



Maura Allen | Today's West

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Maura Allen becomes both participant and spectator to interpret contemporary western life

By **Bonnie Gangelhoff**



An observer once called painter Maura Allen “the Warhol of the West” because she incorporates the same serigraph process that the famous pop artist used while offering viewers an imaginative take on the western way of life today. Of course, there are several major distinctions between Warhol and the Colorado-based artist. With 30 years of experience as a black-and-white photographer, Allen uses all of her own

photographs as reference material for her paintings. And rather than high-profile celebrities like Marilyn Monroe, Allen’s imagery captures ordinary folk, such as ranchers, riders, and rodeo cowboys. Her photographic images become the jumping-off points for her multilayered, acrylic artworks.

As this story was going to press, Allen was busy in her Denver-area studio preparing paintings for several upcoming museum and gallery shows. This month the Pearce Museum in Corsicana, TX, features a solo show of her works focused on the Lewis and Clark expedition. The museum also presents Allen’s work in a group show, titled *A New Look at the West*, opening in October. And in December, Bolam Gallery in Truckee, CA, includes her paintings in a group show.

In some ways Allen carries on the traditions of 19th-century artists like Charles M. Russell and Frederic Remington by emphasizing core values still associated with the West of the 21st century—strength, individualism, perseverance. In fact, she considers herself part of today’s movement toward defining the New West in art. “The New West in art celebrates a mix of styles, ranging from the traditional to the contemporary, all showcasing the West—its traditions, people, and the land they call home,” Allen says.

To effectively communicate the idea of the New West, Allen spends time, from one day to a week or more, participating in the culture and activities of western life, whether in the rodeo ring or on a cattle drive. An experience she had on a cattle drive in southern Arizona inspired one of her favorite paintings, *SPRING FEVER*. She had agreed to assist the trail boss in herding cattle from one pasture to another on the ranch. She worked with the team to keep the cows moving forward. If there was a stray, she rode out and brought it back to the herd. When there was a sudden downpour, the trail boss, Colt, took shelter under a small grove of trees, and Allen snapped a photograph. “As the clouds started to break, I saw Colt look into the valley,” Allen says. “To me it seemed like he was looking for the light, welcoming the relief of spring showers.”



Once back in her studio, she began creating *SPRING FEVER* by building the background with alternating layers of pink, pearl, blue-gray, and silver paint reminiscent of the arid Arizona landscape. To accomplish this effect, she applied paint and glazes, alternately sanding the surface and building it back up until the texture and feel of the piece satisfied her. Allen then used a serigraph, or screen-printed, image to create a shower of subtle flowers in a spring color palette that both created depth and integrated the background layer. Next she painted a silhouette of Colt as a solid, bold shape.

Within the shape, she built up additional layers by adding and removing color. “The final textured elements like the sun-bleached highlights on Colt’s face, hat, and jacket were painted in to create that spring glow,” Allen explains.

Some of the artist’s inspiration arises within the first 24 hours that she is on location, and some comes only after she spends significant time getting to know the individuals and their relationships with each other. When it comes to the New West, one area Allen finds particularly interesting is the family and how traditions are passed down. For example, while visiting a New Mexico ranch a few years ago, she watched as a father explained to his young son how to care for a horse. This slice-of-life experience inspired Allen’s sculpture COWBOY

CODE X. She began the piece with a branding iron and then placed eight handmade ceramic rings onto the rod. “The rings represent traditions or lessons passed down from generation to generation, from handling a herd and understanding why your spurs should live on your boots to how to help out during your first calving season and the circle of life,” Allen says.

Part of this interest in family, Allen says, may stem from her own background. She grew up in Menlo Park, CA, the fifth of eight children in a tight-knit family. Her father was an entrepreneurial businessman who owned his own brokerage firm; her mother was an artist with more than a few creative ways of raising her large brood. Allen recalls that the family’s living room had no furniture other than four Ping-Pong-size tables. Each table was piled high with art-making supplies—paints, beads, glue guns, construction paper, and wallpaper sample books. After school her sisters and brothers invited friends to come and make art at the tables. The hallway leading to the children’s bedrooms sported a leopard-skin rug, and the walls were covered in burlap so the kids could hang up their artworks.

Allen’s mother also color-coded each of the eight children’s belongings, starting with the color of their eight separate bedroom doors. Young Maura chose pink, so her door was pink as were her sheets, wallpaper, backpack, toothbrush, hairbrush, and various other possessions. If a rogue hairbrush landed on the kitchen counter, her mother knew immediately to whom it belonged.

To this day Allen remains intrigued by colors. “When I visit a place, some of the strongest impressions I leave with are the colors of the locale,” she says. “Back in the studio, I mix a palette to remind myself of what I saw and experienced and then give

each color a name. When I use the color in a piece, I am reminded of the feeling of the place all over again.” For example, her customized palette includes the color Red Dirt, inspired by the rocks near Moab, UT. Another color, Idaho Gold, is inspired by the vast stretches of sun-bleached grass in that state. A third, Big Sky Blue, is inspired by the Montana sky from Livingston to Missoula.

In addition to her early creative life at home, Allen remembers field trips to museums as a child, including one to nearby Stanford University’s Cantor Art Center, where she first saw the legendary photographic images by Eadweard Muybridge that capture a horse galloping frame by frame. Seen together, the images convey a sense of motion. In pieces like DESERT BLOOM and COUNTING COWS [see page 112], Allen creates a similar sense of motion. “Muybridge’s series shows the power of the silhouette and movement,” she says. “For me, Josef Albers’ color theory also comes into play—optical sensations can be created using various color combinations and changing arrangement and proportion. These are what I call ghost images that appear in the background of my pieces. By repeating an image in different positions and using different color intensities and proportions, I create a sense of movement.”

Allen returned to the Stanford campus for college, majoring in classics while taking elective courses in photography. Reflecting today on her degree, Allen says that the emphasis in the classics major was on the study of civilizations and the interplay of art, literature, government, songs, stories, and daily life as well as how “these layers in society came together.” Events and circumstances change over time, Allen says, but human values, principles that shape lives, and universal traits such as pride, perseverance, love, community, and connection are timeless.

This approach to ancient societies provides the artist with a lens to view these themes in today’s West. “Oftentimes, people ask me if the images I paint are from another century, from a bygone era,” Allen says. “This is the West today, I say—a place where neighbor helps neighbor, where the land inspires awe and serves as the source of our food, a place where the day doesn’t end when the sun goes down. The art I create reminds me that I am part of all of that. I hope that it reminds viewers, too.”

Representation

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