

INSIDE State of the Art: Montana • Altermann Auction • Jim Norton • Theodore Waddell

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CANVAS as ILLUSION

A new book on Theodore Waddell examines his modern paintings within the context of Montana's West.

By John O'Hern



The artist working on *Monida Angus #15* in his studio.

Theodore Waddell is connected to the land and to the animals that live on it. Both are part of his life and both appear in his art.

A new book, *Theodore Waddell: My Montana, Painting and Sculpture, 1959-2016*, has recently been published by the Drumlummon Institute in Helena, Montana. Edited by the poet and critic, and Drumlummon executive director Rick Newby, the book brings together essays by scholars and friends of the artist who not only place his work in the context of Montana but in the context of the wider art world and among the people who have influenced his life and work.

Robyn Peterson, executive director of the Yellowstone Art Museum, nominated Waddell for the 2015 Montana Governor's Arts Award. In her remarks introducing him at the award ceremony, she said, "Like all

deeply interesting individuals Ted embodies many paradoxes. His life is a chronicle of accident and intent, rebellion and respect, opportunity and hardship, humor and gravity, intelligence and intuition...Ted has forged an aesthetic that is distinctively his own while simultaneously belonging to every one of us."

At the time, Ted remarked "The land determines and shapes who we are." He recalled the influence of the modernist Montana painter and teacher Isabelle Johnson and his experiences in New York where he studied at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1962 and 1963 and discovered the work of Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and all the abstract expressionists.

He has explained, "These painters wanted you to know that the



Quarter Horse Noon #3, 2008, oil and encaustic on canvas, 48 x 39 $\frac{7}{8}$ ". Courtesy the artist and Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe, NM.



Clockwise from above: *Monida*, 1999, oil, 120 x 216"; Theodore Waddell on horseback; *Monet's Sheep*, 1994, oil and encaustic on canvas, 78 x 120"

canvas had a presence, more than their illusionistic predecessors. The paint had its own identity as well with thick swatches, drips, and blurbs."

He returned to Montana and taught at the University of Montana. When he was offered the job of manager at a cattle ranch, he left the university and became a rancher—for nearly 30 years.

"I had been doing abstract sculpture in stainless steel," he explains. "When I looked out the kitchen window at the ranch and saw black cows and snow, a light bulb went on." It was a new chapter in his life and his art.

I have been curious about the effect familiarity has on an artist's work. When we first talked several years ago he told me about going to the library with his father when he was a boy and going home with a bag of books and about reading all of Zane Gray's novels about the West—there are over 90 of them.

"You have to be part of something in some fashion to make a statement about it," he said then. He recalls painting giraffes at a game farm in Africa in the 90s. "There's no way I could paint them now," he says. "They're not part of my life. I can't paint anything I can't see.

"The cattle and horses I worked with for many years became part

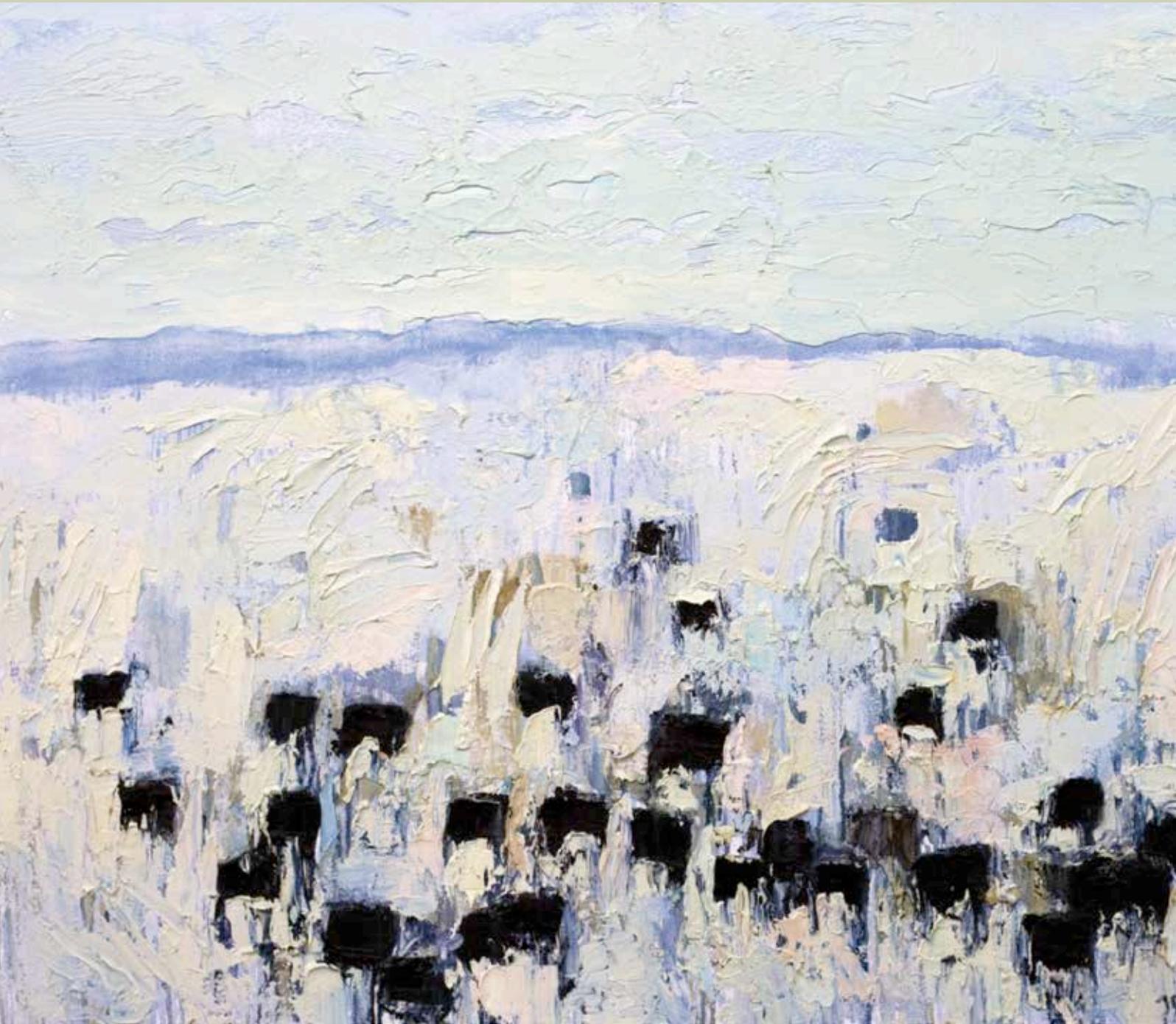
of my experience," he continues, "You can look at a newborn calf and hug a cow. They give everything they have in every way to you. And you consign them to their death. After awhile I couldn't stand the death loss any more. I was nuts about the cattle, and I still am."

Ted's empathy for the animals is evidenced in *Quarter Horse Noon #3*, 2008. A lone horse seeks shelter from the blazing sun in the shade of a lone tree. It is painted in oil and encaustic. He had started out painting with house paints because they were cheap. He was introduced to Dorland's Wax Medium by the Native American artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith.

Commenting further on technique, he explains that with the addition of encaustic and Damar varnish he can "make marks and more marks and still see the mark underneath. I only work on one or two canvases at a time because I want the paint to stay wet. That way you can move the paint into the paint underneath it. If you do it at the right time the effects are really something. If you do it too soon it doesn't work." He uses masonry trowels and stiff brushes and sometimes bottles of solvent while building up the surface and moving the paint around. He's also not afraid to work large.

Monida, 1999, measures 10 by 18 feet. Another painting of angus





Lima August #4, oil on canvas, 35% x 48". Courtesy the artist and Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe, NM.

grazing in the Monida Pass area of Montana and Idaho measures 26 feet wide. "I've probably gone through the Monida Pass 300 times," he says, "and I never get tired of it. You develop a familiarity with a place, after 25 or 30 years. It's always different. Places like that imprint on your psyche and you approach it by instinct. You just have to be open to what's in front of you with no preconceived notions. If you let your intellect get in the way you really get bamboozled. Like Anne Lamott wrote, 'bird by bird.'"

Lamott recounts in her book *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, a story about her 10-year-old brother who sat overwhelmed trying to begin a report on birds that was due the next day. She writes, "Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said, 'Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.'"

In a commencement speech at the University of California, Berkeley, Lamott said, "Your problem is how you are going to spend this one odd and precious life you have been issued. Whether you're going to spend it trying to look good and creating the illusion that you have power over people and circumstances, or whether you are going to taste it, enjoy it and find out the truth about who you are."

Waddell comments, "Most people thought the world ended when Charlie Russell died in 1927." He acknowledges the contributions of the many artists since Russell's time and the contributions of the Yellowstone Art Museum. The museum houses the Poindexter Collection of modernist and abstract expressionist art—where Waddell first tested his skills.

His grandfather knew Russell and worked with him on a roundup around 1895. "I'm proud to be part of that tradition," he says. "The



“The cattle and horses I worked with for many years became part of my experience. You can look at a new born calf and hug a cow. They give everything they have in every way to you.

— Theodore Waddell



Untitled (Used Engine Parts Collage), ca. 1966.

problem is, the Western guys think I’m too modern and the modern guys don’t like that I have subject matter.”

Waddell tastes life and enjoys it, remaining humble—despite his fame. He’s proud that his grandfather invented a manure spreader (or “Fertilizer Distributor” as the patent describes it). He maintains the love for animals that comes from his days as a rancher. He has also illustrated three books about his beloved Bernese Mountain Dogs. Two of the books were in collaboration with his wife, writer and photographer Lynn Campion.

The opening quote in the catalog to his exhibition of sculpture, *Hallowed Absurdities*, is, appropriately, one from Chief Seattle. “What is man without the animals? If all the animals were gone, man would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the animals, soon happens to the humans. All things are connected.” 🌿

Santa Fe Editor John O’Hern, who has retired after 30 years in the museum business, specifically as the Executive Director and Curator of the Arnot Art Museum, Elmira, New York, is the originator of the internationally acclaimed Re-presenting Representation exhibitions. He writes for gallery publications around the world, including regular monthly features on Art Market Insights in American Art Collector magazine. Having succumbed to the lure of the West, he now lives in what he refers to as a “converted adobe goat shed” in the high desert of New Mexico, where he is acquainting himself with new flora and fauna.

