Man With a Rope, oil, 40 x 30"
In a new exhibition at Altamira Fine Art, painter Gary Ernest Smith looks back in time to find the future of the West.

By Michael Clawson
Two strands of derelict fencing—posts askew in sandy soil, barbwire coiled like ribbon around splintered wood, rusty nail heads peeking out of aged lumber—have crisscrossed miles of desert to meet at a single point, a gateway marked by two high posts and a long board nailed between them. These relics of the West, originally meant to mark the entrance of a property, now stand as forgotten monuments, their sentry-like skulls keeping watch on only the dust and the silence.

While gateways are still used today, even on active ranches and farms, it’s the older ones that captivated Utah painter Gary Ernest Smith, who saw through their simple construction and decaying fragments. “The gateway is a very interesting Western symbol, one that farmers and ranchers used to put up over their property. They used to hang skulls on top of them, skulls from deer or cattle or buffalo. They are looked at like old barns—they just sit there, and once they’re down no one really replaces them,” he says. “They became very symbolic as an entrance, a gateway to the past. Sometimes, if you looked at it from the other way, against those sagebrush hills, it became an exit, a gateway to the future. It all depended on which side you were on.”

In Smith’s new exhibition, opening June 29 at Altamira Fine Art, he paints several gateways, including one in Into the West, which is also the title of his show, and another in Gateway to Nowhere. Both gateways are modestly constructed with wooden beams stretching into the air, cow skulls on the crossbeams, piles of rocks as makeshift support foundations, and simple gates, worn tire tracks running underneath each. On one side of the fence is the Old West, with its cattle and cowboys, and on the other is the modern age. There are other logical interpretations of the symbol that can be gleaned from Smith’s imagery: past and future, young and old, and tradition and innovation.

In Looking West, Smith frames a female figure in a gateway, and it adds another dimension. “That one is even more symbolic. This lady is a contract cowgirl, who contracts with farmers and ranchers to round up their cattle. Women were doing much of the ranching while men were in town working at the banks,” he says. “I see her as a symbol or a gateway, even as she turns and looks back into the future. It’s also symbolic of the contemporary West, where women are taking a more central role. That’s a signature painting for me. It captures a really important transition, from Old West and New West.”

That transition is at the heart of Smith’s work, both his newer pieces and those throughout his long career. While exploring traditional subjects and themes, the respected artist has painted them in very nontraditional ways. His shadowy and faceless figures are often heroically posed against rich seas of color, he can paint loose and with impressionistic qualities, his compositions are deliberate marriages of form and function, and his color palette—made of only primary colors—is effective at conveying his big ideas, be it farm workers or his visions of the land.
His work is respected on the range and off it, from traditional Western fans to contemporary art collectors.

“I’m very happy that people have responded to my particular style of painting, but as far as how it developed, I couldn’t even tell you how that happens. You work at it and eventually, like your handwriting, it becomes you. I certainly have my influences: I really enjoy the American West, the Taos painters, and even the Russell and Remington era. I liked them because they observed it and did it. There is something to that, the spirit of work, and observing it. When you’ve seen it firsthand, it really becomes you,” Smith says, adding that he’s still a relentless artist who hasn’t slowed down. “I’m still the obsessed painter. I’ve always equated it to a pilot light: always flickering, never goes out.”

What’s also remarkable about Smith’s work is how little detail he paints, but how much detail is felt. Some works are so simple that a viewer would only have to squint lightly to see abstract shapes come alive, and others have been stripped down to their most basic parts and then reassembled in a leaner form. In the new landscape *Rural Evening*, Smith paints much of the foreground in a dark shadow, yet the scene feels immense and complete; and in *Man With a Rope*, his cowboy figure is nearly a silhouette, but his jawline and nose reveal strength and determination.

“My work does have a minimalist quality to it. I’m dealing with the essence of the subject, and that allows me to remove detail, not add it in. And when I do use detail, I don’t let it overpower the form and color. To me that’s where the emotion really lies. The stronger the forms of the painting, the more concise it is to the viewer,” he says. “I also hide many of the faces I paint—that way they can be anybody. They are more symbolic as people, as opposed to individuals. It opens
the work up to a new generation.”

Arizona painter Ed Mell first met Smith about 20 years ago—“He would drop in on my shows, and I on his. It was a mutual admiration society,” says Mell—and the two eventually started holding plein air sessions together. “He’s one of the only living artists I’ve learned things from. His sense of color and his compositions are very different than mine, so it’s fun to paint with him because our works will look so different,” Mell explains. “He’s very magical with color and composition. His texture and the way he approaches painting are really unique.”

Altamira executive director Mark D. Tarrant also praises Smith for his use of color, and his insight into the West. “Gary Smith has spent a lifetime living and working in the West. He has a philosopher’s perspective of the currents of times. This heightened awareness, of the

*Red Earth*, oil, 16 x 20”

*Desert Red Earth*, oil, 16 x 24”
American West at a crossroads, is on his mind and surface in the work he is doing,” says Tarrant. “His paintings have always had a transcendent quality, and point beyond the physical. Into the West offers the viewer an opportunity to think with him about who we are, where we have been and where we are going."

“I just want to produce a good solid body of work that reflects my sense of observation, and of the things that are important enough to me to put down on canvas,” Smith says. “I’m always pursuing a consistent quality about the work I do. For me, that’s the ultimate joy in all this.”

**Gary Ernest Smith: Into the West**

**When:** June 29-July 11, 2015; reception and artist talk, July 2, 5:30-7:30 p.m.

**Where:** Altamira Fine Art, 172 Center Street, Jackson, WY 83001

**Information:** (307) 739-4700, www.altamiraart.com

Gary Ernest Smith in his Utah studio.