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Gordon McConnell's works question the romanticism of western films

BY ANNA PAIGE



Gordon McConnell grew up watching western films with his parents. They never missed a John Wayne movie, McConnell said. “It got to where I didn’t like them much, actually.”

Late in his life, McConnell's father became "obsessed" with the western channel, and would quote lines from Wayne's movies, including the famous, "Never apologize. It's a sign of weakness," from "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon."

"I apologize all the time," McConnell said with a bit of mischief in his voice. Though his dad wanted him to be like John Wayne, McConnell said he's more like Woody Allen. Creativity and individuality seemed to be the driving forces of McConnell's generation. To him, the Duke represented a cultural gap. "We found our identity with the Beatles and the anti-war movement and changing sexual mores. It was a huge schism between us and our parents."



Gordon McConnell's mixed-media work titled "Misfits: Roping a Dream," portrays several scenes from "The Misfits," a 1961 contemporary western directed by John Huston, based on a screenplay written by Author Miller that starred Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable, and Montgomery Smith.

"I was really intrigued by Clark Gable's expression, his greed and glee at the action," McConnell said. "He is feeling really alive because he is being a cowboy in this scene, but he is in love with (Marilyn Monroe's character) and her being horrified really causes him to call his whole way of life into question."

Yet these westerns would imbue themselves to McConnell's consciousness and make their way into his creative work. The Billings-based painter has spent the bulk of his career painting stills plucked from iconic and lesser-known westerns of the '50s, '60s, and '70s.

A exhibit of McConnell's latest works, titled "When the West Was Won," is on display through Oct. 11 at the Northcutt Steele Gallery at Montana State University Billings. The collection spans paintings and mixed media pieces from the past five years.

For McConnell, who didn't really grab onto other forms of art, westerns were vivid. They had meaning. "I can't capture the narrative of a whole film in a painting, but I can take an image away from the film and let that image itself suggest other stories. It's an intersection between someone else's imaginative creation and my reimagining."



Flanked by two paintings that depict images from classic westerns, Gordon McConnell visits with students about his recent works at the Northcutt Steele Gallery, located on the first floor of the Liberal Arts building on the campus of Montana State University Billings.

RYAN WELCH, Billings Gazette

McConnell initially worked from photographs he snapped of movies as they were broadcast on television. “I had random stuff at first,” said McConnell, who didn’t have the ability to stop the frames. “Then I got a VCR and was able to pause.”

As technology advanced and movies were converted to digital format, the old western films became more vivid, losing the graininess and gaining detail. In this high contrast, McConnell’s style changed and sharpened. Yet for McConnell, there is such a thing as too much detail.

“It’s a lot more work,” said McConnell, whose technique was informed by the initial fuzzy grayscale images. “I grew up with black and white TV.”

The family upgraded to a color television in the '60s, and when McConnell went off to graduate school, his father gifted him a portable color TV.

Yet, black and white westerns — especially from the late '60s and early '70s — continued to be McConnell’s muse. “To me, the black and white is instantly an abstraction,” McConnell said. “The distractions are removed.”

The genre peaked after World War II, and in the 1950s, more westerns were produced than any other genre. “I think it had a lot to do with the violent experiences that the men had had in WWII,” McConnell said. “The western ritualizes violence.” From gun duels to battling rustlers or Indians, the current of violence was stitched into the genre.



A stack of western movie DVDs sits at the Northcutt Steele Gallery, donated by Gordon McConnell to accompany his latest show, "When the West Was Won," composed of paintings that were made from stills of many of these classic movies.



Titled "Ventilator Blues," this painting is part of a collection of works on display by Billings-based painter Gordon McConnell at the Northcutt Steele Gallery. This particular piece is reminiscent of 60s pop art and grabs its title from a few sources, including the Rolling Stones song of the same name, as well as from cult westerns, which used the term "ventilate" or to fill someone full of bullet holes.

"Some of those old cheap westerns that they made in a week on two reels are full of action and the standard clichés of the genre, and sometimes I go for that," McConnell said.

After the peak, westerns began to shift. The films of the '60s and '70s were wilder, a departure from the storylines of the traditional westerns. They became grittier, often dismantling conventions and sometimes getting closer to history, while others were almost absurd in their portrayals.

McConnell's attitude toward westerns was informed by this era. "The cowboys looked like hippies in those westerns, and I was a hippie then too," he said.

In these films emerges a portrait that is distinctly American, whether it's Marilyn Monroe reacting to a brutal wild horse roundup, or a gunfighter in



"Ghost Town" is one of several pieces on display at Northcutt Steele Gallery at Montana State University Billings. The show, titled "How the West Was Won," features works by Gordon McConnell and will be on display through October. Courtesy GB Carson

the middle of a dirt street in a moment of existential crisis, which McConnell portrays as a vaporous figure vanishing while the buildings remain sharp in contrast.

"These film images are fleeting," said McConnell. "They are fundamentally insubstantial, made of light and shadow."

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A teaching gallery

To Morgan Syring, who helped hang the exhibition, the images are familiar. Her grandparents lived in Miles City and loved John Wayne — even naming Syring’s father after the western icon. “It reminds me of home a bit when times were simpler,” she said. “I would go out with my sisters and cousins and play lawmen and gunslingers.”



"How the West Was Won," featuring a variety of paintings and mixed media by Gordon McConnell, will be on display through October in the Northcutt Steele Gallery at Montana State University Billings. McConnell paints stills taken from western flicks, including this painting titled "Rendezvous with Destiny."

Syring is currently attending Montana State University Billings for a bachelor of arts degree. Northcutt Steele Gallery is housed on the first floor of the Liberal Arts building and serves as a learning space for students, who are often part of adding additional interactive components to the exhibits.

Gallery director Dr. Leanne Gilbertson said the students immediately responded to McConnell’s works. “They see that they are beautifully wrought and technically sophisticated. That is the entry point.”

Yet, there's something deeper that causes the viewer to pause. It's almost like looking at ghosts that played out in imaginations long before. In their stillness, the paintings stand alone as a fragment of a time.



This acrylic painting by Gordon McConnell is inspired by the westerns of the 1950s, 60s and 70s, and the iconic image of being held at "gunpoint," included in a show titled "How the West Was Won" on display through October at Montana State University Billings.

"It's visually stimulating," said Gilbertson. "The content and the conceptual depth that Gordon brings to each work is really remarkable. For our arts students, I think it's important to have exposure to that kind of deep consideration"

Gilbertson, who curated the exhibition, selected paintings representative of McConnell's work across the past five years. "My intention was to show a variety of images Gordon was working with," Gilbertson said. "The one overriding theme is the relationship between painting and the experience of viewing the moving image."

McConnell's work is often assumed to be in black and white, but en masse,

the canvases portray a gradient of warm to cool gray tones. “All those subtleties of choices create different moods when you bring the work in a space together,” Gilbertson said.



"I Guess You Just Don't Understand, Kid" is one of a variety of paintings and mixed media by Gordon McConnell on display through October in the Northcutt Steele Gallery at Montana State University Billings. McConnell paints stills taken from western flicks, including this painting titled "I Guess You Just Don't Understand, Kid."

Gilbertson herself grew up with westerns as "background noise." She watched these movies with her dad as a way to connect with him. “Even if you are not a western buff, they are part of the background of American history,” she said. “There is something about westerns that tap into some kind of emotional need that we have to have these heroes and villains, and it’s quite fascinating to me.”

For more information about the artist visit gordonmcconnellstudio.com.

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