



BACK AT THE RANCH

THE CALGARY
STAMPEDE IS IN THE
SECOND YEAR OF
A PROJECT TO MIX
CONTEMPORARY
ART WITH WESTERN
TRADITION

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"Repeatedly what comes up is Calgary being criticized for being culturally void," says Tim Belliveau, one of three artists invited to participate in the Calgary Stampede's Artist Ranch Project last summer. Belliveau should know. He's a Calgary-based artist. He thinks part of the reason the project — which invites contemporary artists to creatively re-evaluate the traditions of western art — came together was that the Stampede itself was being blamed for branding Calgary as a cultural backwater. It's the biggest white-hatted symbol in a city that both embraces and shuns its own cowboy story.

"This project has its origins back in 2008," says Donna Andersen, one of the organizers of the Stampede's Western Art Show. "It was the idea of [Western Art Show] committee members Kim Morrison and Jason Brown. The goal has always been to bring in an exhibition that incorporates traditional western lifestyles with a contemporary interpretation." That is, one that doesn't follow the same, expected formulas, and challenges preconceptions and traditional concepts.

Western art, as it has long been showcased at the Stampede (and at Alberta galleries year-round), is generally broken from the mold of Frederic Remington. In paintings and sculptures, rugged archetypes punch cattle, break horses, wrestle steer. Brown, hilly landscapes play host to cowboys and their horses. There's still plenty of that to be found around Calgary every July, but the Artist Ranch adds a few fenceposts to the corral — expanding the definition of western art, and bringing the form into the 21st century.

The project started with the 2009 Western Art Showcase at the Stampede (held in downtown Calgary for ten days in early July). Local artists Lisa Brawn, Audrey Mabee, Lisa Sobkowich, and Errol Lee Fullen had spent some

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PREVIOUS PAGE: On the A7 Ranche near Nanton, Alberta, (left to right) artists Herb Sellin and Tim Belliveau, rancher Bill Cross, artist Michael Markowsky.

BELOW TOP: The landscape of the A7 Ranche.

BELOW LOWER: Artist Michael Markowsky surveys the landscape, and fellow Artist Ranch Project participants.

time on the Stampede Ranch, interpreting the place, and their own notions of western art traditions. Their work was included in the 2009 Show, and the show was successful enough that the Stampede backed another year of the project.

Part of the idea is to give artists access to some of the historic properties in the Alberta landscape, the hundred-year-old ranches that have helped to shape the province.

So this year welcomes round two. After applying to the project, Belliveau, Michael Markowsky, and Herb Sellin were chosen by the Stampede's committee to represent the contemporary voice of art in the 2010 Western Art Show. They spent three days in late August last summer on the A7 Ranche near Nanton, Alberta to take in the sights and sounds of ranch life.

For Belliveau and Markowsky, both city folk raised in the 'burbs of Calgary, this project seemed like a good way to address the rural-urban divide in Alberta, and the contradictions of a rodeo and agricultural show that now takes place in a big city.

"For so long I saw the Stampede out of context," says the Vancouver-based Markowsky. "It seemed like this thing was just plopped down for a week. Everyone adopted the cowboy hats and clothes, and then it went back in the closet for another year. There's a major population of the province that doesn't put that stuff away, who continue to wear it and continue to live it. That's the essence of what the Stampede is."

Markowsky spent very little time in rural Alberta before being involved in the project, but he gushes like a tourist when he describes attending a rodeo in Stavely, outside Nanton, swapping stories with ranch hands, or eating a steak dinner prepared from cattle raised by their hosts. The Cross family, owners of the A7, are descendants of A.E. Cross, who was one of the founders of the Calgary Stampede. The ranch is more than 100 years old, and is one of the showpieces of progressive Alberta agriculture.

"Bill Cross took time to show us everything," Markowsky says. "He got in his truck and drove us across his ranch, the size of which is pretty much impossible to describe. It was kind of like being on a safari. Tim and I were riding in the back of his truck while he was driving. We were shooting footage, taking photographs, and sketching. They were amazing people. I think they were really intrigued by having three artists come in, sit down, meet with them, and share experiences."

Though each artist had his own method of recording the experience, Markowsky says he did a few sketches while on the ranch, but most of the weekend retreat was spent exploring and taking hundreds of snapshots. He, like the others, preferred to let his impressions incubate before committing any images to canvas.

The artists were free to shift from the art of cowboy clichés to more modern techniques, including abstraction. The Western Art Show placed no restrictions on what they could produce.

As a member of Calgary's Bee Kingdom glass studio collective, Belliveau stakes much of his reputation on his blown-glass sculptures. His submissions to this show include vases containing impressionistic colour patterns that invoke the shapes of the vast rolling hills and mountains of southern Alberta. He also has a knack for pop surrealist illustration, reflected in wood cuts that present familiar images, but in a strikingly oddball way.

"I hope people can laugh," he says of his *Lamassu Man* — which superimposes Bill Cross's head on the comic image of an ancient Assyrian bull-man deity. "That's a good way for people to enter into the arts.

"I was called a low-brow influence," he chuckles as he explains his rationale for pairing the new west with the old Middle East. He's been interested in mythology for a long time, and often looks for ways to combine mythological symbols with modern themes. The symbol of the bull man seemed to fit with Cross, the cowboy.

Markowsky approached the project through a modern lens. He'll have oil paintings, illustrations, and video collage in the show. Much of his past work has been based around the idea of "moving images" — he draws everything that passes his window, as he sits in moving cars, buses and trains. Markowsky brought that sensibility to the A7.

"The idea of trying to capture this world as a still thing is ridiculous," he says. "If I'm trying to paint a cow, or a guy on a horse and they're moving the entire time, it's not possible for me to study it and draw the leg in a measured way like a representational painter. But the dynamic part of it is what excites me. The painting becomes this collage of different



places in time. You get this creature that has now become distorted or transformed into something different than it was before."

Sellin had a much different interpretation of the ranch experience. Though he is a long-time Calgarian, he was raised on a farm in northern Alberta's Peace River country, giving him the insight of someone who is not a born-and-bred urbanite, with little exposure to the province's rural landscape. He also used to paint the types of representational landscapes this show is known for.

"You could say this is still western Canadian landscape pushed in the direction of the imaginative," he says, describing *Alberta Bound*, one of the works that came out of the ranch experience. It's an abstract colour study resembling a stained-glass collage filtered through a logo design program in his brain. "The whole idea is for the viewer to have a surprise. I don't want you to be able to memorize it. So the instant you walk away, you'll want to see it again because you can't remember it like you would remember a representational landscape."

"For me this is almost a realistic landscape," he explains, pointing to bright web of colours

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RIGHT: Michael Markowsky, *On the Range*, digital video (six minutes), 2010.
BELOW: Markowsky gets up close to his subjects at the Ranche.





TOP: Artist Michael Markowsky drives and draws.

LEFT: Tim Belliveau, *Slaughterhouse*, wood, paint and ink, 18" x 24".



symbolizing the evolution of southern Alberta's mountains, clouds, and rivers. "And I have these shapes that look like creatures that are swimming through it, evolving over centuries." Part of his point is to sell viewers on the beauty of the province's landscape which, in a way, is something the Calgary Stampede can easily get behind.

"I'm inviting people to Alberta," Sellin says. "Alberta is a colourful celebration of nature in all its elements. And who wouldn't want to come here?"

The Western Art Show is on at the Calgary Stampede, July 9 to 18, 2010, in the BMO Centre at Stampede Park.