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A New Show at MCA Denver Reins in the Myth of the Cowboy With Works by John Baldessari, Amy Sherald, and More

"Cowboy" deconstructs the long-held archetype of masculinity through works by 27 contemporary artists.

Eileen Kinsella, September 27, 2023



Karl Haendel, *Rodeo 11* (2023). Image courtesy the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles, Mitchell- Innes & Nash, New York, and Wentrup Gallery, Berlin

Hold onto your cowboy hats. This is no ordinary Western art show.

The simply titled “Cowboy” opens at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver on September 29 and it’s sure to garner major attention in the Western U.S. and beyond.

The show, organized by curators Nora Burnett Abrams and Miranda Lash, takes aim at the mythic figure, which they describe as “one of the most fraught and persistent figures in contemporary American culture.” The show raises questions such as how the myth of the cowboy exists today and how this archetype of masculinity shaped how we think about gender now. It further delves into cowboys’ relationship to the land through a series of broad perspectives and aims to debunk the homogenous concept of the cowboy as a white male.

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“There is no mythic figure who is more grand and complicated than the cowboy,” said Burnett Abrams in a phone interview. Originally, she said, she was looking into the history of the Black cowboy, but over the course of years of conversations, the concept was broadened.

“We approached it from all angles,” said Lash, including very much from the side of satire and critique, but also from the perspective of “homage,” with artists incorporating the stories of their own family members. “The stories range from the deconstructive impulse to the very personal. Cowboys are just so much more diverse than what gets depicted in the mainstream media.”

While the show starts with some classic blue-chip names and works like a John Baldessari (*The Space Between Hat Rock and Shadow*), Richard Prince’s famous Marlboro Man photo, and Andy Warhol’s film of a horse, it quickly delves into the contemporary and ultra-contemporary realm with 27 artists spanning 70 works.

Take for instance Stephanie Syjuco’s photographs of Frederic Remington’s famous bronze sculptures of bucking broncos in the Amon Carter collection that depict them being measured with tape and alluding to the popularity of—and poking fun at—the sculptures and replicas on CEO desks across the country as symbols of bravura. “She jokes about how it’s such a popular bronze on the desks of corporate executives because it connects so deeply with this idea of the rugged individual, the entrepreneur, the man who sets his own terms,” said Lash.

The two curators said the tagline for the show could be: “This is not your grandfather’s Remington.”

Another topic that the show tackles is the “very problematic binary of the cowboy versus Indian, which is just an invention,” said Burnett Abrams.

One of the artists included in the show is Oklahoma native Nathan Young, whose art delves into his family history with parents who are of the Pawnee and Delaware Tribe. The multi-disciplinary artist delves into Pawnee rodeo culture in this series of work in the show.

And four contemporary artists, including Rafa Esparza, Young, and Colorado-based artists R. Alan Brooks and Gregg Deal were commissioned to make work for the show.

“There are those who are Native American or are of Native American descent who actively participate in cowboy culture,” said Lash. “There is not that distinction or binary.”

Burnett Abrams said: “Our ambition is to expand the story and I think that for those who are ready to be a part of that, it’s going to be amazing.”

“Cowboy” is on view at MCA Denver, 1485 Delgany Street, Denver, through February 18, 2024.