

**Gordon McConnell**  
P A I N T I N G S



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March 24–June 19, 2005

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Brochure Design: Duane Braaten

## Straight Shooting The Paintings of Gordon McConnell

*"My arrival in Montana in 1982 brought me into intimate contact with some of the most storied places of the historic West and also gave me the opportunity to study the paintings of two of the most influential codifiers of western imagery, Frederic Remington and Charlie Russell. I became aware of how decisive an effect their work, and the work of other western illustrators, had on the formulations of filmmakers like John Ford, William Wyler, and Howard Hawks. At the same time, I recognized how distinctly different the formalized imagery of western films, in its temporal, technological, and theatrical mediation, is from any painting."* Gordon McConnell

In 1977, Artists' Space Curator Douglas Crimp organized an exhibition entitled *Pictures* that would have a reverberating impact on the art—and the art discourse—of the 1980s and beyond. Crimp selected the artists Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Philip Smith and Robert Longo "because their pictures consisted of pictures whose images were appropriated from pictures." At about the same time, painter David Salle observed that people seemed to want to look at pictures again. "One senses imagery creeping into the arena of New York painting and sculpture at a time when the formalist hegemony, with its current concerns for 'pure' perception, is breaking up." In the introduction of the exhibit's catalogue, Crimp wrote: "To an ever greater extent our experience is governed by pictures, pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in the cinema. Next to these pictures, first hand experience begins to retreat, to seem more and more trivial. While it once seemed that pictures had the function of interpreting reality, it now seems that they have usurped it...we only experience reality through the pictures we make of it. They have become our reality."

The 1980s ushered in an era in which it became important to understand the nature of the electronic image itself, to explore media's self-reflexive sources and invented history. The interest in mass produced imagery was also influenced by the deconstructionist idea of French philosopher Jacques Derrida that "everything is a text." John Baldessari was using movie stills in 1972, writing, "Winnowing movie stills gives me an idea of what's on my mind." Americans born after 1945 were weaned on the mass media, in particular, television.

Gordon McConnell, born in 1950, and raised in rural Colorado, studied art at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, graduating in 1972. After doing post-graduate work at California Institute of the Arts, in 1979 he completed a master's degree in art history at the University of Colorado, Boulder. McConnell started working in series and using photographic and film sources in the 1980s, inspired by such post-modernist artists as Gerhard Richter. Like the artists selected for *Pictures*, McConnell's earliest collage work was involved with the



presentation of images from the culture at large. He writes: "Collecting images from mass media is fundamental to collage and more typical of artists like Joseph Cornell... At the conclusion of my formal studies in art history (which is all about collecting, analyzing, comparing and categorizing images), I began making collages of newspaper graphics..." When you add all of this up, it means that after Pop Art ebbed, many contemporary artists of a particular generation began to use the appropriation of film, photographic and video sources to investigate the verbal and visual nature of narrative.

McConnell's work, by identifying with the camera, explores his personal geography and history, a parallel interest in language and literature - high and low - and film and video, and the fierce landscape of the ranching West he grew up in bisected by modern interstates. His images, a stagecoach, horse, swimmer, baseball player, intentionally do not succumb to an allegedly recaptured past. They remain conscious, but not self-conscious, of the efforts going into their construction. Within each painting a consistent awareness of the pictorial elements (composition, light source, surface and texture) and filmic or photographic source, transact to define McConnell's terms. While he paints what he is passionate about, he stays just outside of the frame, slightly removed from the drama he records. "You start with a preexisting image and go to work on it. You might think you know where you're headed or how it will turn out, but things change along the way. The still becomes the score or scenario of a **moving** image which keeps changing until you walk away from it."

Expressionistic in style, McConnell's work embraces simplicity and realism, and it has a grip on history that imbues it with a modest, quiet confidence. He strives to avoid self-indulgence and sentimentality, going for a sparseness and restraint that belies the time and difficulty it takes to "get it." In this respect it resonates with a remark John Ford made in a 1959 interview. "I don't want to make great sprawling pictures," he said. "I want to make films in a kitchen...but don't quote that—oh hell, you can quote that."

McConnell's western genre movie paintings have an ephemeral atmosphere, as though they are vanishing as they appear and the residue is the painted

image. This pulsating quality, the sense that the images are *in motion*, while not mimed or overtly cultivated, is consistent with and true to the nature of their appropriated source. The artist writes, "It is important to me when I work to always to have built a surface that has a history, whether it be legible to some extent as a palimpsest, or aglow with undertones of warm color, or inflected with textural variety. Often the surface appears to be eroded or weathered. To some extent the process is provisional, as if another step could be taken in the process just as well as letting the thing be."



In *Stagecoach With Open Door*, McConnell is working in a larger format and, while the scale of the image is consistent with his smaller paintings, the tension is ratcheted up. Within this larger canvas environment, the implied meaning of small gestures has amplified a still-ambiguous narrative. The viewer's level of engagement with action just barely contained within the frame seems deeper. The slight twist in the neck of a horse as it pulls against the reins and the draft tugs and pushes up its mane in another direction, the tip of the driver's hat, the pale, rigid shape of the open stage coach door held extended by an anonymous, outstretched arm—all allude to the viewer being provided more access to the action of the moment. What I find interesting and exciting about this is that while we are being given access to more information, the image is simultaneously more abstract and iconographic.

McConnell does not over-contextualize the source of his imagery—he borrows from it to explore landscape, obsession, simple pleasures and gut-level drama and fear—and to make paintings of negative spaces and of actions interrupting the horizon. He mixes, layers, recombines and shuffles. Like Robert Longo, who the artist cites as an influence, he un-stages the originally staged "reality." Semi-transparent text

may become part of a built surface that is scraped, wiped, painted over and drawn under. In two paintings the views are of horses pulling an unseen stagecoach from the perspective of the driver (*Going On*) and (in a framed view only cinema could have invented) the team of horses headed straight at and slightly above the viewer (*Coming On*). In each painting the viewer is pulled into ghostly, abstracted moments of sprawled time and a dissolving flow of forms.

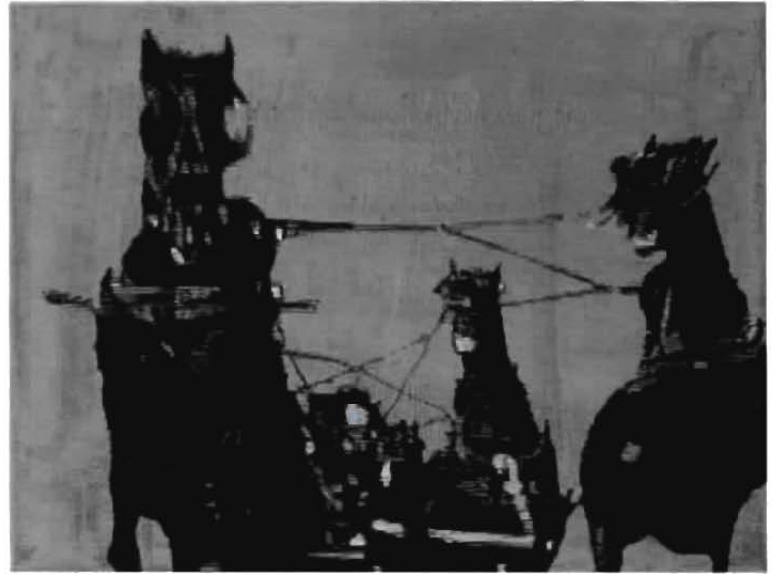


*Straight Shooting* is the title of the oldest John Ford film known to exist. It dates from the early 1920s, and with its rhythmic and subtle, albeit technically murky, characterizations that would come to be identified with Ford's oeuvre—the ethos of the classic western film—it is as such the earliest example of the director's deceptively complicated and visually taut film vocabulary. Like the work of 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 surfaces are anti-mechanical, reminiscent of a statement I heard performance artist Eleanor Antin make years ago, "There are some things you can only do by hand."

*The Myth of the West* is the title of an exhibition organized in 1990 by the Henry Art Gallery's (then) Senior Curator Chris Bruce. In his essay entitled *Epilogue: West of the Silver Screen* (one of five included in the book published to accompany the exhibit) Bruce writes, "...Artists have always looked not so much for historic fact, but for subject matter that stimulates compelling pictures which represent their time. Today, the media offer the visual dramas we share most commonly as a sort of universal vernacular, continuing to expand upon the already wide pool of western imagery from which we draw visions of ourselves."

McConnell writes, "Although I love the big screen Technicolor western panoramas of the sixties and seventies...I am drawn in my painter's imagination to the more austere and abstract black and white westerns of the late 1930s and into the 1950s. Perhaps it's because I saw many of the films as worn prints transmitted from signal towers atop distant Cheyenne Mountain across the Colorado plains, through electromagnetic 'snow' and haze to our little farmhouse on the prairie." 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.

Elizabeth Guheen  
Senior Curator

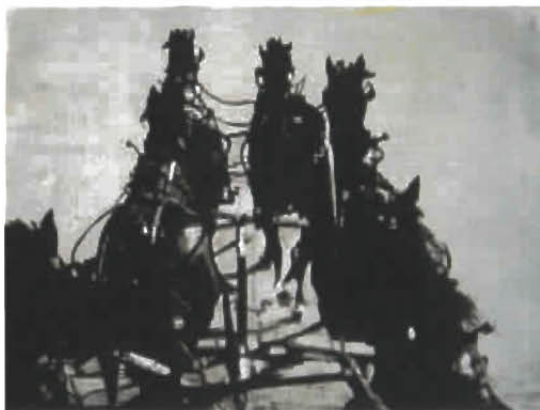


#### References and Selected Reading

Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era, From the Late 1960's to the Early 1990's*; Douglas Crimp, *About Pictures*, *Flash Art*, April/May 1979, page 34; Hunter Drohojowska, *No More Boring Art*, *Art News*, Jan. 1986, page 65; Brian Wallis, essay entitled *Modernism, Postmodernism and Beyond*, in catalogue for *Beyond the Frame: American Art 1960-1990*. Tokyo, Setagaya Museum, 1991, page 194; Carter Ratcliff, *The Art of Gesture: Jackson Pollock and Postwar American Art*, Westview Press, 1998, page 303; Chris Bruce, *Myth of the West*, Introduction by Chris Bruce, Essays by Brian Dippie, Paul Fees, Mark Klett and Kathleen Murphy, Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, Rizzoli, NY, 1990, page 179; In *Myth of the West* see also essay by Kathleen Murphy, *Graves and Grail: Mythic Landscapes in Western Fictions*; Colin Young, *The Old Dependables*, *Film Quarterly*, Fall 1959.

#### Images

Far left: *A Column of Twos*, 2004, acrylic on canvas panel, 12 x 16 inches.  
Center (top): *Traveling West*, 2004, acrylic on canvas panel, 12 x 16 inches.  
Center (bottom): *Charge for the Guns*, 2005, acrylic on canvas panel, 9 x 12 inches.  
Above: *Coming On*, 2004, acrylic on canvas panel, 12 x 16 inches.



**Going On**, 2004, acrylic on canvas panel, 12 x 16 inches



**The Big Action Picture, Study #26**, 2004, acrylic on paper, 5 x 12 inches (Detail on brochure cover)

## **A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S**

Generous support for the exhibition **Gordon McConnell—Paintings** has been provided by **David and Ann Knight, Joseph and Miriam Sample, Laurence R. and Ruth B. Martin, Dr. Stephen and Marilyn Kramer, Artcraft Printers, David Orser and Ossie Abrams, Kay Foster and Mike Mathew, Mildred M. Oliver, James M. Haughey, Walker's American Grill & Tapas Bar and Donna M. Forbes.**



**Stagecoach with Open Door**, 2005, acrylic and collage on acrylic panel, 24 x 32 inches. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert H. Hanson

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