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**The Ever-Evolving
Style of Western Artist
William Matthews**



William Matthews has painted people and places all over the world, but buckaroos and the Great Basin are significant subjects in his body of work.

WESTERN ART

Paint by Wonder

A new art exhibit and documentary shed light on watercolorist William Matthews' life, body of work, and ever-evolving style and subject matter.

By JENNIFER DENISON

WHEN WILLIAM MATTHEWS TOUCHES a paintbrush to paper, he releases streams of watercolors that flow in an unpredictable manner, creating energy, texture, shadows, highlights, depth, color value, and obscure shapes and gestures. His art form is in constant transition from wet to dry.

Akin to a dance, the medium is active yet fluid, and requires a partnership between the artist and the paint. The artist's eyes, hands, body, brushes, water and paint, as well as the light, sounds and nature's forces, all become part of the dance. A master at the medium, Matthews paints in such a visceral way that when you look at his paintings they invite you to step inside and take a visual voyage to the West as he sees it.

For more than 30 years, Matthews has traveled to the Great Basin, a region that encompasses Idaho, Nevada, Oregon and parts of California. It is an area where vast, open land and big horseback outfits still exist. It is home to the buckaroos and high-desert landscapes that have greatly influenced Matthews' artwork. Twenty-seven of his paintings, plus a grid of 35 smaller branding scenes, are on display in a retrospective exhibit titled *William Matthews: Trespassing at*

the Denver Art Museum in Denver, Colorado, through May 17. The exhibit coincides with the release of *William Matthews: Drawn to Paint*, a full-length documentary that takes an in-depth and personal look at Matthews' life, painting and connection to the ranching lifestyle.

A self-proclaimed interloper on ranches he visits, Matthews observes contemporary buckaroos in their element and paints their interactions with livestock and the land.

"I've always thought of myself as an outsider and in some ways a journalist," he explains. "I'm not a cowboy, and I've never drawn a check from a ranch. That said, I feel very comfortable out there with the cowboys, and I've always been welcome [on ranches]. But I'm very aware of who belongs there and who does not."

Matthews takes viewers to places that aren't necessarily accessible by motorized vehicles and cannot be found on a roadmap or by GPS.

"Not only is he trespassing into this world that he really is not necessarily part of, but he allows us to do the same," says Thomas Smith, curator of Western American art and director of the Petrie



Hard Candy is an iconic and unexpected painting that "challenges the idea of who cowboys are and the mythical idea ingrained in American culture—the anti-Marlboro Man," says Thomas Smith, curator of Western American art and director of the Petrie Institute of Western Art at the Denver Art Museum. In the painting, Matthews captures Montana cowboy Martin Anseth enjoying a Tootsie Roll Pop, his strategy to quit smoking.

Institute of Western Art at the Denver Art Museum.

"The reality is, the only way to see these things is to get off the pavement, and most people do not," Matthews says.

RAISED IN SAN FRANCISCO, California, Matthews knew about cowboys, buckaroos and bridle horses, but he never intended to paint them. Then his

friend, photographer and former *Western Horseman* Editor Kurt Markus, invited him in 1983 to attend the first organized Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada (the event later became the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering). There, Matthews was introduced to Hal Cannon, founding director of the Western Folklife Center, and poets such as Baxter Black, Gary McMahan, Wallace

McRae and Waddie Mitchell. Through them and Markus, he also met buckaroos and was invited to visit the ranches where they worked and paint scenes from their daily lives.

"A lot of the buckaroos were reluctant when I first came [to the ranches]," he recalls. "It took time for them to loosen up and accept me being out there. Then some guys would kind of primp in front



Midday Heat (left) and *Moonlight* (right) are two of several paintings Matthews has done of the Winecup Gamble Ranch granary in Montello, Nevada, at different times of the day and in different seasons during the year.

of me. Those were the guys I was less interested in painting. It was really important to me to find the best buckaroos."

As Matthews got to know the cowboys and their lifestyle, he noticed similarities

between the work of a painter and that of a buckaroo.

"I identify with the buckaroo to the extent they are contrarians and like being alone," Matthews says. "I get to observe and appreciate the esoteric qualities of their lives that sometimes they miss. To me, it is a great responsibility and a privilege."

DURING THE ECONOMIC depression of 2008, which slowed art sales and closed some galleries, Matthews withdrew from the public eye.

"I knew that nothing I painted would sell," he says. "It was one of the things that propelled me to not paint what had become predictable, to start taking more chances."

Matthews has painted around the world, and everywhere he went he captured architecture, people, and their connections to horses and agriculture. His paintings are compiled into more than a dozen catalogs that are visual narratives of humanity and agrarian cultures.



LEFT: Matthews has added typography to some of his recent paintings, such as *Optimister*, in which his subject hauls a heavy saddle and pad up a long and winding road. "The cowboy is the ultimate optimist," he says. **RIGHT:** *Environmentalist* is a painting that conveys the controversial dichotomy of a rancher's role as a land steward.



Drought is an issue facing the West, and Matthews touches on the futility of not having enough water and fighting range fires in the painting *No Water*.

The past few years, the 65-year-old artist has taken a new tangent in his art, painting more industrial settings and architecture, such as the abandoned granary that towers on the Winecup Gamble Ranch in Montello, Nevada. Matthews first visited the ranch in 1986.

"As I approached, a giant grain elevator loomed up in front of me. Its galvanized siding was golden in the evening sunlight, and its massive volume illuminated like an industrial shrine," he writes in the Gamble Ranch Granary catalog, which contains 29 different renderings of the structure by Matthews. "Somehow I knew that I would return to paint this granary over and over again ... In some ways this building symbolizes the arc of the great cattle ranches of the West. Their usefulness may be coming to an end, and they too may collapse and be swallowed up by the desert."

Matthews also continues to paint landscapes, venturing into the abstract, which he says makes his work more about the painting process than geography.

"For me it has always been about painting. The subject was important, but not as important as the act of painting," he says. "I am not trying to accomplish the same things I used to [in a painting]; I like things to be looser, more abstract, and more about the feel and energy than accuracy."

Matthews still paints buckaroos and their relationship with land, dealing with water, fire and other forces of nature. One painting hanging in his Great Basin Studio in Denver shows a cowboy kneeling and reaching for the ground with a great expanse of land, mountains and water in the background. In bold yellow letters across the painting is the word "Environmentalism."

"I labeled it 'Environmentalism' for the controversy of which I am aware," he says. "Cowboys often consider themselves anti-environmentalists, yet in a lot of cases they're more responsible and more environmentally thoughtful than anyone else."

THE OPENING of the exhibit at the Denver Art Museum and the release of

the documentary *William Matthews: Drawn to Paint* have created a resurgence of interest in Matthews' work, and the attention is a little overwhelming for the artist.

"We artists paint quietly in seclusion, whether it's out in the field or in the studio, and we hardly ever look back in a retrospective way," he says during a tour of the exhibit. "To see my paintings set in such a beautiful installation is humbling and exciting."

One of Matthews' early paintings in the exhibit is a monochromatic, burnt-umber sepia-toned branding scene with a splash of ultramarine blue in the buckaroo's wild rag. Through the years, Matthews gradually added more colors to his palette. But in the highly traditional and often realistic Western art world, Matthews has never felt the need to conform or pigeonhole his work.

"He paints today what cowboys look like today, what the West looks like today," says Smith. "When you try to think about the development of Western American art, that's where you can look at William Matthews and say, 'This is



For the painting *Waddie Mitchell*, Matthews wanted to paint an aged Mitchell as a heroic working man, exhausted from plowing his long, snowy driveway.

where he fits. He painted his time; he painted his place."

Last January, Matthews made the familiar excursion to the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering to be on hand with producer Amie Knox for screenings of the documentary. People filed into Elko's Crystal Theater to view the film, which debuted to sellout crowds at the Starz Denver Film Festival last fall. Longtime buckaroo Larry Schutte, who also makes horsehair and rawhide gear, sings and recites cowboy poetry, and Jon Griggs, manager of Maggie Creek Ranches outside of Elko, both were interviewed in the film and among the buckaroos in the audience seeing it for the first time.

"This is our toughest audience," Knox said after the screening.

But the response to the film was overwhelmingly favorable. Bekah Klarr, whose family owns and operates

Maggie Creek, says the film gave her goosebumps.

"Northern Nevada is a diamond in the rough, and the film captured the beauty of the area and the ranching lifestyle so well through the eyes of an artist," she says.

Knox, who has produced several artist documentaries, has been friends with Matthews for several years and set out to create a short film about the exhibit for a local PBS affiliate. As she and her Denver-based crew—Chad Herschberger and Davis Coombe of Milkhaus—got involved in the project, they realized there was more of a story to tell.

"We really didn't know what the movie was going to be about when we started," she recalls. "You never really do; you have to be open to the process and let it evolve."

Filming began with Matthews painting *en plein air* (outside) on

Loveland Pass in September of 2013 and was completed in 14 months, just in time for the Denver Film Festival. While Knox was familiar with Matthews and Western art, she knew little about ranching and buckaroos.

"What struck me was the deep bond between the buckaroos and Willy," she says. "This is not a passing fancy; he has painted these men for decades, gotten to know their families, stayed with them, eaten meals with them and become part of the fabric of their lives. I think one of the reasons his paintings are so effective is that they capture the essence of these people. Willy has an enormous respect for these guys, and they have respect for him."

Those familiar with Matthews' work get a rare glimpse of not only his painting process in the documentary, but also his approach to life.

"Willy is still searching and exploring," Knox says. "It is his way of embracing life and diving into things that make him unusual. His drive to explore new things, meet new people and find new subject matter is what fuels him. I hope the film inspires more people to live their lives with a little Willy in it."

Knox is working to get the film shown on PBS stations, at other film festivals and on larger screens throughout the United States. She says a DVD of the film eventually will be available for purchase.

Not content to paint one particular subject, Matthews remains an outside observer and documentarian of the West he loves as it faces change in the midst of industrial and urban encroachment. Only at the midpoint of his career, he still finds excitement in the mundane, and helps viewers see familiar people, places and structures in a different light.

"I love to paint, and I love to respond to my imagination and my sense of excitement and wonder," he says. "It takes a lot of juice and genuine enthusiasm to paint. You've got to really love what you're painting, and be interested in the process and subjects. If I find I am bored with either of those things, nothing happens, so I continue to move toward what really excites me."

For more information on the artist, visit williammatthews.com.

ON THE COVER

Saddle Bronc

In his progressive and prolific 40-year art career, William Matthews has documented in watercolor people, places and cultures all over the world. Those interested in the Western lifestyle, however, are most moved by his heroic portraits of contemporary Great Basin buckaroos and their connection to their horses, livestock and the ever-changing Western landscape. This month's cover features his 37-by-32½-inch painting *Saddle Bronc*, from the collection of Roxanne and Fred Vierra.

"I painted this stock saddle bronc [rider] at the Jordan Valley [Big Loop] Rodeo in 1997," he explains. "It's a ranch rodeo in eastern Oregon, where the competitors are working cowboys who seldom take time off. But Jordan Valley is an important annual get-together where buckaroos compete against each other."

As with many of Matthews' paintings, this one shows a cowboy with his face partially covered by his hat brim. He is sitting back in his saddle, sweeping his spurs down the bronc's neck, balancing himself with the bronc rein and extending his free arm in the air. The kicking, twisting position of the bronc, flapping fringe on the cowboy's chinks, flying specks of dirt and a swirling cloud of dust leave no doubt in a viewer's mind that this was a wild ride.

"It's always a challenge to capture the movement and power of a writhing athlete," Matthews says. "The design of the painting pivots on the vertical axis of the pony's right fore hoof and head. And it carries up through that great pink [bronc rein]. I wanted to taste the dust."

Matthews is highly regarded by buckaroos for his authentic portrayal of their traditions and lifestyle, and says, "there is something honorable about working buckaroos showing off their ranch skills."

He also notes this bronc rider hung tight and made a good ride.

For more information on Matthews and his art, visit williammatthews.com.



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