INTO THE SUNSET

A Thesis

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by

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Dedication

For Haley. Without your love, I’d be nowhere at all.
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The Past is prologue, everything begins with a story.

-Joseph Campbell

Like many boys, by the age of six, I was determined to be a superhero. The only remaining decision was whether to be Spiderman or Buffalo Bill. Despite my unsuccessful transformation, the impact these heroes had on my development is unmistakable. I was fascinated by cowboys and the Wild West. The landscape was foreign and full of mystery: big tall buttes and cacti strewn about a desert landscape was the stuff of kids’ dreams. Like a good percentage of America’s pre-adolescent population, I played a good deal of cowboys and Indians growing up. I relished the opportunity to strap on my plastic orange tipped six-shooters and emulate the heroes I watched on television. When I wasn’t playing cowboys, I would recreate the heroic episodes with my toys.

As I grew older, my devotion to these heroes developed into drawings, capturing their heroism through stories I drew, colored and bound. This development radiated from a newly discovered fascination with the comic book. The sequencing of narrative images filled with colorful, exciting stories entranced me to the point that it made
tagging along with my mother on her weekly trip to the grocery store exciting for the 
sole reason it gave me the opportunity to read the comic books on a spinning wire rack 
by the checkout lane. In addition, these comic book heroes were extremely similar to 
the cowboys I loved, and, truth be told, archetypical descendents of the vigilante 
gunfighter. Like Westerns, comic books starred brave, selfless, masculine heroes who 
by issue’s end, triumphed over the evil villain and saved the day. The comics also 
nurtured my desire to draw and planted me firmly on the path to a career in the arts. 

As a teenager, however, I began to question the world around me, as is common 
at that age. The revelations I found were disheartening. Being raised a white male in a 
middle class family in mid-sized suburban town in the Midwest, I soon understood my 
position as one of privilege. I was your stereotypical all-American boy, and as such 
found myself shielded from the more adverse parts of our culture. As a child I had 
relished the cultural history of our country, reveling in its mythology but now I gained a 
sense that the America I read about, dreamed about, fantasized about, was much 
different than the America I had actually been born into. Family and friends were out of 
work, economic burdens became more difficult, and night after night newscasts showed 
me a world that was fearful and disturbing. It seemed that the America I knew through 
popular culture had all but disappeared. But had it, or had I simply found faith in an 
idea that never truthfully existed? As I began researching our country’s origins, 
including my beloved cowboy hero, a web of fabrication began to unravel. Beneath the 
veneer of American exceptionalism lay a history filled with violence, oppression, and 
invention. The cowboy heroes of my youth turned out to be much more fiction than
fact, cultural creations better suited for selling lunchboxes than saving damsels in distress.

Where do we stand when we discover the foundations of our character are seemingly made of sand? Can we make amends between the culturally produced mythology of our nation and a grimmer reality? This paper articulates the conceptual basis for my thesis exhibition. In the following pages I intend to explore the concept of national identity and its formation through history, mythology and popular culture. I will examine the origins of our foundational myth and the cowboy and how these symbols continue to impact our cultural and personal perceptions. In addition, I will examine what happens when reality fails to measure up to the mythology, resulting in disillusionment, escapism, or nostalgia.

The paintings that comprise the visual part of my thesis work, while reflections of the concepts discussed in this paper function as more than illustrations of an idea. Instead, physical processes inform a concept to fully articulate and give an idea voice: the process, tools and their application also function as content. The development of a process using toys and dioramas to construct narratives has played a formative role in my art, formally and conceptually.

Toys serve both as evocative reminders of childhood and a reflection of the culture that created them. After all, toys are “cultural messages – sometimes simple,
occasionally complex and ambiguous, but invariably revealing.”¹ By incorporating recognizable toys and characters from popular culture, I enter into a conversation with the history of a larger culture. Toys almost always contain statements “made by adults either about the culture in which they live and/or the values that they think desirable.”² In this way, toys mirror a culture, or at least aspects of it. My use of toys is to take that mirror, and mirror it back on itself.

Furthermore, toys also act as reminders of the innocence of childhood. The act of play is an integral part of development and allows children to explore their understanding of the world and their surroundings. In this way, toys act as agents of the imagination. Similarly, I employ toys like actors in my narratives, selecting the particular toy best suited for my narrative.

If my toys are actors, then I am their director. Working directly with these objects, I construct dioramas like a stage upon which I can orchestrate a narrative. This direct contact allows me to physically manipulate the toys and environment to create a composition not restricted by source materials. These dioramas are filled out with handmade touches including scenery made from cardboard, masking tape and paper-mâché. Once arranged, photographing these setups allows me to compose images evocative of film stills through the controlled manipulation of light and the theatrical staged quality.

² Brewer, “Genesis of Modern Toys,” 34.
Beyond the photograph, the act of painting adds another layer of transformation. In spite of an artist’s dedication to representing an image as realistically as possible, the millions of minute decisions a painter makes during the creation of a canvas defies simple 1 to 1 translation. Incremental differences in the mixture of a color, the choice of medium and how much, whether to use sable or bristle brushes, the selection of support (canvas, linen or panel), whether to employ controlled or expressive brushwork, all effect the final image. The resulting compilation of these choices is a unique, tactile and personal expression of the artist.

“Paint is a cast made of the painter’s movements, a portrait of the painter’s body and thoughts.”³ Paint records “the most delicate gesture and the most tense. It tells whether a painter sat or stood or crouched in front of the canvas.”⁴

All those meanings are intact in any painting that hangs in a museum, gallery or studio: “they preserve the memory of the tired bodies that make them, the quick jabs, the exhausted truces, the careful nourishing gestures.”⁵ The paintings possess and preserve this record of process. Thus, through my images and the following research I present the direct and indirect record of my thoughts and my actions.

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I wish to thank the faculty and staff of the Department of Art, Art History and Design who have been instrumental in my development as both an artist and teacher. In particular I would like to acknowledge my committee, Fr. Martin Lam Nguyen, Dr. Charles Rosenberg and especially Maria Tomasula for their direction, assistance and continued guidance. A big thank you is owed to Anne Coleman in the Department of American Studies for directing me in my research and expanding my views of the American West. I also wish to thank my parents, whose unqualified encouragement and support provided me the ability to pursue my art. Finally, special thanks should be given to my fiancé, Haley Prestifilippo, for her overwhelming love and support.
CHAPTER 1:
NEW FRONTIERS

It is impossible to calculate the impact and continued presence the Frontier has had on the American imagination. For certain, the Frontier has permeated all arenas of popular culture, including cinema, politics, and advertising. The power of Frontier imagery is unmistakable. When President John F. Kennedy unveiled his social improvement plan, he named it the “New Frontier,” evoking images of pioneers and Conestoga wagons in the name of science and progress. In fact, most U.S. presidents have at one point or another donned a wide brimmed Stetson cowboy hat, visually acknowledging their connection to our history and mythology.

In the 1980’s a group of historians nicknamed the “gang of four” including Patricia Nelson Limmerick, Richard White, William Cronon, and Donald Worster reevaluated the American Frontier in terms of race, class, gender, and the environment. The New Western History they created peeled back the veneer of mythology exposing a history of racism, conquest, erasure and fabrication. Despite their research, this more complex portrait of our country’s past has done little to alter the seemingly cemented images of cowboys on the range and gunfights at the OK Corral. For a vast majority of

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7 Limmerick, Something in the Soil, 79.
the population, I would argue, the Frontier still stands as a romantic and nostalgic symbol of America.

Why does such an archaic period of United States History that lasted only a short time command such a strong hold on the national imagination? The best answer is that Frontier mythology taps into the core of what Americans believe about themselves and their country, and, more specifically, it is an image of how they would like to be and be seen.

Part of the West’s continued appeal is its displacement from both history and geography. While it is true that the West is both a historical period as well as a specific geographical region, in the collective conscious of Americans it is first and foremost a set of ideas, a place that resides in the imagination. This “imagined West” is a mythic construct that permeates everyday American life through a set of encoded metaphors that explain who Americans are and how they should act.  

The West as a construct is an amalgam of fact and fiction, separating the myth from history is not a simple endeavor. Historian Richard White points out, “the actual West and the imagined West are engaged in a constant conversation, each influencing each other.” Mythmakers draw on history to construct their stories, using real people and events but amplifying and exaggerating them to tell the narrative that expresses their worldview. Buffalo Bill epitomizes how fact and fiction intertwine in a mutually


9 White. It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own, 615.
dependent relationship. After Ned Buntline popularized William F. Cody’s image in his dime novels, Cody began dressing in the attire Buntline wrote about and performing in his Wild West Shows the embellished events of Buntline’s novels.\(^{10}\) As White has noted “people accept and assimilate myth, they act on the myths, and the myths become the basis for actions that shape history.”\(^{11}\)

\(^{10}\) White. *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 614.

\(^{11}\) White. *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, 616.
CHAPTER 2:

ORIGINS OF EXCEPTIONALISM: OR AMERICAN ADAM IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

The role of mythology in the formation of a country’s national identity cannot be overstated. Mythology forms a lens through which we can understand ourselves and our experiences. It connects us with larger ideas that attempt to explain who we are and where we come from. Furthermore these myths affirm a set of values the culture finds desirable. Unlike many other cultures whose mythology stretches back thousands of years, from the beginning the United States rejected ties with the old world. This desire for a “break from the bondage of the past”\(^\text{12}\) required Americans to adapt and create their own new mythology. “As old myths were out of vogue in such an environment, new versions were created - Olympus and Camelot gave way to the City of God on the Hill and Dionysus being replaced by a pristine pilgrim.”\(^\text{13}\)


For America, the belief in American exceptionalism has been one of the most influential and unifying aspects of our national mythos. Exceptionalism is the belief that the United States is qualitatively different from all other nations in important ways, and that these differences have given its people different characteristics and caused it to follow different paths.14 First coined by Alexis de Tocqueville in the nineteenth century, exceptionalism describes America’s unique place amongst the nations of the world as a country founded on ideology. We can trace the origins of this concept back even further, notably to Massachusetts Bay Colony Governor John Winthrop, an early Puritan leader. Winthrop metaphorically posited his city as an example for the rest of the world, claiming “Wee will be seen as a city upon a hill.”15 These early forefathers believed that a fresh start on a new continent gave them an unprecedented opportunity to “found an exemplary New Jerusalem cleansed of the catastrophic history they had left behind and peopled by a divinely chosen elect.”16 This mythical coronation owed much to the puritanical character of early American settlers, who developed a firm belief that America had been “singled out, from all nations on the earth.”17


The unique geographical landscape of America also played a significant role in its mythical construction. When European settlers first arrived over 500 years ago, they believed they stumbled upon a newly discovered, vacant land. This of course, ignorantly disregarded the millions of native inhabitants who had lived on the continent for some 12,000 years prior to Columbus’s arrival. These pioneers viewed the “unoccupied” landscape as a terrestrial paradise, drawing comparisons to the fabled Garden of Eden. The abundant fertile land in conjunction with its symbolic “virgin” quality, undisturbed by the destructive hands of civilization set the stage for the origins of the Edenic myth in America. Historians of early America have convincingly argued that the apparent reality of an area of unlimited free land offered the psychological sense of unlimited opportunity, which in turn had many consequences, including optimism, future orientation, shedding of restraints due to land scarcity, and wastefulness of natural resources.  

The development of distinctively American characteristics is also directly indebted to the landscape and the process of civilizing it, at least according to one of the most influential analysis of the American Frontier. The historian Frederick Jackson Turner in his seminal essay “The Significance of the American Frontier” defined westward expansion in terms of an invisible frontier line separating civilization from savagery. Turner argued that “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous

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18 Turner, Significance, 15
recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development."\(^{19}\)

More than a geographical region, the frontier was a process that MADE Americans. Advancement westward saw “the rapid succession of historical stages, from the most primitive to the most advanced, recapitulated developments that elsewhere took centuries to complete.”\(^{20}\) Successive waves of emigrants pushed the frontier line forward, and in doing so forged a national character that possessed the qualities of strength, inquisitiveness, self-reliance, “a practical, inventive turn of mind,” and a “dominant individualism.”\(^{21}\)

It can convincingly be argued that the foundations of the American mythology were formed during the Frontier period. Some critics have regarded the Frontier as the adolescence of America: if America was conceived in Philadelphia, born in the civil war, then certainly the “creature of mythic heritage comes of age” in the west.\(^{22}\) Americans have returned to this period again and again to reaffirm their identity. As historian Wallace Stegner stated, the West IS America, “only more so.”\(^{23}\)

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\(^{19}\) Turner, Significance, 23

\(^{20}\) Evans, Creative Myth, 39.

\(^{21}\) Turner, Significance, 26

\(^{22}\) Coyne, Crowded Prairie, 55.

CHAPTER 3:

MID-CENTURY AMERICA: FAITH AND HERETICS

"America's not Disneyland. Things smell, things have edges, people can get hurt."

-Eric Fischl

Exceptionalism is such an ingrained part of American existence that it has been cited time and again to explain who we are. While the frontier lies at the foundations of this idea, mid-twentieth century America promised the fulfillment of this fabled edenic paradise. America stood at the peak of its power. Following a military victory in World War II, The United States emerged in 1945 as the most powerful country on Earth. America stood unrivalled economically as well, with the average white family’s standard of living increasing by 41% during the decade. Between 1940 and 1945 alone, the U.S. GNP doubled. With 6 percent of the world’s population, the United States produced 50 percent of the world’s goods.24

Most producers of culture promoted this vision of exceptionalism, depicting the decade as a golden age in United States history. With an ever rising expendable income, Americans saw a major increase in the amount and variety of consumer goods available to them. Suburban communities, too, popped up all over the country. These uniform, ordered tracts of houses acted as visual symbols of prosperity and the seeming materialization of the mythic city upon a hill. Norman Rockwell’s (1894-1978) overly sentimental and idealistic paintings of small town American life are perhaps some of the most indicative images of this era. Politician Newt Gingrich has praised Rockwell’s works, claiming that they present a “clear sense of what it means to be American”. This conservative nationalistic sensibility is consistent in Rockwell’s work, placing him within an American artistic tradition that makes optimistic statements of exceptionalism dogma.

However, every faith also breeds doubt. As Benjamin Franklin said, “to follow by faith alone is to follow blindly.” A mirror to the work of Rockwell could be that of Edward Hopper (1865–1951). Widely considered one of the finest American realist painters of the last century, Hopper’s work has been characterized by his melancholic depictions of the alienation of modern life. Hopper is one among many who partake in another American tradition in the arts, one that highlights the other side of the equation. These artists represent the lesser seen America, the one we might prefer to forget or ignore. These artists often work to reveal aspects of our culture either

obstructed from view or misrepresented in the mainstream. Social realists at the turn of the 20th century drew attention to poverty and urban decay. The film noir offered a darker alternative to the optimistic “Hollywood ending.”

The work of Edward Hopper, is poignant and fascinating; his narratives are dark, laced with uncertainty. Whereas Rockwell’s wholesome images celebrate the surface, Hopper’s genius lies in depicting what is beneath. For example, his image *Automat* (1927), the windows behind the figure indicate, “what is outside is only the inside reflected.”

This applies to his figures as well. Their gaze is most often aimed downward, as if in deep introspection. It’s as if his figures have seen beyond the emptiness of the façade society has constructed. If Eden had materialized, it was in idea only.

Eric Fischl (b. 1948), another American realist, also explores figures caught struggling with conceptions of American society. His paintings of middle-class suburbia express a tragedy of contradictions. Suburban life is based on visual representation. For Fischl, the suburbs present a “stage set for happiness...a highly artificial world in which the image of what ideal life is supposed to be according to our society has become fact.”

Like Hopper’s figures, Fischl’s are typically isolated, exploring their inner turmoil amidst a fabricated paradise. In an interview, Fischl recalls an incident of his youth in


which the incongruities of his own state of mind and the environment were quite pronounced.

I was very introspective, melancholy. And as I was walking through the neighborhood I was looking at this scene of incredible tranquility. The incredible order of these desert planted gardens struck me. They were perfectly ordered, unlike my feelings. I realized that what I had going on inside of me was out of kilter with what I was seeing. So I felt very displaced.28

Drawing from Hopper, Fischl utilizes lighting and atmosphere to great effect. Many of his narratives depict mundane, pedestrian experiences, but, through composition and atmosphere we ascertain that something is not quite right. Take, for example, *Best Western Study* (1983) (Fig. 3.1), in which a boy plays with his toys beside a pool. The dark turbulent lighting suggests something sinister lurking beneath the innocent appearance of this boyish act. With this murkiness threatening to engulf the boy, one may read darker overtones into his interactions with the toy Indians. In this context, his play takes on violent, even sadistic connotations as he mercilessly assaults the toys with oranges. Perhaps it is adding historical perspective, reflecting the Anglo-Saxon displacement of native populations, or a simple foreshadowing that this boy, too, is doomed to inherit our imperialist shoes. But then again, perhaps not. After all, nothing definitive ever occurs in Fischl’s paintings;

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28 Fischl 20
It is what might be going to happen, or what may have happened already that disturbs people. Incest, bestiality and other forbidden pastimes are never spelled out. It could, in fact, be that we ourselves read them into a perfectly innocent situation as a result of inclinations long repressed.  

Artists such as Hopper and Fischl show a “commitment to deconstruct such mythologies as American exceptionalism” to reveal the diversity, and dissonance that “in fact are more genuinely American.” They seek to ask Americans to reevaluate the nation to discover a more complex portrait.


30 Caputi, 26

31 Caputi, 23
Figure 3.1: Best Western Study, 1953, Eric Fischl.
Oil on Panel. 80 x 84 inches.
CHAPTER 4:

PRINT THE LEGEND:

THE ROLE OF AUTHENTICITY AND NOSTALGIA IN WESTERN ART

On March 14, 1991, *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier.* opened at the National Museum of American Art in Washington, DC, amidst a sea of controversy. The exhibition still stands as the most divisive exhibition of Western painting in history, as it challenged viewers long held understandings of the genre. The curators of the exhibition provided lengthy didactic labels that reinterpreted the displayed images in revisionist terms. With sections titles such as “Inventing the Indian,” the show certainly had a clearly defined purpose: to expose the role of painting in the production and proliferation of culturally constructed ideas of national identity and setting our “foundation myth in paint and stone.” William Truettner, the NMAA curator, left large, blank comment books at the exits of the show for visitors to leave their thoughts about the presentation of the work. The comments mirrored both critical and popular opinions on the subject, with some praising the curators’

reinterpretation of such well known images while others panned the labels as being overly politically correct or blasphemous, not worthy of taxpayer money. Regardless, the show demonstrated how these images interpret our perceptions of the national past.

Painting stood as one of the strongest manifestations of the West in popular culture in the 19th century. Historian Jon L. Kinsey, who has explored why painted images of the West appeal so strongly to Americans, notes that the uniqueness and straightforwardness of American landscape painting speaks to the Turnerian conventions of our National Character. Through images of pioneers crossing the plains and majestic mountains, painters materialized and reinforced the relationship between America and the West which Turner would later identify. The United States government commissioned paintings of progress to advocate and justify westward expansion under the banner of Manifest Destiny. Artists accompanied railroad surveys and nearly every federal expedition West with the task of recording images of the far side of the continent. Journals and newspapers reprinted these images as engravings which the Eastern public consumed with a hearty appetite for the still exotic image of the West. These images cemented a particularly romantic view of the American West forever in the national imagination.

One of the primary draws of the “Imaginative West” is its claims of authenticity. Despite the complex relationship between imagination and reality, promoters of the West emphasized the authenticity and accuracy of their depictions. For example, a contemporary journalist of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show proclaimed it to be a “Wild
West Reality...a correct representation of life on the plains...brought to the East for the inspection and education of the public.”³³ The claim of authenticity carried over into the visual arts and eventually Western films where the use of historical locations, props and players resulted in an impression of realism. Costume shops of major Hollywood studios in the golden era of the Western (1930-1950s) constantly relied upon copies of books featuring the works of Frederick Remington (1861-1909) and Charles M. Russell (1864-1926).

Western Art has always had an ambiguous relationship with authenticity. Western paintings have “simultaneously represented themselves as art forms and disavowed that status by claiming historical fidelity and lack of invention.”³⁴ Nancy K. Anderson analyzes the authenticity of the landscape paintings of Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) which typify this apparent contradiction. In his first grand painting, The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak (1863), Bierstadt struggled to balance the need to produce a sublime image of American grandeur with the desires of an Eastern audience hungry for accurate information about the far reaches of the continent.³⁵ European trained, Bierstadt reconfigured the conventions of nineteenth-century landscape painting to produce an American equivalent. These “wondrous inventions” almost always bore the


names of very specific topographical locations, implicitly exerting a claim that this was not a general facsimile of Western mountains, but an AUTHENTIC portrait of an actual location. Some contemporary critics lauded his works for their indisputable authenticity, pointing to the meticulously rendered details of flora and fauna that encouraged viewers to believe the truth. Other critics, however, noticed the artifice in which Bierstadt worked, eventually agreeing that his compositions “actually were highly contrived constructions that romanticize their subjects through spectacular lighting, coloration, manipulation of spatial relationships or overblown theatricality.” As Mark Twain noted after seeing The Domes of the Yosemite (1867) (Fig. 4.1), that the atmosphere was more “Kingdom-Come than California,” and “altogether too gorgeous.” Contemporary Western artists still hold fast to 19th-century conventions and proclamations of authenticity. In “Hangin’ Out at Leanin’ Tree,” Erica Doss finds that while Western American art today remains very popular with record sales at auctions and Western galleries, one should not expect to find revisionist themes or any real evidence of the change undergone in the understandings of the American West in the past half century. Many contemporary Western artists seem frozen in a singular nostalgic understanding of the American West that differs little from the mythologized images painted by Remington and Russell almost a century ago.


37 Anderson, 215.

In addition to conceptually producing works that emanate a nostalgic perspective, “cowboy” art seemingly ignores or disregards the avant-garde, abstractionism or even postmodernism as ever happening. Instead much Western art remains entrenched in the principles of realism, championing artistic craftsmanship and Old Masters techniques. Bill Nebesker, President of the Cowboy Artists of America, explains the purpose of realism in cowboy art: “People can easily relate to realistic images and they relish the idea of connecting with the historic West, with the thought that their ancestors climbed into a wagon or mounted a horse and headed off to explore new frontiers.”

Doss points out that realism plays a much larger role than this confused view expresses. “Mastery of the medium is understood as the mastery of a particular mythos of Western American history laden in nationalism and nostalgia...more importantly they authenticate that image of the West as the ‘real’ West.”

Doss asserts that the realism of Western images give the viewer a false sense of authenticity. By seeing the cracks on the cowboy’s face, and the creases of the saddle one “finds” the evidence to support the mythology. In this sense, realism itself is vital to the explicit goal of “authenticity.”

The issue of authenticity has always been critical to the formation and understanding of Western images. Literary critic Nathaniel Lewis argues in “The Heirs of Buffalo Bill: Performing Authenticity in the Dime Western” that “Western literature is


40 Doss, 19.
frequently, perhaps fundamentally, about authenticity.” 41 What then does authenticity mean for a Western? Authenticity has a somewhat flexible meaning, foremost it describes something that is believed truthful or is taken as fact. The term also refers to the ability to conform to an original so as to reproduce essential features. The second definition gets closer to its understanding and usage within a Western context. As cultural historian Jefferson Slagle puts it “it is a measure of how well a western or westerner fits notions of what westerns and westerners should be, based on previous westerns and westerners that have been judged authentic.” 42 Thus the quest for authenticity is paradoxical since individualistic heroes in Westerns are viewed authentic by their ability to imitate what is ultimately a fictional construct. Just as problematic, this idea presupposes that there is an objective western history that is authentic on which these fictional imitations are based. This sets up a system in which the post-structuralist philosopher Jean Baudrillard would argue the simulacra of the Western film precedes the actual historical west: the cowboy on the movie screen seems more “authentic” than the real cowboys whose lives were filled with unending, back-breaking work. A majority of these historical cowboys were not even white, a great number were former slaves or descendants of vaqueros. Despite the historical information, the white cowboy in the Stetson hat of Marlboro commercials seems more real.


42 Slagle, 122
If the popular culture images of Westerns can be seen as simulacra, then the diorama becomes a unique format to produce a metaphor for its understanding. Dioramas, deriving from the Greek *dia* (through) and *horama* (to see), has become an all encompassing term that is used to describe three-dimensional scenes in which figures, animals, or other objects are organized in a naturalistic stage that stands before a painted background. In “Small Worlds,” Toby Kamps provides a history of the diorama, a term first coined by L.J.M. Daguerre in 1822, as ancestors to the eighteenth-century panoramas that encircled their viewers with large painted moving images.

The idea of diorama was re-imagined in the 20th century in the animal habitat displays at the Natural History Museum in New York created by Carl Akeley, the father of modern taxidermy. The natural history diorama consists of three major components, the taxidermied animals, often sculptures that feature the animals skin stretched over a frame; a three-dimensional environment of indigenous plants and fauna from the animals natural habitat; and, lastly, a painted landscape on a curved background that finishes the illusion.

The idea of a diorama captures the essence of the divide between the imagined West and the actual West. Much like the grand picturesque landscape paintings of the West, dioramas were designed not to actually deceive the viewer so much as to offer a compelling substitute for the real world, a zone of artifice capable of prompting an
observer to feel “transported bodily into a replica of natural conditions.”43 Standing in front of the large 6 x 10 ft canvases of Albert Bierstadt, viewers also must have felt “transported.” These grand paintings too had the power to bring the West to the viewer.

Dioramas can act as a strong metaphor for our vision of the West. Through both Turner and Buffalo Bill’s frontier myths, a certain degree of editing and omission occurs in order to portray a specific romanticized perspective. The diorama, too, shows a preference for the idealized image over a practical reality. The illusionism which is fundamental to natural history museums habitat displays can easily seduce viewers, but even so the presentation remains a “meticulously crafted, sanitized version of the real thing.”44 In these nature dioramas, the glass pane separates the viewer from the perceived image – it is the point where the illusion falls apart: we can see but cannot enter.

I have used the language of the diorama in my own work to deconstruct the Western mythology associated with its visual representation. The dioramas I have produced and painted do not attempt to create a seamless illusion, in fact, the artifice is emphasized and exposed. In my landscape painting See the USA (2010)(fig. 4.2), a mid-century pickup truck with a covered wagon top drives over a bluff looking towards vast mountain range. The sublime view of a distant western landscape conjures up notions


44 Kamps, 13.
of grandeur and promise generally portrayed in Western art, but, upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that the dreamscape is constructed of cardboard, paper mâché and plastic. In addition, the painting is executed in a highly realistic style, painstakingly replicating the creases and corrugation of the cardboard. This approach subverts the traditional understanding of Western landscapes where realism reinforces the authenticity of the image; in my painting the realism instead highlights the fabricated nature of these culturally constructed images.

When the illusion falls apart we can begin to embrace a more complex view of these images and ideas. The simulacra is presenting the object AS simulacra. In natural history dioramas, the images and taxidermied animals are meant to transport you into the environment for reflection. My dioramas break the connection: your expectations are betrayed when you realize the image you imagined is really quite artificial, the product of construction. Even in this aspect I subvert a technique Bierstadt and other painters of the Hudson River School often employed: The panoramic image was comprehensible from a distance, but included elements intended to draw viewers close to the surface. Seductively rendered rocks and foliage in the foreground, as well as minute groups of deer invited viewers closer only to find themselves surrounded and immersed in the scene. My images play on this idea, from a distance you can see the grand form of mountains but once the minute details of the scenery lure you in, you are left surrounded by an imitation of geography, a landscape closer to children’s play than the sublime.
Figure 4.1: Domes of the Yosemite, 1867, Albert Bierstadt. Oil on Canvas. 33.07 x 22.05 inches.
Figure 4.2: See the USA (From Your Chevrolet), 2010, Jason Cytacki. Oil on Canvas. 40 x 62 inches.
CHAPTER 5:

GREAT EXPECTATIONS:
DISILLUSIONMENT, BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

“Is a dream a lie if it don’t come true, or is it something worse.”

- Bruce Springsteen, “The River”

Americans are weaned on the milk of aspiration. Optimism is more than a character trait, it is woven into the very fabric of the American dream. Ralph Waldo Emerson described America’s spiritual history as being in the “optative mood,” free to be whoever we want to be and convinced of the opportunity to chase our dreams. The benefits of such optimism are the inventiveness and energy it can elicit from individuals. Exceptionalism empowers us to be unique, self-directed individuals not limited by birth or class. However, such high aspirations can also place an enormous amount of pressure on both us and our faith in the Dream. What happens when experiences fail to measure up to the myth?

Throughout history, Americans have been forced to make amends between these dreams and realities. In the 19th century, farmers bought desert land convinced by the promises of hucksters who claimed that rain would come if they farm it. Despite hard work and faith, the rains failed to come and the land refused to become arable. Economic disasters of 1873, 1883-84, and 1893-95 were psychic wakeup calls to farmers who expected their slice of Eden. Historian Henry Nash Smith describes the resulting shock:

Since the myth affirmed the impossibility of disaster or suffering within the garden, it was unable to deal with any of the dark or tragic outcomes of human experience. Given a break in the upward curve of economic progress for the Western farmer, the myth could become a mockery, offering no consolation and serving only to intensify the sense of outrage on the part of men and women who discovered that labor in the fields did not bring the cheerful comfort promised them by so many prophets of the future of the West. The shattering of the myth by economic distress marked, for the history of ideas in America, the real end of the frontier period. 46

The recent financial crisis, too, has left its impact on our country’s self esteem. Commentators have also noted America’s fading presence on the world scene. America's reign as the most powerful nation on earth, economically, militarily or otherwise may soon come to an end. For many, the economic recession has meant a decline in living standards and growing anxiety about the future.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the genesis of the American dream of escape stems from our origin story, the groups of pilgrims who settled in the “New World” to escape the corruption and violent history of Europe. The myth of escape was perpetuated during the period of Western expansion, when pioneers travelled across the continent in search of a new life and riches beyond the Mississippi. Escape continues to fascinate Americans who believe they can make a break from their personal limitations and find a better life.

Edward Hopper reflected on this search to find the American Dream, notably in a series he created during his travels in the west between 1956 and 1957. A typical example of this body of work is “Western Motel” (1957) (Fig. 5.2). This painting features a lone figure, a woman, sitting on a hotel bed in front of a large window. Outside we see a new, green car and, further in the distance, large blue mountains. I interpret the painting as a metaphor for the journey of escape. Painted in the 1950s when the advent of modern interstate highway system made travel increasingly convenient, resulting in a great many Americans taking to the roads, vacationing in the West.\textsuperscript{47} The character in the painting seems to have taken a trip, an attempt to escape the impersonal and alienating city that Hopper typically depicted only to arrive at a dead-end. Instead of looking out the window, her head is turned, so that she looks longingly back towards the viewer. This woman has bought into the idea of the

American Dream, she has the new car, she has taken a vacation only to arrive at
disappointment. The dream of escape in the world of Edward Hopper is a journey that
takes you nowhere.

Another American artist of another time, Bruce Springsteen (b. 1949), also
muses on dreams of escape. His 1975 album, Born to Run, is “rooted in an American
geography that is both physical and cultural.”\(^48\) Escape is a major theme on the album
as characters attempt to escape dead end jobs, bad romances, loneliness and their
social status. The characters are both “escaping from something but also searching for
something”\(^49\) The bombastic Phil Specter wall-of-sound style production formally
provides an excited sense that these characters can achieve their goals. However, the
threat of failure looms large.

The song “Jungleland” is the perfect closing to the album and serves as its thesis.
The song begins innocently with a violin and romantic images of a “barefoot girl drinking
warm beer on the hood of a dodge” leading to a romantic encounter with “the Magic
Rat.”\(^50\) The tone of the narrative quickly shifts as we experience key changes and
increasingly perilous imagery including gang fights and police chases. By song’s end, the
couple’s romance, along with the naïve innocence of its beginning has dissolved. At the
song’s conclusion, a final struggle ensues. The characters “try to make an honest stand,

\(^48\) Louis P. Masur, Runaway Dream: Born to run and Bruce Springsteen’s American Vision (New

\(^49\) Masur, Runaway Dream, 3.

\(^50\) Bruce Springsteen, “Jungleland,” on Born to Run (Columbia Records, 1975).
but wind up wounded, not even dead.”\textsuperscript{51} Death would be romantic. However, for these characters there is no simple escape, they must continue forward crippled, forced to deal with their circumstances and the wounds of their disappointments. Springsteen would continue these themes on his follow-up album, \textit{Darkness on the Edge of Town}. A much darker album, it continues to recount his struggle with the American Dream, following a cast of characters who no longer have the option of escape, but who, instead, must face their problems with grim acceptance.

What is interesting in this work is that Springsteen points to the source of pain as the dream itself. The Magic Rat of “Jungleland” is “gunned down by his own dream,”\textsuperscript{52} a terrifying acknowledgement that it is the American Dream itself that is at the heart of this conflict, and the dream of escape is just another version that can entrap us.

At one point in Hunter S. Thompson’s \textit{Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas}, Dr. Gonzo inquires about a hotel called the “American Dream.” He is told that it burnt down several years ago, and now it is known as the Psychiatric club. “You can’t be just a dreamer, that can become an illusion which turns into a delusion,” Springsteen has said regarding his American vision.\textsuperscript{53} We may achieve our dreams, or they may destroy us, but one thing is for sure, there are no guarantees.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{51} Bruce Springsteen, “Jungleland.”
\textsuperscript{52} Bruce Springsteen, “Jungleland.”
\textsuperscript{53} Masur, \textit{Runaway Dream}, 93.
\end{flushright}
Figure 5.1: Western Motel, 1957, Edward Hopper. Oil on Canvas. 30 ¼ x 50 1/8 inches.
CHAPTER 6:

THE COWBOY HERO

Every myth needs a hero, and the cowboy is ours. Evolving out of the backwoodsman character perfected in the early nineteenth century by James Fenimore Cooper, and firmly established in Owen Wister’s early twentieth-century novel, The Virginian, the cultural presence of the cowboy is unrivalled. While other heroes come and go, the cowboy persists, transcending even his mythic status to be identified worldwide as a symbol of our national identity: a living embodiment of the traits and characteristics identified as American.

The path this character took from the desert plains of history to become a codified fixture in American culture is a long and twisted one. It is important to remember that the mythic cowboy belongs to the “Imagined West,” and as such is a blend of fact and fiction, reconstructed in popular culture through literature, music, television, film, advertisements, and nearly every other medium known to man. While

54 The Virginian, 1902, is credited as the first true American Western. It established many of the hallmarks of the genre, including the “walk down gunfight” conclusion.
it can be argued that the archetypical cowboy we know today is a distortion of an actual historical character, the myth exists as a “more influential social force than the actual cowboy ever was.” 55

The cowboy and his genre, the Western, has been “one of the most potent means of articulating and promoting concepts of national identity.” 56 It provides the framework for an expression of common ideals of morality and behavior. Much scholarship has been devoted to charting the social and political subtexts found in many of the most famous Westerns. Scholars have noted how throughout cinematic history, the Western has served as a reflection of our country’s concerns. Prime examples include the anti-McCarthyism cold war allegory of High Noon (1952) or the violent reflection of the Vietnam War in Westerns like The Wild Bunch (1969). While the cowboy in popular culture has seen many revisions as “each generation has rewritten and refilmed the great Western myths and myth-figures to fit its own preoccupations and perceptions” the golden age westerns of the mid twentieth century had rather clear messages for the American population. 57

Perhaps the best representations of this are the serial westerns of John Wayne or the B-Westerns such as the Lone Ranger, Rawhide, and Bonanza churned out for television where the cowboy hero promoted a specific code of masculinity. These

57 Coyne, Crowded Prairie, ix.
heroes instructed young boys what made up a complete man, just as well as what made up an incomplete one. This code was even explicit to the point that many well known Westerns offered fans didactic rules to follow. The Lone Ranger for instance promoted the Lone Ranger Creed to help young boys learn what it meant to be a man and an American. These heroes relied on actions rather than words. They were skilled at their work, brave, and followed a strict code of morality.

It could be said that the Western hero of these films existed in a vortex of moral certainty. The hero, often symbolically sporting a white Stetson always acts clearly on the side of justice. Conversely, the bad guys were ruthless, murdering bandits and cattle rustlers who wore all black. Typically not a thought is given to the motive for their aberrant behavior; they were bad and they wore black. Simple enough. While both men committed a plethora of violent acts, the hero always acted with clear moral authority. If he killed, it was because he was drawn on first. Despite an abundance of physical pain the hero must endure, it is always undertaken in order to accomplish his heroic task, and taken with confidence.

Unfortunately, the real world operates rather differently. This over simplification into binaries of good and evil denies the complexities inherent in real life. The moral fiber of an individual is hardly discernable in the color of their headwear: “Villians” are often motivated by societal influences more than mean spiritedness. Heroes too often find themselves in circumstances of moral ambiguity, forced to make

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58 Some kind of man, 34.
choices that have no clear right or wrong answer. An interesting comparison to the Western hero’s moral infallibility is the film noir hero. As in the Western, the hero of the film noir operates alone, often outside the law. However, if Westerns could be categorized as overly optimistic, the noir would fall squarely on the side of pessimism. The hero of these films must work through a net of moral ambiguity to reach an often gloomy conclusion.

In works such as, *Noir Cowboy* (Fig. 6.1), I have fused the images of the cowboy and noir hero to muse on our perception of these icons. In the image, a cowboy assumes a familiar confident pose hoisting up his six-shooter. His anxious expression and body language, however, betray the stoic confidence generally associated with this imagery. Film noir underlighting and shadows also bring the associations of that genre into the forefront of the viewer’s mind. These devices undercut the optimism and confidence and reveal the vulnerability of the hero.

In other works I challenge our conception of the hero by appropriating images of cowboys from popular Westerns caught in moments of psychological distress (Fig. 6.2). Isolated from their environment on a plain white background, I emphasize the confusion and uncertainty absent from most Western depictions. To heighten this effect formally I have applied paint in a loose liquidy paste, allowing it to drip down the canvas sometimes literally dissolving the hero’s portrait. I seek to express a more human portrait of the cowboy, one that, like us, experiences pain, failure and anxiety. With the Western’s reflection of national identity, I saw this as a more fitting image of the
cowboy. In this way too, I am taking part in the tradition of recontextualizing the Western to fulfill contemporary perceptions about our nation.
Figure 6.1: Noir Cowboy, 2009, Jason Cytacki. Graphite and Oil on Panel. 48 x 62 inches.
Figure 6.2: High Noon, 2009, Jason Cytacki. Oil on Canvas. 12 x 16 inches.
CHAPTER 7:

RIDING INTO THE SUNSET:

CHILDHOOD AND THE WESTERN

“The cowboy has always been the hero of the pre-adolescent, either chronologically or mentally.”

Beyond the simple stereotype of the cowboy lies a much more complex character. While his traits as a self-reliant fast gun initially appear as boons, they also relegate the cowboy to a permanent outsider status. While the western hero rides into town and saves the day, he is barred from remaining and enjoying the fruits of his triumph. The same traits that allow him to banish evil and save the town also make him unsuitable for domestic life. The cowboy therefore must ride off into the sunset, forsaking the bonds he has forged, rejoining the landscape only to continue his good fight another day in another town. His independence and use of violence make him a danger to the community.

This tragic character flaw is seen ad nauseum in the Western, perhaps most powerfully so at the end of John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956). John Wayne’s character, Ethan Edwards, leads a hunt for his niece held captive by a Native American chief named Scar. Throughout the six year search, he uses an assortment of violent tactics to try to retrieve her, including a deadly military raid on the Indian community where she is held. In the closing scene, after returning her home, director John Ford frames Edward’s broad shoulders in the closing doorway as he watches the family file into the home while he must walk off into the desert alone.

A similar scenario concludes *Shane* (1953). After cowboy Shane defends the Starrett family’s homestead from the villanous Ryker gang in the Wyoming Territory, he immediately bids his farewells and rides off into the panorama of the Grand Teton. This ending is in reality the only way that the story could end. If the cowboy stayed, the results would be disastrous. The traits of the cowboy are simply antithetical those required of domestic life. Free roaming self-reliance is in direct opposition with commitment, as violence is opposed to language. Wilderness versus civilization.

Taking a step backward we can look at the cowboy’s qualities in another light: that of a child. The cowboy lives outdoors, never becomes romantically entangled, favors a carefree life on the plains and freedom from responsibility. He is, after all, a cowboy, reflected in the names of some of the most famous serial Western heroes such as the Cisco Kid or the Durango Kid.

This connection was not lost to marketers and the media. The popular television program “Hopalong Cassidy” is a prime example of cultural producers’ tendency to
“grow down” the cowboy. The Hopalong Cassidy television show was intended to be a translation of the popular book by Clarence Mulford, in which the protagonist was a swearing, hard drinking, womanizing brute. Mulford must have been wholly shocked to see his creation transformed into a clean-cut singing cowboy whose lips never tasted a drop of alcohol or the kiss of a woman.

It is no coincidence that the cowboy has enjoyed a particularly strong appeal among children. Many generations of American children grew up imagining themselves as cowboys, myself included. Games of “Cowboys and Indians” were part of the canon of children’s games. Pretending to be a cowboy “manifested the longing to be heroic and to be in a place where dreams come true.” I spent countless hours dressed up wearing a cowboy hat and drinking “sarsaparilla,” mimicking the images of cowboys I saw on television and read about in books. Personally and culturally, the cowboy is intrinsically linked to childhood.

The snag here is that playing cowboys involves the “dragging into adulthood the desires of childhood.” As children, viewing the exploits of cowboys seemed remarkably like games, and games are preparation for life. However, these ritual games lead us nowhere, “they are designed to maintain the fiction of male boyishness even in the

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60 Davis, Ten-Gallon Hero, PAGE NUMBER


62 Roderick McGillis, He was Some Kind of Man: Masculinities in the B-Western. (Waterloo, ON: Wilford Laurier Press, 2009) 49.

63 McGillis, Some Kind of Man, 8.
midst of adult activity.”64 It’s no stretch to view the cowboy as an adult in a perpetual state of arrested development. Like Peter Pan and the Lost Boys, the cowboy never wants to grow up or be tied down. He remains perpetually on the cusp of adulthood but retreats time and time again into the seeming freedom of childish ways. The hero rides into town, saves the day, but must leave hastily before he risks domestication and being forced to grow up.

For the childlike heroes of the Western there is the perpetual sense of the coming of adulthood. The open range is in constant threat of being civilized, and with it an end to the wildness of the West. Technology and civilization represent the death of the frontier, an end to the innocent free-roaming plains. Embedded in the Western is the nostalgic sense that this is the “last great drama, a sad knowledge that the cowboy is passing and that civilization is approaching.”65 But unlike real life, it never comes. While boys grow up, marry, and get jobs, the cowboy remains eternally youthful, forever riding his stallion around in a Wild West Neverland:

We know that adulthood, civilization is inevitable, but we are living toward the end of childhood, and at that point, ‘childness’ seems eternal; it is a whole lifetime. But suddenly we find it is not eternal, the forests disappear, the mountains are settled, and we have new responsibilities. When we shut our eyes and try and remember, the last image of a carefree life appears. For the nation, this last image is the cowboy.66

64 McGillis, Some Kind of Man, 9.
CHAPTER 8: NOSTALGIA AND PROGRESS

A conviction that the world has developed into a more sophisticated, wiser place does not prevent looking back on “less enlightened ages” with fond regret: “the more emphatically the modern age insisted on its own wisdom, experience, maturity, the more appealing allegedly simple, unsophisticated times appeared in retrospect.”

Despite both geographical and industrial progress, there remains an underlying sense that something has been lost. For every step taken forward, the more desirable the last step appeared.

Not only the country’s material wealth but its commitment to the democratization of opportunity... made it easy not only for Americans themselves but for foreign observers to see America as the wave of the future, yet Americans were notoriously given to recurrent fits of melancholy, evoked by the suggestion that some primal innocence, some “original relation the universe,” in Emerson’s phrase had been lost in the headlong rush for gold.

This conjunction of progress and nostalgia gives the American character its distinctive flavor. Nostalgia, literally meaning homesick, was initially coined as a medical

67 Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 92.

68 Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 93.
condition by a German physician named Johannes Hofer to describe Swiss mountaineers separated from home.69 It was not until the 1920’s that the term evolved to refer to a sentimental view of the past. Authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald nostalgically recalled times before the great war, casting the prewar period as the childhood of the nation.

Returning to the 1950’s, we again see this duality of nostalgia and progress. Mid-century America is noted as an era of scientific discoveries, modern technology, and space travel. Conversely, the decade also saw an unprecedented fascination with the American frontier. In 1959 alone, there were twenty-seven Westerns on prime-time TV.70 Cowboys dominated everything from magazine covers and clothing designs to children’s lunchboxes. It might seem contradictory that Americans spent hours in their clean suburban communities enjoying television shows celebrating our spartan past, but it makes perfect sense when we consider the Western as an expression of this nostalgic desire. As noted earlier, nostalgia shares a special bond with the American West. Even Turner’s late nineteenth-century Frontier Thesis, which touted progress as the architect of the American character, contained its fair share of nostalgic reflection. It was in response to the idea that the frontier was closing that he writes his thesis, stating that “the frontier line is ending, and therefore the first chapter of American history has come

69 Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 92
70 Men to Boys, 25
to a close.”  

One can summarize the article as a nostalgic look at how frontier progress shaped our identity.

If we recognize Turner’s frontier as the story of the West and of America, it can be argued that the story is vulnerable to its outcome. As the story concludes, the land is changed irrevocably. One can sense a note of mourning in Turner’s words as he acknowledges that the land is settled, no longer wild. Historian Elliot West explains, “When the pioneers win, and in the classic westerns they always do, those challenges vanish. At that point, the heroes have destroyed the very conditions that brought out their best, that have made them American.”

Ironically, as the Western hero ventured into the savage wilderness breaking trails and seeking the “unsullied, true values of nature,” he inevitably destroys the “Virgin Land” that provided him meaning.

This paradox arises continuously; frontier folklore surrounding hero Daniel Boone tells a similar tale. Boone is described as a fiercely independent scout who is famous for leading a group of settlers into Kentucky. This heroic act, however, destroyed the wilderness that made him heroic, transforming it into a bustling new settlement. Therefore the place and the story are mutually dependent and mutually destructive: “when the story is over, the place is gone, and without the place there can

71 Turner, Significance of the Frontier, 24.


be no story.”74 This paradox is fine when it remains a simple story, but is problematic when it lies at the foundation of the myth that Americans have used to express who we are. The result is a national character that pushes and pulls between nostalgia and progress.

This conflict has only been heightened in the past century as America has seen unprecedented technological advancements. Compared to the freedom and big open skies depicted in Westerns, contemporary America seems loud, frantic, unpredictable and uncertain and dominantly urban. Mary Caputi in *A Kinder Gentler America* posits the contemporary American as one “who longs for an anterior richness missing from the present, a person driven by an internalized desire that, by definition can never be fulfilled.”75 The clear distinctions of right and wrong, the simplicity and freedom inherent in the Western’s ideology seems to represent a perceived void in contemporary life. With the advent of the recent economic crisis and America’s declining presence on the world scene, there is a sense that something has been lost.

“The decisive correlate to this nostalgic syndrome is a sense of loss, a conviction that the Eden Americans deserve to inhabit is now besieged by insoluble problems.”76 An

74 West, “Selling the West,” 272.
75 Mary Caputi, *Kinder, Gentler America*, 27.
overarching desire to uncover an “anterior connection...that endows life with a unifying substrate” can overshadow the present and arouse feelings of melancholy. 77

This is exactly what Westerns offer their fans. Westerns are more than a form of escapist literature, they serve to fulfill a sense of meaning. In this case, the melancholic is not one who has felt a lack of meaning, but instead feels a great connection with an earlier time, such as the mythologized frontier stories and edenic landscapes, or at least perceives they have. Attachment to these ideas can create a mindset that wishes to escape a bewildering present and flee to a simpler, more innocent time with a clearer purpose. These images reveal our preference for mythology and metaphor, for the desire for a foundation rather than reality of one.

This dichotomy has been a recurring theme in many of my paintings, notably in *Clay Feet* (2009)(Fig 8.1). In this image, a dinosaur pulled from a roadside Americana attraction and a child stand in the foreground along with a vintage gas sign. In the distance a shining futuristic city beckons the duo forth. Between them however lies a vast, barren, mountainous valley. Incapable of crossing the void, the two remain in a nostalgic landscape and stare longingly at an idealized image of the future.

77 Caputi, 28.
Figure 8.1: *Clay Feet (Almost Chosen)*, 2009, Jason Cytacki. Oil on Panel. 48 x 62 inches.
Author Jane Kramer chronicled the life of Henry Blanton, a Texas rancher and self-proclaimed cowboy in her 1977 book, *The Last Cowboy*. In the novel, Blanton never drives anywhere without the .30-30 Winchester Rifle strapped to his Ford Pickup to protect himself. However, no villains are available to fight, well, none that wear black hats and carry six-shooters. In fact, Blanton’s rifle provides no assistance in his fight against the antagonists of his life. The grandson of a Texas cowboy, he longs for a ranch of his own, but, at the age of forty, he is still working on a ranch owned by a big business cattle man. He drinks too much, and continually gets into fights, both of which have pronounced effects on his marriage. Still, Blanton is interested in “expressin’ right,” like the silver screen cowboy heroes he admires and attempts to emulate.

For Blanton, the gap between the West of his imagination and the realities of his life are devastating. The *Library Journal* review aptly summarizes: “It’s more than the story of one man’s disappointment. It is the story of the West that never was.” Lived experiences often differ significantly from the myths they strive to achieve. Similarly,

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for the white pioneer of the 1840s, westward expansion was a divine fulfillment of a manifest destiny. For the Native Americans already living in the west, it was a bloody white conquest and displacement. Perspective is crucial in understanding history.

The over emphasized and omnipresent representation of the myth of the American West threatens to supplant the reality of American development. As the often quoted line from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* states, “when the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”80 Historian Michael Coyne has suggested that “the glib higher truth has been the primary rationalization for distortions in America’s frontier past.”81 He continues that “the way it should have been elevates the ideal over the authentic and implies that America’s heritage best reflects the essence of truth within the contours of myth.”82 It could be stated that the Frontier does not depict how we were, but how we would like to be and be seen.

Perspective was the basis for the New Western History in the 1980’s. Despite the efforts of these revisionists to expose a more authentic portrait of our nation, the frontier myth remains enormously influential. Patricia Limerick acknowledged its incredible staying power in her essay, “Something in the Soil,” where she humorously and revealing explored the usage of the word “frontier” in contemporary media applied to everything from advances in science to velcro. To her surprise, the word “frontier”

80 The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance. DVD. Directed by John Ford. 1962; Los Angeles, CA, Paramount Pictures.


82 Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie*, 8
was used interchangeably with “progress” to evoke powerful metaphors. Even those
disenfranchised in the American Frontier, such as blacks, readily adopted the term to
describe achievements.\(^8\) We must ask how these ideas still hold so much cultural
currency in spite of knowledge of their artificiality? Why do we still believe even after
we have seen the man behind the curtain pulling the strings?

Limerick in her essay suggests a more appropriate alternative for the term
frontier: \textit{la frontera}.\(^8\) The Spanish word represents the colliding of two cultures,
instead of emphasizing the progress of one. I feel this term can be further expanded to
better articulate a more complete understanding of our national identity. The myth of
America’s foundation disavows and ignores a significant, more complex and rich history.
Likewise, to dispel the myth completely would be to disregard an enormous cultural
shaping force that defines our national self-perception. It is at the intersection of these
two, in full knowledge of each other that we gain a full picture of who we are.

I believe that America is fascinating not just for its vision, but also for its failings
and illusions. One need only to look at our history of violence, genocide, racial and
sexual oppression, to see that we never became a “city upon a hill.” If we view the
country with the same critical analysis that Joseph Campbell applied to the heroes of
mythology, a strong image emerges of a nation cast as a tragic hero engaged in its own
redemptive quest. The overwhelming spirit of optimism and its ideological earnestness

\(^8\) Limerick, \textit{Something in the Soil}, 79.

\(^8\) Limerick, “Something in the Soil,” 84.
become only more tragic when looked at in conjunction with its failings. Perhaps someday the mythic contours of our national identity will be redrawn to accommodate this more complete, truthful, and tragic portrait.


