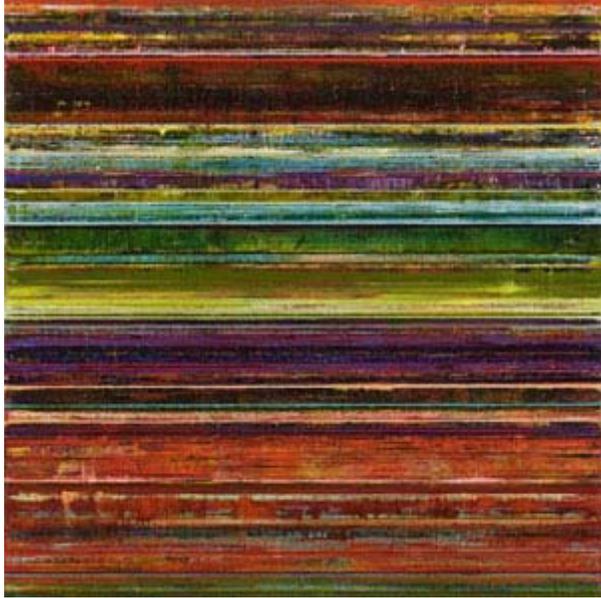


# Artists Capture the Great American West

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Lisa Nankivil, *Valley of Fires Road – Red Rock Canyon*, 2006.  
(Courtesy of Meridian International Center)

The sunlight filters purple and blue over the red earth. A drastic shadow creates a new horizon where men on horses survey the scene. A horse stomps its foot impatiently, watching wild horses gallop through the snow. Not wanting to be forgotten, a deer stands proud and catches the eye of a driver. These are only some of the images in the art exhibit *Out West: The Great American Landscape*.

The show premiered in Washington, D.C. on February 16, 2007 at the Meridian International Center and will be heading to Beijing, China late March, 2007. *Out West* is part of a cultural exchange that began in 1998 when China shared an exhibit called *Ancient Threads, Newly Woven* with the United States. *Ancient Threads, Newly Woven* features China's Western Silk Road

regions and is still on tour in the U.S. The Meridian International Center felt it only appropriate to return the favor and display an exhibit celebrating the American West for China.

Rich colors and various techniques ranging from realism to modernism, and impressionism to cubism lend to stunning renditions of our Western world. Many of these works share attributes with paintings done by artists of the past. Though some techniques may be derived from classic styles these artists add their own touches, making their masterpieces stand on their own.

Some of the realism works include Michael Drury's *Hay Barn in the Spring*, Julie Chapman's *Fire and Ice* and Gordon McConnell's *By Stage #2*. Each painting demands a second look to decipher that it is indeed a painting and not a photo snapshot or movie still.

Dudley Dana and Steven Shores grace the canvas with a modern approach. Dana abstracts a butte with a brilliant yellow square under a blue square in his appropriately named *Square Butte*. Shores creates a "paint by numbers" look with epoxy resin and enamel on wood in his *Dale* featuring Dale Evans, wife of Roy Rogers. This piece is reminiscent of Andy Warhol's silkscreen prints of various celebrities.

In an impressionistic style Robert Moore painted *Summer Glow* using soft lighting and brushstrokes similar to Monet. Moore approaches post-impressionism with this piece as well as the work emulates some of Seurat's study paintings. Blake Neubert takes a step beyond impressionism and reaches expressionism with his *Bull Rider at the Cody Night Rodeo*. His Kandinsky-like use of color and line emphasizes the emotions and feel of riding a bull, making it possible for the viewer to imagine actually being on the bull.

Ed Mell paints a cubist thunderhead cloud in his *Sunlit Thunderhead*, accentuating ridged square lines where you would expect billowing circles. Dick Evans creates a dichromatic painting with brush strokes similar to Cezanne, but adds a flare of contrast by using the complimentary colors red and green.

One common element of these works is the portrayal of the vast space that is the West. But how can something so grand be captured in a small canvas? These accomplished artists have mastered the task in a pleasing and practical way.



Mark Knudsen, *Mile 95*, acrylic, 7' x 2', 2005.  
(Courtesy of Meridian International Center)

Mark Knudsen, an artist from Utah, takes on this intimidating project with great skill and within a mere 24 to 30 inches of canvas. Knudsen paints with a realism approach. Instead of painting "a pretty picture" he paints the land the way it is: harsh and unyielding.

The accessories he inserts into his paintings bring you to the scene.

Where traditional landscape painters select a gorgeous mountainside or waterway, Knudsen picks a spot by the side of the road. He includes the pavement of the road, the white lines, the rumble strips and all. Even a mile marker, in *Mile 95*, is invited into the painting.

In his *Pas de Deux* two red Holstein cows are centered in a field by the side of the road. They are almost the same color as the dirt they walk along - Knudsen refused to paint more popular black Holsteins when it is the red cows that are native to Utah.

"It doesn't need to be romanticized," Knudsen explained in an interview. In his artist statement he wrote, "The desert country of the American West is too large, too wild, and too gorgeous to be encompassed by traditional landscape painting." *Mile 95* and *Pas de Deux* are far from traditional and certainly portray the breathtaking experience of seeing the Great American West.

Other artists in the show have an entirely different approach to painting. The prominent reds, yellows and browns seen at first glance invoke passion. But upon taking a deeper look, the viewer is enticed to feel the calm beauty that is suspended by purples, blues and greens.

One particular artist who so vividly brings this balance of complimentary colors to life is Susan Brearey. Currently living in Vermont, Brearey has spent most of her life in the West and has been painting for over ten years.

Her images appear primitive and yet the technique can hardly be called simplistic. Partially inspired by cave paintings in Lascaux, France, but mostly inspired by the West, Brearey is well known for her rendering of animals.

Brearey's painting *Blue Deer in Sienna* is composed using oil and wax on wood veneer. She says the grain of the wood guides the drawings. You can see this clearly as the swirls of translucent oil glide through the grains, staining them in just the right places.

The natural wood surface creates a forest-like ambience that draws the viewer into the deer's surroundings. A swirl of green following the grain to the right of the deer resembles a tree and suggests that the deer is in a forest. As the background of the painting is primarily composed of warm colors, reds and oranges, it speaks in an almost forbidding tone. The deer stands as a blue-green creature, cooling the intensity of the background and letting the viewer know that it is soft and gentle.

Brearey's contrast of serene cool colors and vibrant warm colors tells the viewer to enjoy the intense beauty of the wild, but warns us to leave it alone. In an interview with the artist, Brearey explained that she chooses

to show the deer and other animals in their own habitat and in a way that will make people want to protect the wilderness. It seems that she has done just that.

Taking another turn, as this exhibit does very well, there are quite a number of modern style paintings. One notable modern style artist is Lisa Nankivil. A native of Minneapolis, Nankivil has traveled through the West often with her family and horses. She described part of her inspiration as the sensation of "driving with the windows down and the wind blowing our hair into tangles, all the glory of the West [flying] past our truck."

The landscapes Nankivil rode past are what she endeavors to capture in her works. In the striking horizontal line painting *Valley of Fires Road – Red Rock Canyon*, Nankivil purposefully reminds the viewer of the horizon line.

The countless layers of paint add a depth similar to levels in a landscape. When asked how she begins such a complex painting, Nankivil explained that sometimes the blank canvas is too daunting and she'll have her kids throw some paint on it just to get it started. Because of this, the paintings often have elements such as diagonal lines or even circles underneath the finished works. Even though these are not obviously visible to the eye, they help give the painting a feeling of movement and energy through the layers.

Some of the techniques Nankivil uses include taking a painted edge of cardboard and placing it on the canvas, dripping solvent on the painting and stopping it at a line, and using a blade to paint or scrape into the layers. The intricacy of this painting is boundless, but it is not calculated to be precise, as some modern paintings are. It is meant to be alive and free.

Nankivil's ideas draw from a favorite passage by John Berger, which states, "Home is where the vertical meets the horizontal." In Nankivil's paintings the horizontal line represents where we are in the world. By standing before the painting, the viewer makes the vertical line, which represents where we stand in the world. In this way, Nankivil engages her audience to become a part of the American West.

The immeasurable talent that lines the walls of this exhibit is simply wonderful. I could have gazed at several of the paintings for hours, only beginning to take in the layers of detail and passion. Though it may sound jarring to have such a wide variety of styles and colors, *Out West: The Great American Landscape* is truly unified by the individual spiritual journey that viewers experience as they travel through the exhibit.

Audrey Albright is an assistant editor for *The World & I Online*.