

PAUL BAINES

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LASSOING THE COWBOY MYTH

Matt Straub is well known for his use of mythologised cowboy iconography in his paintings. His style strides both **pop art** and **abstract expressionism**, his intent to deconstruct the idealised nostalgia associated with America's gun-slinging past, appropriating metaphor for his treatise on a fragile future and its foundations of a false history. Yet still there's humour abound in Straub's work, both in his creative process and final results, his art engenders the a split reaction within most viewers, one of simultaneous familiarity and surprise.



KA-POW!

Dismantling cultural sentimentality can be a tricky process, his use of comic characters such as images of cowboys, cowgirls, guns and horses immediately deflate any sense of political turbulence, although it is still always there, hovering in the background, clinically assessing the power of this particular set of signifiers.

The media as well as the twisted tales of opportunistic histories, many of which were little more than ad hoc myth invented for the sole purpose of engendering figures of power and commerce to the public's hearts. As Hollywood matured the traditional central hero character of Westerns was frequently utilised as a device to parallel the woes and failings of modern society. As cowboy movies moved on through the decades the clear cut line between the bad guys and the good guys began to blur, the devastation of the Native American culture was re-examined, the rise of the anti-hero in many of **Sergio Leone's** spaghetti westerns, and finally the drudgery and desolation of frontier life were brought to the fore.



Blood in the Dust

However, Hollywood has a habit of reinventing itself as well as many of its movie genres time and time again, sometimes successfully, sometimes not so. As with sex, nostalgia sells, and it sells far more than the brutal and usually rather uninspiring tales of history laid bare. The historical iconographies and biographies of those who have been deemed brave and courageous, political or military genius, the noble aspirations of peoples in turmoil, can be tarnished. A modern myth cannot be sustained, the plethora of communications technology, the failings of the PR industry to sustain their exaggerations under the naked light of the truth, the eternal reduction in the attention span of the human race, it just doesn't happen.

The past offers a chance to rewrite the imperfections of any culture, given enough time and momentum a fake heritage can be nurtured through the resultant misrepresentations of the creative industry. America compared to many European countries is still relatively young, what would be considered colloquial in Britain is seen as antique in the USA. I live in a town where the majority of houses are over a century old, it is a heritage area and thus protected from any major development. But houses of this age are commonplace in Britain, I have rented apartments in houses built as far back as the 16th Century, but again this is not a rarity. History surrounds the British as does a majority of Europeans, so much so we take it for granted.



Crack

America must find and venerate history wherever it can find it, to the extent the monetary value of relatively recent and rather mundane items that could be found in any humble home a century before can, in certain cases, reach tens of thousands of dollars. The frontier era is treasured for many reasons by the Americans, it captures the essence of a spirit of freedom, a conquering of the unknown, a battle against the hardship of subsistence farming, clan wars regarding the claim of territories, the rush for gold and oil, and literally the establishment of a nation. The cowboy stands a lone figure, winning against impossible odds, a stake in a new life with broader horizons than anyone across the continent could have imagined at the time.



This Is the Way It Always Ends

Hollywood and in turn government, corporate America and the citizens of the United States view this era with a heartfelt nostalgia that cannot truly be understood by other cultures of the world. Life was hard, men were men, women were women, the many fought bravely for the good of all, the survival of a nation depended on the glamorisation of the humble cow herder. Life has moved on, but the metaphorical resonance of the cowboy in everything from marketing to politics means that this icon of a frontier country will remain powerful for many years to come. Albeit the fact that Straub, amongst others, is consciously deconstructing this myth, in my opinion, merely feeds the beast of nostalgia so deep in the heart of contemporary American culture.

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