

# ART WORKS BLOG

## Painting with Grit

February 21, 2014

By Rebecca Gross



*Big Boys* by Gordon McConnell. Acrylic on hardboard panel, 2014. Photo by Jane Waggoner Deschner

In 1966, author Jorge Luis Borges told an interviewer, “I think nowadays, while literary men seem to have neglected their epic duties, the epic has been saved for us, strangely enough, by the Westerns.” It’s true that the soundstages of Hollywood—commercially driven and glitteringly artificial—might seem an incongruous heir to Homer or Virgil. And yet, their ability to tell towering tales of the open range, replete with heroes and villains, justice and cowardice, has left us with our own, uniquely American brand of saga.

In a new exhibit at the Yellowstone County Museum in Billings, Montana, painter Gordon McConnell translates the genre’s epic narratives onto canvas, creating what almost feel like cinematic stills. His works are painted in the black-and-white palette of movie reel nostalgia, and portray Western screen stars such as Gary Cooper and William S. Hart, as well as classic

scenes of cowboys and sharpshooters. Organized in conjunction with the local **YMCA's Big Read program**, which focuses on Charles Portis's classic Western tale, *True Grit*, the exhibit opened on February 7 and will run through the summer. In a recent interview, McConnell spoke about his work, his passion for the Western, and the mythology the genre has spawned.

**NEA: How did you first fall in love with Westerns?**

GORDON MCCONNELL: I was born in 1950, which was sort of at the center of Hollywood's postwar renaissance of Westerns. At about the time I started school, we got our first black-and-white television, and I was enamored as a little boy by Hopalong Cassidy and Roy Rogers, and the Saturday afternoon matinees of movies like *Red River* and *Dodge City* and *They Died With Their Boots On*. My dad was a great movie fan all of his life, and he particularly loved Westerns, and particularly John Wayne Westerns. Even though we rarely went to the theater, we never missed any of John Wayne's movies as they came along.

So it's been something that's stayed with me all my life. Even in the 60s, when I was in love with the Beatles and the counter-culture, I still really appreciated the Westerns of that period, like *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Little Big Man* that were revising the myth and looking at it more critically or more relevantly to the times we were living in, in the Vietnam-war era and the era of civil rights and student protests.

**NEA: You've talked about how Hollywood Westerns have become inextricably linked with the actual history of the West. How do you think art can shape our sense of history or cultural identity, and is there any danger in allowing that to happen?**

MCCONNELL: Yes indeed. I think there really has been a lot of ideology in Hollywood film production, and in the 50s and 60s, the gunfighter scenario that got to be such a cliché in Westerns had something to do with the machismo of our leadership and our stance toward the Soviet Union. Of course, there are dangers in the romanticized or fetishized display of guns and violence in Western movies and other violent entertainment, and of course, the treatment of Native Americans in movies was almost universally terrible. In fact, the Indians were almost erased from Hollywood, and the Native Americans seldom played speaking roles. Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* was really the first that had a number of Indians in recognizably human roles. So Hollywood and also, to a much lesser extent, the visual art world, can definitely perpetuate negative stereotypes and behaviors.

**NEA: And positive...?**

MCCONNELL: Obviously I see a lot of positive virtue in Western archetypes and behavior, and simply the beauty of the co-dependent relationship of a human being and a horse. I know it's a well-worn artistic trope, going back to the Greeks—the relationship of human and horse, and the leader as a figure on a horse—and I'm in love with that. There's something that stirs inside of me when I see a galloping horse in a movie. Even in a movie like *Lord of the Rings*—Gandalf's steed is something I love. And the self-sufficiency, and economy of means, being mobile, traveling on horseback with everything you need in saddlebags, and just living rough, close to nature—it's a fantasy zone that I enjoy going to.

**NEA: How do you think your paintings complement the Western films and Western literature that you work with, or are inspired by? How do they all overlap?**

MCCONNELL: I'm trying to distill narrative content into something that's more standalone and abstract. It's just an instant: freezing an action, a moment that's perfect in the graphic play of

light and shadow. It's something that is quintessentially Western, and also reflecting on Western art, from [Frederic] Remington and [Charles Marion] Russell. I love the literary Westerns, and certainly *True Grit* is one of the best examples of a Western story that's got a lot of literary value. I've only come to [author] Louis L'Amour recently, actually, through [critic and writer] Jane Tompkins, because she deals with the Western genre not just in film, but also in literature. I was impressed with the extracts from Louis L'Amour and her discussion of him, so I finally began to read him, and also Zane Grey. But I have to say that my favorite Western books are books like *Lonesome Dove*, or Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man*, Mary Doria Russell's *Doc*, or Pete Dexter's *Deadwood*. Those books really have great depth and literary merit.



*Two Gun Bill* by Gordon McConnell. Acrylic on canvas panel, 2014. Photo by Jane Waggoner Deschner

**NEA: How do you hope that your exhibit will fit in with the Big Read program?**

MCCONNELL: I was thinking I should do some paintings drawn from the *True Grit* movie, but I actually found myself gravitating away from that. I think my work is in the spirit of *True Grit*, and the sense of the classic journey of the lawmen which is spurred by this incredible little girl for retributive justice. [*True Grit*] is a quintessential Western narrative, and my work ramifies that.

**NEA: Can you walk me through your creative process?**

MCCONNELL: My academic background is both as a visual artist and as a critic and art historian. When I was working on my art history degree, I spent a lot of time in darkened lecture halls

looking at slides of works of art that I had not yet seen, and trying to imagine what they were really like, with the help of the professor and the text and my own imagination. I'm talking about the Ghent altarpiece or the Sistine Chapel ceiling, things like that.

I think my imagination was activated really powerfully, just that experience of looking at slides. A darkened lecture hall is similar to a darkened movie theater, or a darkened living room looking at a television. All of this kind of coalesced in my mind, and I noticed, in that era, that colored television was very primitive—it was almost like a blurry Impressionist painting that was animated. I simply began photographing television and trying to transpose that type of imagery onto a paper or canvas surface in paint, self-consciously thinking about Impressionism and also Abstract Expressionist style as I interpreted the images that I was photographing from television as if I was out in the real world. You know, I was photographing the screen, rather than photographing something in the real world as the basis of a painting. That was very much a pop art and postmodernist approach.

**NEA: Something we've been talking a lot about at the NEA recently is the concept of inspiration. How do you continue to find new inspiration within Western themes?**

MCCONNELL: The process of painting is fairly laborious and time-consuming, and one strikes off ideas for future works much more readily than one can accomplish the works. I have ideas that will take me years to accomplish, and that will change as I work on them. I haven't seen all the Westerns yet either! There are thousands of them, and I keep finding themes and images that lead me in other directions. A particularly fruitful avenue in the last few years has been studying Eadward Muybridge, and other pioneers of moving picture technology, and the coincidence of his work with the illustrators like Frederic Remington, who created the iconography of Western painting. The fact that Muybridge is a Westerner—[he] was working in San Francisco originally—it all is of a piece for me.

- See more at: <http://arts.gov/art-works/2014/painting-grit#sthash.SMRtNclQ.dpuf>