

Unlocked and Loaded

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In a new show, nationally known Minneapolis artist David Rathman casts an affectionate eye on the American West.



No hat. No boots. No pistols.

Stalking into Weinstein Gallery on a recent afternoon, Minneapolis artist David Rathman didn't look like a gunslinger. Didn't sound like one, either, as he roamed the gallery talking about the 18 large Western-themed watercolors in his new show, "The Other Side of Sunday," which runs through July 9.

Rathman, 53, grew up in Montana and is nationally known for his dead-on renditions of Stetson-topped, gun-waving guys on horseback charging across dusty landscapes, seeking justice. Such paintings have brought him acclaim everywhere from London's Sport Magazine to the New York Times, Art in America, Esquire and the Huffington Post, which this spring trumpeted him as one of 10 painters making a difference.

Major museums that have snapped up his work range from Walker Art Center and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts to the Getty Museum in Los Angeles and New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, which bought four pieces last year. Even in a down-market time like this, recent shows in Los Angeles, Miami and New York sold well and several Weinstein pieces were snapped up before the exhibit opened.

All that aside, Rathman is an arty type rather than a buckskin romantic. Wearing a blue shirt and skinny pants, the printmaker-turned-painter rambled on about lines and designs, ink mixes, scale shifts, the way water sinks into paper.

He knows the West well but plucks his images of gunslingers and desperadoes from old films and TV shows. Clint Eastwood classics -- "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," "Pale Rider," "High Plains Drifter" -- are favorites. He freeze-frames and photographs key scenes, then dissects and reassembles them. Projecting film images onto paper, he sketches in some images and omits others, rearranging scenes and figures to suit his own needs. Then he adds captions derived from song lyrics, snippets of poetry, overheard conversations or his own musings.

"That whole generation of westerns are so Shakespearean and biblical," he said. "There's always a moral situation to be resolved, a conflict between good and evil, wrong and right, that takes place outside proper society. They're beautiful, with well-defined roles that you've seen hundreds of times, but have a certain essential trajectory that can be shaded."

Breakthrough birthday card

He hit upon the Western motifs almost by accident about a decade ago after years of driving delivery trucks and doing printmaking. After graduating from Minneapolis College of Art and Design in 1982, he published some well-received books and got high-profile grants from local foundations -- Jerome, McKnight and Bush -- but by the late 1990s his career had plateaued. He started painting again, cycling through other people's styles, from Willem de Kooning abstractions to Francisco Clemente's portraits. Then he needed a card for a friend's birthday.

"I'd been reading some Time-Life books on the history of the West and saw some bunkhouse graffiti on a wall," he recalled. "I put it on a card and painted a cowboy silhouette and within a week I'd started watching western movies. I got really immersed. I'd found something and it found me."

Besides cowboy and Western landscapes, his subsequent subjects included high school football players, beat-up cars and trucks, military vehicles (tanks, helicopters, warships) and boxers. Earlier this year he produced a 90-second film based on a series of watercolors inspired by Muhammad Ali's and George Foreman's legendary 1974 "Rumble in the Jungle." Last month he released a book of watercolors of military subjects -- tanks, helicopters, warships -- with the incongruously poetic title "In Quiet Rooms Young Girls Are Writing Poetry."

Given such guy-gear motifs, he's often pegged as a chronicler of the bruised psyches of modern men, a tag he acknowledges with ambivalence. Though the work is definitely about "men's culture," he noted that his use of watercolor, an ephemeral medium often associated with hobbyists and women, undercuts the machismo and injects a contradictory note of fragile vulnerability.

"The choice of subjects just seemed authentic to me, but I've never tried to look too hard at my subjects and what they should be," he said. "It's really loaded stuff, but there's an internal quality, too, that contradicts the impact of the subject."

Moody machismo

His paintings have a certain laconic poetry, often injected via captions that float through scenes like cinematic voice-overs, random dialogue or internal ruminations. Captions may hint at vengeance, confrontation, bravado, despair or even dreams deferred.

In one work at the Weinstein, a gang of gunslingers thunders across the horizon below the caption "Now Is Not a Time to Forgive," while in another, two cowboys stare into the distance under the lonely line "Nothing Here to Put Me in Love With the Good Life." An especially lyrical image depicts two guys riding past a broken windmill and disappearing into a lilac mist; its caption, "No Poems Tonight, Just Wind and Rain," quotes Minnesota poet John Engman, who "died too young a few years ago," as Rathman put it.

The new work includes mournful, ironic and even self-referential reflections on the dying West, too. In "King of the Hill," a junked truck rusts on a hilltop in the shadow of Mount Rushmore, and in "It All Counts," taxidermied buffalo and deer glare from walls hung with little reproductions of Rathman's own earlier paintings. A picture called "Western Eyes" even offers a wry peek into a future museum where three visitors appreciatively study a mural-sized Western picture and ignore the modernist abstraction beside it.