

## A vast range

Two exhibits at the Arts Center in St. Petersburg cover the extremes of cowboy art, from the romanticized to the realistic.

By LENNIE BENNETT



Carlton Ward Jr., *Three Horses*, 2001, photograph

You could call it the Brokeback Mountain effect, a new interest in cowboy culture, especially one that introduces a different way to study its mythology. But we have always had a fascination with the cowboy as a unique American icon. Two exhibitions at the Arts Center examine the ways our perceptions have changed

with the times.

Taken together, the shows illustrate that even as we idealize and romanticize the cowboy way of life, it is more and more a marginalized and anachronistic profession.

"The Wild Bunch: Cowboys in Contemporary Art" gives us the cowboy of our imagination mostly in paintings. "Cracker Country: Florida's Cowboy Culture" presents the gritty realities of this vanishing breed with three photographic essays.

A cool irony pervades "The Wild Bunch." From James Michael's enormous, exuberant mixed-media works to Jenny Rogers' video of a women's synchronized swim team performing an underwater version of a western movie, we get the point that cowboys as we think of them are mostly an artistic conceit. It began with movies in the early 20th century in which the cowboy protagonist was a heroic figure, a characterization that continued into the 1970s with television westerns. More recently, revisionist westerns desanitized the genre with graphic violence and moral ambivalence.

You see that history throughout "The Wild Bunch." Gordon McConnell paints with a slight blurriness that suggests a "screen grab," or still photograph taken from a movie or video. The images of the Old West are isolated without contextual details. Grouped together, they tell a story in minimalist language. David Rathman does something similar in his portraits. They have a more finished look but share McConnell's metaphorical removal from a sense of place.

Like Michaels, Bill Schenck's western themes are leavened with a shot of pop, a cowboy version of Roy Lichtenstein's captioned melodramas. This is Just so Emotionally Crippling, for example, seems to interrupt a fraught scene in which a cowboy is trying to comfort a woman who has turned away in resignation. Done in "painted desert" hues with stylized flatness, it is a wry reversal of the stoic cowboy. Fort Guerin perfect name - and real!- for a western artist takes the tweaking further with his cartoon characters surrounded by story lines written in cramped, nearly illegible longhand that have the folksiness of Howard Finster.

Bernard Williams takes cowboy mythology to literal task in portraying a black cowboy, historically common though you would never know it from most

Hollywood depictions. Jennifer Zackin's installation of hundreds of neon-colored plastic cowboys wielding guns or rope are grouped to form a large Mandala-like pattern, a Hindu object used for meditation. The whole is different from the sum of these vintage parts, another metaphor for this evolving genre. So what's next, meditating cowboys?

The three photography exhibits in "Cracker Country" are slices of the real lives of those who earn their livings on horseback. Carlton Ward Jr.'s lush, evocative prints on deckled paper have the rich, saturated colors of National Geographic displays. Some of them have the nuanced gradations of paintings; one in particular, Big Cypress, could be a delicate Japanese watercolor of mountains rising through clouds. Just beautiful. Those by Beth Reynolds and Rachel Turner are more documentary and specific, though Reynolds' photographs also have a lot of compositional drama. Reynolds follows teenager Laci Whaley through her days on the family cattle ranch and her amateur career as the Junior National barrel racing champion. The photographer really captures the joy this young woman derives from life on the land and her knowledge that it's a privileged life.

Turner gives us a close-up of cowboys on another Florida cattle ranch, their days going from fast-paced corralling to slow meanders with their herds and dogs. It doesn't look easy or comfortable, but the message of Turner's photographs, like the others, is that these men choose this life because they love its freedom. Hearing them speak of it on an accompanying video reinforces the theme of "Cracker Country" that, for all its toughness, it's also a very fragile one.

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## **IF YOU GO**

### **Cowboys in art**

"Wild Bunch: Cowboys in Contemporary Art" and "Cracker Country: Florida's Cowboy Culture" are at the Arts Center, 719 Central Ave., St. Petersburg, through May 27. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday and noon to 4 p.m. Sunday. Free admission. (727) 822-7872 or [www.theartscenter.org](http://www.theartscenter.org).

## **On the Web**

Photographer Carlton Ward's work often appears in the St. Petersburg Times. For online galleries of his work, including features on the Hendrie Ranch in Highlands County and the Adams Ranch in Fort Pierce, go to [links.tampabay.com](http://links.tampabay.com).

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