

Previews of Works For Sale at Upcoming Shows

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WESTERN ART

C O L L E C T O R



INTRUDING *on the* WEST

Watercolor artist William Matthews explores the West as an outsider in a new exhibition ongoing at the Denver Art Museum.

By Michael Clawson



Above: *Heading up French Glen*, 1992, watercolor on paper, 14¾ x 37¾". Private collection.

Opposite page: *Close Range*, 1998, watercolor on paper, 28 x 18". Collection of the artist.

Denver painter William Matthews calls himself a trespasser—to the West, his subjects, and his paper, which he infiltrates with his remarkable brushstrokes.

It's fitting then that his new show at the Denver Art Museum is titled *William Matthews: Trespassing*. "I wanted a title that would be simple, one word, somewhat provocative, but also appropriate. It describes me personally and me in the Western world. I did not grow up a cowboy, so when I started visiting the great ranches 30 years ago, I was an outlier," Matthews says from his studio. "I was trespassing into a world that I was not a member of, yet everyone was very accommodating and polite to me as I trespassed into their private world."

He continues, "In a lot of ways *Trespassing* also describes what my position is in other situations, too, like when I travel both inside America and outside. I always feel like I'm an outsider...I like that feeling. I feel unattached and it gives me the ability to be more objective. I become a journalist as I witness everything around me."

This outsider element can be seen in Matthews' works. They're similar to Western scenes you may have seen before, but they're skewed just a nudge from center. In *Bottle Tops*, he paints a rancher adjusting a row of metal containers, their frost-covered tops almost mirroring the snow-capped hills in the background. His images of granaries and agriculture sheds are less landscapes and more experimentations in lines, shadow and abstraction. In *Hard Candy*, a Montana rancher pops a red lollipop in his mouth. The iconic image of the cowboy, so familiar to Western audiences, is turned on its head by the inclusion of single burst of red. It's as if the piece of candy were trespassing from another painting.

"As we progress as artists, the simplicity we paint grows into more conceptual themes. I'm no different and these days I really think in terms of ideas, ideas that tie different communities or places together. As a result, my paintings aren't necessarily what they appear to be," he says. "*Hard Candy* is about a man named Martin Anseth, who I met 20 to 25 years ago in Montana. Martin was quitting smoking at





Hard Candy, 1995, watercolor on paper. Lent by Graeme and Norah Bretall, Ketchum, Idaho.

the time and, as a substitute, he was carrying lollipops around in his chest pocket. So when he was craving a cigarette, he'd have a lollipop. He was kind of the anti-Marlboro Man."

Other pieces in the show include a number of works from his granary series, and several pieces with text painted right onto the image, a product of many years in illustration, including album covers. Examples of this style include an image of a cow with the words "Hopalong Henry" painted below, and a landscape with the word "Californicopia" presented in the center of the scene. "I learned at an early age to hand letter and how to use type. My first one-man show, in 1973, was full of paintings that had type on them," Matthews says. "I just love language, and I love the way it looks on the paper."

Thomas Brent Smith, curator of the show at the Denver Art Museum, says what makes



Golden Section #19, 2011, watercolor on paper, 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Denver Art Museum: Gift of Edmund Wattis Littlefield Jr., 2012.330.



William Matthews paints a power plant outside Salt Lake City, Utah.



Bottle Tops, 2005, watercolor on paper, 39½ x 43¾" (framed). Collection of the artist.



William Matthews on location for a painting.


Matthews' work exceptional is his refusal to paint traditional Western scenes. "Some artists paint the Old West or the West of the 1880s or 1890s," Smith says. "William Matthews doesn't do that. He paints the West of today, the West of right now."

Smith says the show was easy to curate because the artist has such a variety of work,

and that it all flows together fluidly and with ease. One of the highlights of the exhibition is a collection of 35 pieces arranged in a 5-by-7 grid, with each piece telling a story about the branding of cattle. "It works quite effectively," Smith says. "Each branding is very organic as things are happening in multiple spots... He was concerned about having a piece fill

the back wall of the gallery, but it worked out really great and the overall idea really holds everything together."

Matthews, whose next show is an exploration of industrial themes with his son Austin Matthews, says that despite his subject matter, he doesn't see himself as a Western artist. "Not by the classic definition, at least," he says. "I think most people who follow me are continuously surprised by the stories my paintings tell and the new elements that the pieces bring to the wall. Some people are easy to pigeonhole, but I don't think I am, nor do I want to be."

Matthews' works hang at Denver Art Museum through May 17, 2015. 

William Matthews: Trespassing

When: Through May 17, 2015

Where: Denver Art Museum, 100 W. 14th Avenue Parkway, Denver, CO 80204

Information: (720) 865-5000,
www.denverartmuseum.org