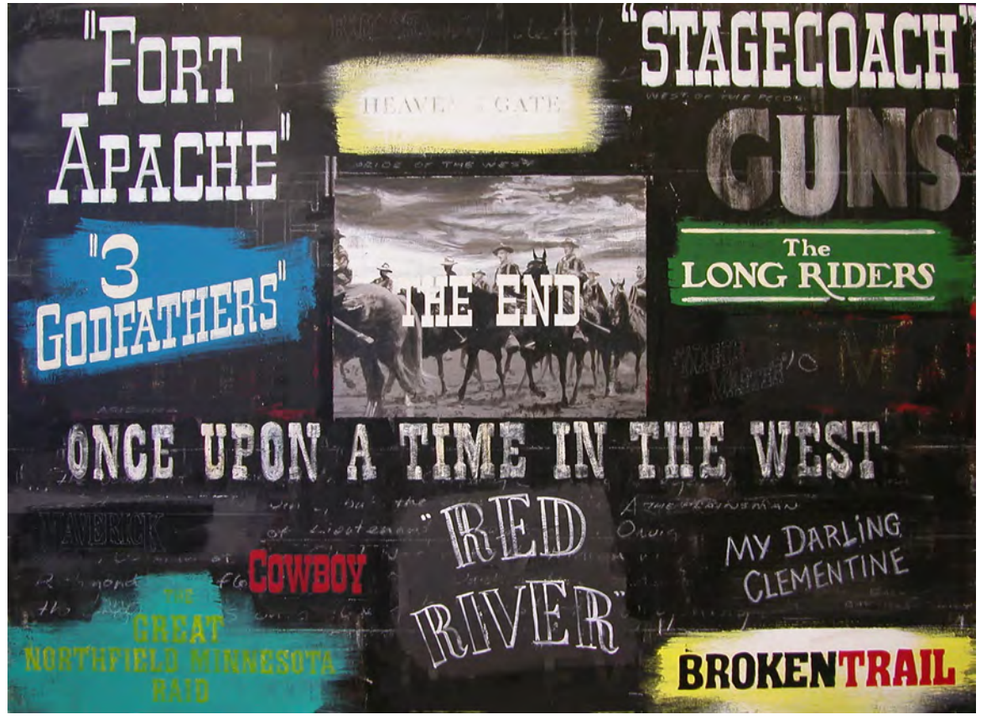
This exhibition evolved after several studio visits and fascinating conversations with Gordon McConnell regarding his creative process, influences, and source materials. Over the course of many interviews and visits I realized not only how ingrained in the visual and symbolic imagination of my family, relatives, and friends—but also, and more significantly of the nation—the fantastic, cinematic West has been and continues to be today. Through these conversations the exhibition emerged as timely and poignant. I am grateful to McConnell for his thoughtful, engaging familiarity with, and interrogations of, this subject. The exhibition would not have been possible without his time and vision, which has offered me the rewarding opportunity to choose and then reflect upon a group of works. It has been a truly rewarding personal experience. Lastly, Jon Lodge and Jane Waggoner Deschner assisted in all ways with the realization of the publication, and I am deeply grateful for the skills, insight, and expertise they brought to the project.

Leanne Gilbertson, Ph.D.

Front Cover:
Crouched Run
2015, acrylic on canvas
16 x 20 inches
Collection of Jon Lodge



West of Everything
2013, acrylic and oil pastel on canvas
48 x 66 inches

All of my paintings are haunted by the past and congealed of fleeting instants. We only live now. Paintings exist in suspended animation, they are traces of my life and perceptions, and of the cinematically mediated lives I observe.
— Gordon McConnell

When the West Was Won

Leanne Gilbertson

The title of Gordon McConnell's exhibition, *When the West Was Won*, suggests the liminal territory between memory and history the works gathered here inhabit. The "when" signals the dreamlike ways the past is implicated in the present and the present in the past—the haunting McConnell notes in the opening epigram. The ghosting so prevalent in McConnell's works also reminds us, or this viewer at least, of the palpable presence of those who have come before us on these Western lands—Indigenous people, migrants seeking shelter, those who succumbed to untold violence. "Was Won" speaks of a national narrative that demands heroes and villains, winners and losers, beginnings and ends, and moments of definitively marked turning points that offer only one dimension of the story. When we carefully consider the American West, it reveals itself as rather fuzzy and ill-defined, as McConnell reminds us throughout the exhibition. Where is this West? And when was this West won, if ever? How? By whom and for whom?

Together, Gordon McConnell's works explore how the American West has often been understood through the cultural construction of the Western film genre and as such has always been a fantastic cultural projection, always already receding or lost, blurred and at a distance. For in fact as soon as the American West was "discovered," its mythos as a paradise lost to be potentially regained was challenged by the reality that it already was inhabited by Native American populations with radically different relationships to it, and that it was comprised of vastly varied, difficult, often hostile lands.

Gordon McConnell has lived his entire life on several of these varied lands of the American West. After moving to Billings, Montana, to assume the position of Assistant Director at the Yellowstone Art Center (now the Yellowstone Art Museum) in 1982, McConnell embarked upon creating artworks inspired by Western film frames and found or imagined scenes of the West. Like one of his favorite contemporary artists, Ed Ruscha, McConnell—who grew up in Colorado and has familial connections to Texas cattlemen—has had a lifelong fascination with the romantic concept and modern reality of the evolving American West. For over thirty years he has been exploring the symbolic place the frontier myth has held and continues to hold in his own life and in the national imagination.

With little traditional training in painting, McConnell developed his signature style through years of patient practice that builds upon his academic education in drawing and design. That foundation continues to inform the artist's works today, most of which explore the drama inherent in a grisaille palette that conjures experiences of watching Westerns on black and white television. Over decades of painterly experimentation with abstraction and photorealist styles, McConnell has explored various means of building his forms through sensitive brushwork and subtle layering of color—embracing accidental effects and honing his graphic sophistication. Along the way he has taken inspiration from many, including his friend, rancher/painter/sculptor Theodore Waddell, who studied with pioneering Montana Modernist and former Eastern Montana College (now MSUB) art professor, Isabelle Johnson.

Once in Billings, McConnell began researching the means by which Western American art, especially that of Charlie Russell and Frederic Remington, influenced cinematic depictions of the early West. He also drew inspiration from the experimental Structural films of the late 1960s

10,000 Ways to Die
2013, acrylic on canvas panel
11 x 14 inches

and 70s he viewed while in graduate school. Those experiments called attention to the physical realities of film—its flatness, grain, light, and movement—in an effort to demystify the illusion of cinematic representation and amplify its abstract, aesthetic potentials. The Structuralist emphasis on formalist explorations rather than narrative content, inspired McConnell to consider relationships between the act of painting and the perceptual experiences of viewing moving images. The visual dialogue between film and painting McConnell began investigating in the 1980s has sustained decades of artistic creation. Informed by the artist's interest in cinematic history, and his ongoing study of the evolving cultural representations of the American West, McConnell's personal biography is also deeply woven into the works, which were created—with one exception—following the death of his father J. G. McConnell in February 2013.

J. G. McConnell was born in the town of Pampa in Gray County, Texas, in 1918 and farmed and tended his family's herd of cattle as a boy and young man before moving to Colorado with his wife to farm and ultimately pursue a career teaching science. The McConnell's extended Texas family had connections to such fabled Western figures as the illustrious cowman Charles Goodnight. Gordon has memories of listening to his father's tales of his cattle-driving Texas relatives and his father's own recollections of growing up in the oil fields surrounding Pampa. He also recalls his father watching classics of the Western genre on the Encore channel "obsessively"—seemingly in an effort to connect to a West from which he found himself and his family increasingly removed. Among McConnell's many formative cinematic memories from this time, he recalls seeing Philip Kaufman's *The Great Northfield, Minnesota Raid* with his mom and dad at a drive-in theater outside Rocky Ford, Colorado, the summer he graduated from Baylor University with a B.A. in studio art in 1972.

We Took Them For Soldiers

A frame from *The Great Northfield, Minnesota Raid* (1971), which is based on the Jesse James-Cole Younger story, is the source for McConnell's painting, *We Took Them For Soldiers*. Here the artist focuses painterly attention on the fleeting cinematic frame that captures the gang's lead riders and horses moving across a landscape devoid of landmarks. A single, tenuous black line in the painting suggests the horizon. In the image the gang passes by in single file with Cole Younger (Cliff Robertson) and Jesse James (Robert Duvall) in the lead. Blurring these figures with gestural marks, McConnell effectively suggests the ephemeral nature of the moving image and its mesmerizing quality. He minimizes specific details of the scene and allows the impression these figures imprint as iconic Western outlaws to become foregrounded. When completing this work, McConnell researched eyewitness accounts of the James/Younger gang recorded by citizens of Northfield, Minnesota and found this descriptive statement: "We took them for soldiers," a phrase he borrows for his suggestive title.

The James/Younger Gang was in fact comprised of veteran Confederate guerrilla cavalrymen who considered their frontier terrorism a natural extension of wartime activities. Here a filmic representation of those gang leaders is re-figured in McConnell's painting. Decked in their slouch hats and dusters worn over tailored suits, James and Younger ride military style saddles on fine mounts. These details of the gang's appearance are noted in eyewitness accounts, respected by Kaufman's film, and attentively reproduced in McConnell's rendition. Yet notably, while most of the James/Younger Gang's activity actually occurred east rather than west of the Mississippi, their crimes have inspired countless portrayals of fictional outlaws in numerous western movies. Savvy about how such details of omission and historical distortion haunt our understandings of the nation's

We Took Them for Soldiers
2013, acrylic on canvas
12 x 24 inches

past and present, McConnell's artfully composed, modestly-sized painting effectively complicates the archetypal status these outlaws have assumed in the American imagination. He draws attention to how that status is intricately tied to the illusion of filmic representation, which by necessity empties many material realities of history to accommodate the fantasies of the viewer.

In McConnell's representation, the fictionalized leaders of the gang are relatively evenly-spaced and flattened, and the artist has remarked how this makes the riders appear almost as if passing by on carousel horses. This sense is heightened by the eccentric cropping of the horses at the left and right margins of the frame. Deprived of a panoramic or receding Western landscape, the figures hover in a web of painterly impressions and appear to occupy a never-ending nowhere space. The romance of the landscape that in the Western genre has historically been used to arouse the viewer's wish to identify with an object overpowering and majestic—an object that draws the viewer ineluctably to itself and crushes him with the thought of its greatness and ineffability—is withheld entirely in this example and throughout the exhibition. The romantic cinematic promise of entering the majestic space of the West is replaced in this instance with a carousel-like image—an image which may serve as metaphor for time as a cycle, of the impossibility of stepping outside of or fully into romanticized archetypal roles, and of the repetition of tropes in Western films, and perhaps in American history.

Gray County

While *We Took Them For Soldiers* is one example of how McConnell weaves together elements of personal memory and national history, *Gray County* is the most direct address of McConnell's biography and of his actual connections to rural life. The work stitches together past and present depictions of land held by the artist's family for generations. *Gray County* began as a collage of photographs of McConnell's granddad with his registered Polled Hereford bulls from the 1960s alternating with McConnell's own recent photographs of oil pump jacks on the same property, now incorporated as R. S. McConnell, Inc. and located in the Texas Panhandle.

In this work McConnell questions how personal memories are intertwined with photographic records and cinematic illusions. Translating his inherited and personal photographs into painting, the artist abstracts from the original photographs' location in real time and space and asks us to consider how these representations broaden our understanding of individual experience. One dimension of McConnell's intergenerational family story of the American West, how the uses of land belonging to his family have changed over time, is presented in quilt-like form with subtle patches of red, white, and blue underpainting peeking through. The painting speaks not only to the artist's mediated relationships to his family's lands, but also to evolving economic realities of the American West. The resulting work presents visual incongruities that one might as readily encounter in rural eastern Montana or the Dakotas, as in Texas—suggesting one element of the West that transcends any specific locale or moment meaningful to a singular artist. In McConnell's hands, Gray County, Texas becomes Gray County, USA.

The Last Cowboy: Rearview Mirror

During his own coming of age, McConnell witnessed and experienced his father adapting to real losses rather than fantasized wins. The loss of a way of life in the disappearance of a largely agrarian, increasingly mythologized West during the post-World War II period profoundly altered the economy of the American West and challenged prevailing ideals of freedom and independence. If the West had ever been won in the national imagination, the false veneer of its promises, especially its promises for white American masculinity, was increasingly eroded by the experiences of the 1960s—a moment a *New York Times* journalist named: "The End of Cowboy Economy." As a nation grappled to find new cultural stories that could accommodate the increasingly undeniable reality of a world of exhausted frontiers and a rising, hungry population dependent on limited natural resources, the Western film genre was transformed in a series of revisionist, countercultural films McConnell notes were formative for his artistic evolution.

One of those revisionist films is *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962), which was adapted for the screen from Edward Abbey's novel, *The Brave Cowboy* (1956). McConnell utilizes a frame from the film's opening sequence to create one of his most literal, and poignant paintings, *The Last Cowboy: Rearview Mirror* (pp. 10-11). The composition is broken roughly into three rectangles by a truck's rearview mirror slightly left of center. Within the frame of the mirror a cowboy figure appears against a backdrop of mountains in the lane of an oncoming car. The profiled silhouette of a truckdriver in the foreground, turning dramatically to catch a passing glimpse of the receding horse and rider, is presented in deep, dark shadows effectively conveying the fraught tension of the film's scene.

McConnell's choice of this cinematic frame from *The Last Cowboy* draws attention to how

Gray County
2018, acrylic on canvas
36 x 48 inches

The Last Cowboy: Rearview Mirror
2018, acrylic on canvas mounted on wood
11 1/8 x 25 1/2 inches

in American memory and perhaps in most of history, we tend to isolate the hero of any tale in the sharpest of contrast, singling him out in the light of the high noon. In the composition the cowboy is isolated by the frame of the mirror and is wearing a sun-drenched white hat. But this is not a typical heroic figure of the Western genre, riding off into the sunset or emerging over the horizon.

Traditional Westerns from the 1930s–50s had tended to focus on white male heroes escaping from and triumphing over the conditions of modern industrial society, of mechanized existence, of economic dead ends, and of social entanglements. These heroes entered unoccupied space and proceeded to dominate it. In McConnell's example the hero is isolated and in high contrast, but the isolation is revealed not as freedom but as a trap, and a deadly one at that—as this cowboy is bound to confront the unforgiving realities of a modernized West.

Lonely Are the Brave is a film that grapples with the ways ideals of homosocial American loyalty and male independence became increasingly difficult, perhaps even impossible to maintain in the face of new post-World War II realities. At the opening of the film set in the 1960s, an itinerant cowboy and Korean War veteran, who does not own a motor vehicle, is crossing a highway near Albuquerque on horseback. Cars and trucks zoom by, swerving and honking as the cowboy's skittish horse darts and dodges to ultimate safety across the road. The film's narrative follows this man who has become a living anachronism, and who, in his quest to live free cannot, in the artist's words, "compromise with the rules of society or abide the matrix of technological civilization."

This frame from the opening of the film foreshadows and encapsulates its tragic narrative arc with stunning visual economy. As McConnell has remarked on its composition: "The center stripe of the highway pointing to a vanishing point in the one image; the horse and rider receding in the rearview mirror in the other are unambiguous in their meaning." The road less taken here by this "last cowboy" leads nowhere and is visible only in the rearview mirror. The painting isolates and amplifies a transient cinematic moment and in doing so touchingly pictures a profound type of cultural loss—that critical moment when lives that do not find their place in the historical record are threatened with disappearance, or worse, with violent dead-ends.

Gunpoint

The Last Cowboy: Rearview Mirror suggests the need for new paths of American progress, different cultural imaginings for the American West. If this is one of the most literal paintings in the exhibition, *Gunpoint* is perhaps McConnell's most striking departure from work derived from cinematic imagery and is deeply personal. The source for the painting came to the artist in a dream he had of guns held by disembodied hands and pointed directly at him. According to McConnell, "Each bore, aligning with my line of sight, felt like a vanishing point, oblivion."

Motivated by this vision from his unconscious, which surfaced in the wake of the mass shootings of recent history, McConnell began collecting images of 1950s and 1960s screen actors and actresses holding guns using the Google search engine. The resulting 34 instances are gathered together in a collage of fractured cinematic moments portrayed through a range of gestural marks. The collection of guns McConnell has sourced and indexed, bears some conceptual resemblance to historical displays of firearms found in many Western museums including the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming. Both collections share a conspicuous absence of the human body and lack of reference to the embodied experiences of shooting or being shot. But unlike the historical displays they

Gunpoint
2015, acrylic on canvas
30 x 40 inches

Ghost Town
2014, acrylic on canvas
12 x 24 inches
Collection of G.B. Carson

conjure, McConnell's painted guns are assembled in chaotic rather than systematic fashion, madly turned upon one another or floating aimlessly, with no villain or threat in sight—unanchored images borne on the sea of the Information Age.

Nothing is as compelling in *Gunpoint's* composition (p. 13) as the passages of abstracted gray that efface parts of hands or as in the top left corner suggest a frenzied gray-washing. It seems as if the subtle distinctions between the abstract and the figural are minimized to the point of not mattering through the artist's display of varied, gestural marks. Notably, McConnell's refusal to let the bodies holding these guns be fully figured also prevents them from being fetishized as they are in most of the Western film genre. His choice to label each instance as merely numbered, disembodied hands asks of the viewer to consider the realities of gun-pointing as a seemingly endless performance enacted and repeated not only by cinematic screen stars, but by countless, nameless figures throughout history.

If American culture is, at this moment, heavily defended, the fantasy of the West is the most culturally defended dream of all, rendered potentially lethally so by the Second Amendment. The recognition of this cold hard reality, explored in *Gunpoint*, is not reduced to an ironic wink at a knowing viewer or to a political statement. Rather, McConnell explores this idea in a humble, human, painted working-through. The artist's open, honest interrogation of his personal fascination with the Western as a place of escape and of violence in this and other works feels pointedly radical at a moment when there is relative scarcity of collective spaces in which to acknowledge and consider the ways we may all be implicated in, and defined by, the national dream of the West and its accompanying violence.

Ghost Town

Throughout the exhibition, McConnell offers us dreamlike visions, informed by cinematic memories, inflected by film's perceptual effects, and distilled through the act of painting. He offers fragments of the nation's cinematic past and his own personal history without clear comment and without obvious judgment—holding these moments suspended in time for close consideration. A sense of loss and mortality hovers throughout. And this mood, which borders on, but never fully descends into melancholia, is perhaps most obvious in his work, *Ghost Town* (pp. 14-15).

Ghost Town suspends an iconic Western moment in a truce between a familiar, perhaps even clichéd compositional structure in the form of a generic frontier town, and McConnell's deft painterly improvisation in the form of a vaporous gunfighter drifting in the scene. The moment of a gunfighter appearing on an empty, Western frontier street summons an entire genre of Western films but lacks a single, direct source. It is in fact a composite drawn from multiple influences and the artist's imagination.

McConnell presents this dramatic, existential moment freed from any narrative that would, in a typical Western, wed us into identification with the hero. Instead this painting leaves us sitting in the company of the emotions such a moment elicits or does not. Grabbing our visual attention through this most recognizable depiction of the West, McConnell suspends attention on this haunting, central figure inviting our eye to linger in the field of his canvas, which is enlivened by subtle marks and passages of color. In doing so he also holds the violent, cathartic resolutions offered by the mythic tales of the West and central to the manners by which the genre has sustained romantic ideas about its "Win," deferred.

Rendezvous with Destiny
2017, acrylic on canvas panel
12 x 16 inches

Rendezvous with Destiny

Ghost Town and many of the other works gathered here freeze isolated moments before potentially violent confrontation or bodily harm. Such moments are typically fraught with a sense of impending doom or excited anticipation—the moment when the Western's characters' destiny will be decided, typically by overcoming or succumbing to death. In works like *Rendezvous with Destiny* (p. 17) and *Rendezvous with Destiny #2*, McConnell further explores this theme.

In both, the all-male outlaw gang from Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) appears. Lifted from their cinematic frames near the end of the film and transported into McConnell's painterly world, these figures appear either emerging from or disappearing into the surface of the canvas. In *Rendezvous with Destiny*, the gang is shown walking into an unknown future in which the ground appears to dissolve beneath them as they slowly morph into pixels on a computer screen. In *Rendezvous with Destiny #2*, temporality is signaled by a web of horizontal and vertical gestural brushstrokes upon which these figures materialize. The work is reminiscent of the French Impressionist's broken brushwork that reveled in the fleeting nature of perceptual reality. The painting also recalls Frederic Remington's depictions of the West, which themselves were informed by European Modernist trends and in turn influenced cinematic depictions of the early West.

In *Rendezvous with Destiny #2*, McConnell reveals this gang of iconic figures as conjured and perhaps even false in this land of painting, which has always been about making believe. Like a mirage these figures seem destined to fade away into the material facts of the artist's paint and canvas. The hero of the Classic Western film genre tended to be composed in his space, a fact which secured for him and his identifying audience a sense of self and place in the world. The message typically conveyed by the Western is masculine competence in, and control of, his setting. But in this painting, the sense of belonging in the world and the accompanying ease with which male bodies stride confidently through the Western's cinematic space is undermined through sensual, impressionistic marks that bypass ironic recontextualization or overt message. Instead the artist offers his artistic reconciliation with the reality of cinematic fantasy as constructed projection. Painting his way through this borrowed image, McConnell does not speak down to or instruct the viewer, but rather creates an elegant abstract space in which the emotions of trying to hold on to or let go of these figures, may unfold.

The realization that the Western archetypal roles we may feel compelled to inhabit, identify with, or reject in our quest to find a place among the cultural representations of the West we have inherited elicits strong reaction. The fact that we may be performing in dramas larger than any single life and beyond our personal control is a threatening, troubling proposition. To glimpse the potential emptiness sustaining certain stories and roles of the West is to confront the shaky ground on which we attempt to find our belonging in these shared lands of the American West. But through his modest, painterly investigations of this reality, McConnell does not mock his viewer's situation. Rather he sincerely examines his own implication and investment in these stories and roles, standing beside us and asking us to consider the task of reconciling ourselves with our fantastical pasts so new paths for living in the American West might unfold in our collective future.

Rendezvous with Destiny #2
2017, acrylic on canvas panel
7 1/2 x 14 inches
Collection of Trenay A. Hart

Black Shapes Stenciled Across the Road
2013, acrylic on hardboard panel
18 x 24 inches

Conclusion: Twilight and Reckoning

In *When the West Was Won*, Gordon McConnell weaves his painterly way through photographic and cinematic images that have personal significance and aesthetic allure and that often appear uncannily familiar to us as fellow Westerners, as fellow Americans. Rather than appropriating photographic and cinematic images as givens with assumed meanings to make a pictorial statement, however, McConnell carefully selects each image for its compositional strength, and then approaches the translation as a task to be worked through and seen again, to be brought into re-organized form through the physical and intellectual labors of art-making.

Like the Pictures Generation artists emerging in New York and California in the 1970s, McConnell questions the authenticity of Western imagery in the saturated mass media visual culture in which we all now live. He calls attention to the constructed nature of photographic and cinematic reality and questions the cultural tropes and stereotypes prevalent in representations of the American West. But McConnell does not share the Pictures Generation's often cool, distanced, ironic, sometimes harsh interrogation or deconstruction of his media-derived subject matter. Instead his works are laden with poetic seriousness and painterly sincerity that has evolved over decades of practicing his craft, of considering the difference between knowing a subject and sensitively seeing and revealing its complexities.

Through his process of translation, McConnell carefully studies the photographic or cinematic frame and then remakes his emotional experience of seeing it again. Images shift, marks build. Forms are effaced, revealed and masked almost simultaneously—as if his hand is recording the passing of time throughout and all-over his canvas. The results are glimmers of the hand-made that enliven these flat, borrowed images, and that suggest, but never fully reveal dimensionalities that accompany any life lived. The passages of colored underpainting and evidence of his painterly editing that emerge testify to other stories living and continuing to thrive in the long twilight flickering below these largely black and white surfaces, racing by, and hovering at the edges of their frames—hinted at but never fully visible.

This hinting becomes McConnell's honest form of honoring the labors, bodies, and lives informing and involved in the construction of myth of the West in the first place. Having lived and worked with those toiling to survive on these lands of the American West, McConnell assumes an approach to his chosen subject that acknowledges that the legends of the American West do in fact bear some resemblance to actual human, laboring lives now and in the past—to lives living and to lives and livelihoods lost. He invites his viewers into these inherited cultural representations of the American West, leaving open the door for multiple, even contradictory emotional responses and reactions to his haunting images.

When the West Was Won might best be understood as McConnell's reckoning with his own personal attachments and losses, which are implicitly intertwined with the nation's own imaginary American West. This fantastical "West that Was Won" and into which McConnell was born and raised is one he continues to devotedly consider, study, review, and work through as personal commitment and as ongoing task. *When the West Was Won* offers McConnell's individual reconciliation with an American-dream West that has been culturally constructed and "won" at the expense of many. The works in the exhibition offer a space and time for intergenerational contemplation and conversation, for personal and cultural reflection.

I Guess You Just Don't Understand, Kid
2017, acrylic on canvas
30 x 40 inches

Annotated Checklist

10,000 Ways to Die
2013, acrylic on canvas panel, 11 x 14 inches (p. 5)

We Took Them for Soldiers
2013, acrylic on canvas, 12 x 24 inches (p. 7)

Black Shapes Stenciled Across the Road
2013, acrylic on hardboard panel, 18 x 24 inches (p. 20)

Leaping from the Box
2013, acrylic on paper, 9 x 24 inches
Courtesy of Stremmel Gallery, Reno, Nevada

Men's Memories Are Uncertain
2013, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 30 inches

McConnell derived the title for this painting from a statement by the character Judge Holden in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian:* "Men's memories are uncertain."

His subject is a scene in *My Darling Clementine* (1946) where Wyatt (Henry Fonda) and Morgan Earp (Ward Bond) find the body of Doc Holliday in the aftermath of the gunfight at the OK Corral. Although John Ford knew Wyatt Earp, and claimed that Earp had described the actual gunfight to him in great detail, he and his screenwriter decided to further amplify the legendary quality of the shootout. Earp's biographer, Stuart Lake, had similarly embellished and ignored history, and Ford did the same.

In creating this work, McConnell painted over an old canvas, leaving a few traces of the original in this finished painting. The result seemed fitting since the source 35 mm slide taken from a VHS copy of the film, McConnell used as the source for the painting was already several technologically mediated stages removed from the original day in Arizona when these actors were captured on film.

West of Everything
2013, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches (p. 3)

This painting begun in 1992 and finished in 2013 gathers titles of several Western films from which many of Gordon McConnell's works derive their compositional origins.

McConnell began this painting by superimposing layers of imagery derived from Charlie Russell's illustrations for *Trails Ploughed Under: Stories of the Old West* (1927), an account of Russell's early days in Montana. Not satisfied with the results, one day McConnell painted the canvas black and added the end title of John Ford's film, *Fort Apache* (1948), in the center. The rich black matte background of the painting absorbs light not unlike what happens in a cavernous movie theatre while also bearing a relationship to the "blackboard paintings" of contemporary artist Cy Twombly. McConnell has taken inspiration for the graffiti-like passages in the painting from works of such contemporary artists Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Maggie Kilgallen.

The ghosted text, seen in patches under "Once Upon A Time in the West," is taken from Louis L'Amour's novel, *Hondo* (1953). In that classic Western novel, the body of a US Cavalryman, Lieutenant Creighton C. Davis, is described as "dead now in the long grass on a lonely hill, west of everything."

The irretrievable layers and hovering, decontextualized words communicate new poetic associations. The sense of death, of loss, of an "end" is also gracefully conveyed by the hand-wrought and time-worn painted text.

Ventilator Blues
2013, acrylic on canvas panel, 16 x 20 inches
(back cover)
Courtesy of Visions West Gallery

The Last Hunt
2014, acrylic on canvas mounted on Gatorboard,
32 x 40 inches

Since the 1880s painters have relied on the ability of photography to arrest animal motion for accurate depiction. English photographer Eadweard Muybridge is remembered primarily for his stop-motion photographic sequences of human and animal locomotion, including a study of the American bison, which is the source for this painting.

In the early 1880s, the Philadelphia Zoo was one of the refuges for the scarce remnants of the American Bison, driven from numbers in the tens of millions to the brink of extinction by market hunters and United States military policy. Buffalo hunts were utilized to subjugate the American Plains Indians and to open their lands to cattle ranching, farming, mining, and settlement. Muybridge, in residence at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1880s was able to include his photographic study of the American Bison among thousands of photographed men and women, athletes and dancers, and all types of animals, domestic and wild, in his voluminous *Animal Locomotion*, published in 1887. McConnell says of the Muybridge source that inspired the painting:

> This galloping bison, his power confined to a sequence of boxes laid out in strips, speaks to me of today's confinement of bison in Yellowstone, continued conflicts with the cattle industry, and the abiding connection that Native Americans have with this majestic animal.

Ghost Town
2014, acrylic on canvas, 12 x 24 inches (pp. 14-15)
Collection of G.B. Carson

El Ray-o X
2014, acrylic on canvas, 20 x 16 inches

20th Century Rodeo Photography

In 2012, McConnell read Ken Kesey's and Ken Babb's novel about the first Pendleton Roundup rodeo, *The Last Go Round* (1994), and was inspired to explore rodeo photographs from the early 20th century. Many of these photographs were by Lee Moorhouse, who documented the early Pendleton Roundups, and Ralph R. Doubleday, who specialized in rodeo photography and was the first to take his camera into the arena. Doubleday's photographs are likely familiar to many in the region through his numerous picture postcards.

Like A Rocket and *El Rayo-X* draw their inspiration from iconic rodeo photography by Doubleday and Moorhouse, which capture in the artist's words, "alternately balletic and violent action of saddle bronc riding." The emotions of the scenes are amplified by McConnell's introduction of abstracted passages of paint in each. The artist notes:

> El Rayo-X leaves many details unresolved and emphasizes the lattice structure of the fence—a pattern I have explored recently in a series of non-objective paintings. The piece may be unfinished from a descriptive standpoint, but the painting, as I was working on it, wanted to be something other than a photorealist document. Like *Ghost Town*, the finished painting reveals some of my underlying process. The horse is somewhat transparent, as if it is being seen with X-ray vision or is an escapee from a Francis Picabia or David Salle painting. The title is derived from the name of virtuoso studio musician David Lindley's band of the 1980s.

Like a Rocket
2014, acrylic on canvas, 14 x 14 inches

Crouched Run
2015, acrylic on canvas, 16 x 20 inches (front cover)
Collection of Jon Lodge

Winchester '73
2015, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 24 inches

Broken Coach
2015, acrylic on canvas panel, 18 x 24 inches

Gunpoint
2015, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 40 inches (p. 13)

According to McConnell:

> This painting came to me in a dream in which I imagined guns, held by disembodied hands, and pointed directly at me. . . . Undoubtedly, the mass shootings of recent history and the controversy surrounding other instances of gun violence informed this disturbing vision.

Collecting the images of 1950s and '60s actors and actresses using the Google search engine, the artist was struck by some of the results. The handgun de-

picted in nearly all instances is the 1873 Army Colt, the famous "Peacemaker."

McConnell collaged the handguns together and numbered and identified the performers as he went: 1. James Arness as Matt Dillon in *Gunsmoke*; 2. Richard Boone as Paladin in *Have Gun Will Travel*; 3. Unknown; 4. Unknown; 5. & 6. William S. Hart in *Two Gun Bill*; 7. Errol Flynn in *Rocky Mountain*; 8. Unknown; 9. Unknown; 10. Richard Boone; 11. Alexis Smith in *Montana*; 12. Unknown; 13. Jack Kelly as Bart Maverick in *Maverick*; 14. Unknown; 15. Lash LaRue; 16. Gregory Peck as Jimmy Ringo in *The Gunfighter*; 17. Gregory Peck; 18. James Arness; 19 & 20. Robert Redford as the Sundance Kid; 21. Tina Louise in *Day of the Outlaw*; 22. Julie Newmar; 23. Paul Newman as Billy the Kid in *The Left Handed Gun*; 24. Robert Redford; 25. Paul Newman as Butch Cassidy; 26. Paul Newman as Billy the Kid; 27. Robert Redford; 28. Linda Cristal; 29. Jane Russell in *The Outlaw*; 30. Dean Martin in *Four for Texas*; 31. John Ireland as Cherry Valance in *Red River*; 32. John Wayne; 33. Charles Bronson as Harmonica in *Once Upon a Time in the West*; 34. Ricky Nelson as Colorado in *Rio Bravo* (page 13).

Horses and Men
2016, acrylic on canvas panel, 9 x 12 inches
Collection of Rebecca Adams

The legendary cowboy and memoirist Teddy Blue Abott recalled an "old Texas cow dog's" response to a lady's comment about the "boys" and their "ponies." "Madam," he said "there wasn't any boys or ponies. They was all horses and men." From this anecdote, McConnell draws his title "Horses and Men".

The subject of this painting is from the 1950 Errol Flynn western, *Rocky Mountain*, a film released the year Gordon McConnell was born. More than 130 western films were released in 1950, about a third of all Hollywood productions. It was a peak year for the genre.

A group of riders on galloping horses is one of McConnell's favorite motifs. With the aid of cinematic and photographic sources, McConnell has worked to master these dynamic forms and to convey movement through selective blurring of flying hooves and speeding ground.

McConnell understands these works of galloping horses as a "connective between Frederic Remington and Charlie Russell, the nearly ubiquitous TV horse operas of the mid-20th century, and the post-modernist aesthetic of 'The Pictures Generation.'" The 1970s "Pictures Generation" of artists, included Cindy Sherman, and called attention to how media representations create and sustain certain cultural stereotypes and myths. In the artist's words:

> Studying art history, working as a curator, making collages and abstract paintings in my spare time, it took me a while to figure it out, but by turning to the imagery of the Western film, I have found my deepest and most engaging means of expression.

In the Middle of the Road
2016, acrylic on canvas mounted on wood,
11 x 25 1/2 inches

Lonely are the Brave

McConnell's three works, *In The Middle of the Road, The Last Cowboy: Rearview Mirror* (pp. 10-11), and *Solitary Edge* all draw inspiration from the opening scene of the 1962 film, *Lonely Are The Brave*, which is an adaptation of Edward Abbey's novel, *The Brave Cowboy* (1956).

Lonely Are the Brave is a film that grapples with the ways ideals of homosocial American loyalty and male independence became increasingly difficult, perhaps even impossible to maintain, in the face of new post-World War II realities of the United States. At the opening of the film set in the 1960s, an itinerant cowboy and Korean War veteran, who does not own a motor vehicle, is crossing a highway near Albuquerque on horseback. Cars and trucks zoom by, swerving and honking as the cowboy's skittish horse darts and dodges to ultimate safety across the road. The film's narrative follows this man who has become a living anachronism, and who, in his quest to live free cannot, in the artist's words, "compromise with the rules of society or abide the matrix of technological civilization."

McConnell captures and conveys the mood and emotion of that fraught opening scene of the film, isolating certain frames and magnifying specific details in these three poignant compositions.

Fli-Back
2017, inkjet prints, acrylic medium, PVA adhesive, foamboard and archival cardboard, 23 x 38 inches
Courtesy of Visions West Gallery

Fli-Back is a brand of wooden paddle/rubber-band and ball toy, which was popular in the United States from the 1930s–60s. This brand of paddleball toy from which McConnell derives his title had an illustration of a bucking horse imprinted on the back.

The film frames collaged together in this artwork are all taken from the film, *The Misfits* (1961), in which the character played by iconic comedienne Marilyn Monroe plays with a paddleball, possibly a Fli-Back, in a rowdy cowboy bar. McConnell selects and edits frames of the film star's performance in his overall composition in a manner that mimics the effects of the jump-cutting that distinguish that memorable cinematic scene.

Rendezvous with Destiny
2017, acrylic on canvas panel, 12 x 16 inches (p.17)

Rendezvous with Destiny #2
2017, acrylic on canvas panel, 7 1/2 x 14 inches (p. 19)
Collection of Trenay A. Hart

I Guess You Just Don't Understand, Kid
2017, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 40 inches (p. 22)
Courtesy of Visions West Gallery

Disguised as Soldiers
2017, acrylic on canvas, 12 x 24 inches

Disguised as Soldiers #2
2017, acrylic on canvas, 12 x 24 inches

Solitary Edge
2017, photomontage and acrylic medium on canvas, 12 x 24 inches
Courtesy of Visions West Gallery

The Misfits: Roping a Dream
2017, photomontage and acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches (p. 30)

Gray County
2018, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches (p. 9)

McConnell considers *Gray County* to be a personal counterpart to *The Last Hunt*. It draws from family photographs of his granddad with his registered Polled Hereford bulls, and his own recent photographs of oil pump jacks on the same property in the Texas Panhandle. Gordon McConnell's granddad, Roger Stanley McConnell, incorporated the farm and ranch property in the 1960s, preserving the family legacy.

McConnell's father outlived his two brothers, and he moved back to Texas to run the property in the mid-1990s. He rebuilt fences and restored farmlands to pasture through the United States Department of Agriculture's Conservation Reserve Program. Tenants now farm and raise cattle on the property today, working alongside producing oil and gas wells. McConnell's Texas land, like many lands of the American West, is an industrialized landscape with pump jacks, tank batteries, power lines and networks of pipelines underlaying it all.

The Last Cowboy: Rearview Mirror
2018, acrylic on canvas mounted on wood, 11 1/8 x 25 1/2 inches (pp. 10-11)

Note: *Annotations are derived from Leanne Gilbertson's exhibition wall texts.*

The Misfits: Roping a Dream
2017, photomontage and acrylic on canvas
36 x 48 inches

Artist's Acknowledgments

In March 2017, I was delighted to accept Dr. Leanne Gilbertson's invitation to show my work at MSUB's Northcutt Steele Gallery. As a board member of MAGDA (Montana Art Gallery Directors Association), she also secured the organization's sponsorship for the exhibition to travel at a reduced rate to member institutions across the state, and I am thrilled by the response of MAGDA member museums and galleries and the opportunity to present my work in several communities across the great state of Montana.

Leanne is the consummate curator, and I am proud to have my work included in her rich and diverse portfolio (especially in the context of MSUB's art faculty and contemporary Indigenous artists such as Bently Spang, Wendy Red Star and Neal Ambrose-Smith). She carefully selected each piece (surprising me with some of her choices) and engaged in a series of studio visits and interviews. I provided her with copious notes and a collection of Western DVDs to review. Her essay about my work is a marvel of scholarship and deep consideration. She has done me the profound service of illuminating the higher aspirations and more serious potential this work holds, and has reignited my passion for the gunsmoke and dust-clouded iconography of the Western American Dream, and the challenge of painting it.

I loved having my work seen in an academic setting, and to have the opportunity to interact with the Art Department's students and faculty. I particularly appreciated the efforts and creative contributions of student gallery assistants Angel Shandy and Morgan Syring.

Anna Paige and Corby Skinner were generous in their coverage of the exhibition, first on their Yellowstone Public Radio program, *Resounds*, and later in Anna's article for *Enjoy!* in the Billings Gazette. I am grateful for the response of friends in the community and across the state. The art is inert without the audience.

Special thanks to G.B. Carson, Rebecca Adams, Trenay A. Hart and Jon Lodge for allowing works from their collections to be included, and to Turkey and Peter Stremmel (Stremmel Gallery, Reno) and Nikki and Jeb Todd (Visions West Gallery, Livingston, Bozeman, Jackson, Wyoming, and Denver) for de-consigning works from their inventories for this exhibition and tour.

Production of this catalog brought the opportunity to collaborate with one of the avant-garde masters of printing and design, Jon Lodge, who has coordinated the project with Dusty Young with CopyRight Printing. Jane Waggoner Deschner did the digital photography and cast her creative, critical, perfectionist eye on the final edit of this publication. Jon and Jane are brilliant artists and fabulous people, my treasured friends. They have been working with me, polishing my efforts, and advancing my cause for more than three decades.

Gordon McConnell

When the West Was Won

RECENT WORKS BY GORDON MCCONNELL

Exhibition Schedule

Northcut Steele Gallery-Montana State University • Billings, Montana
September 5 – October 11, 2018

Schoolhouse History & Art Center • Colstrip, Montana
September 1 – October 1, 2019

Lewistown Art Center • Lewistown, Montana
October 5 – November 1, 2019

Carle Gallery of the Butte-Silver Bow Public Library • Butte, Montana
November 15 – December 15, 2019

Missoula Art Museum • Missoula, Montana
January 1 – May 1, 2020

Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art • Great Falls, Montana
June 1 – July 15, 2020

Holter Museum of Art • Helena, Montana
August 20 – November 2, 2020

MonDak Heritage Center • Sidney, Montana
November 15, 2020 – January 1, 2021

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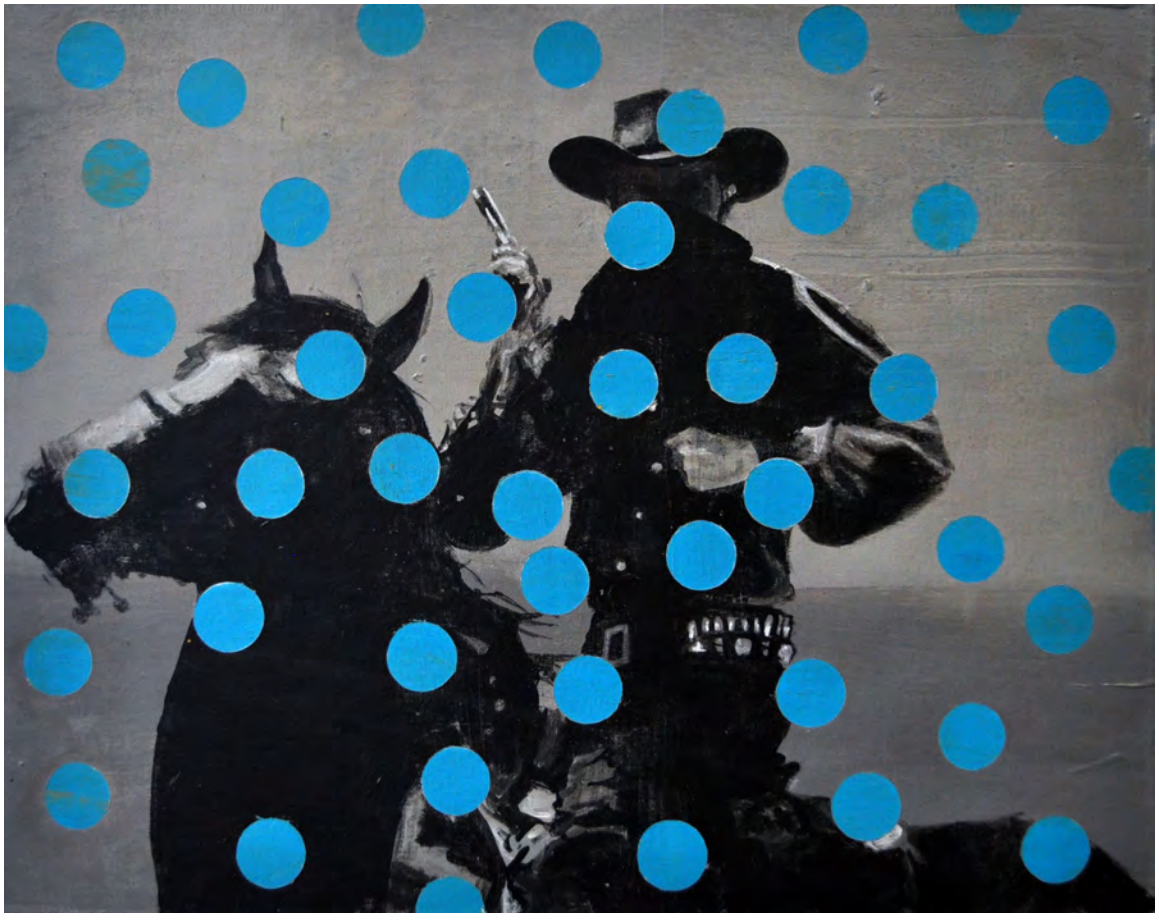
Back Cover:
Ventilator Blues
2013, acrylic on canvas panel
16 x 20 inches



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