

# Texas Artists: In a Lone Star State of Mind

By ROSEMARY CARSTENS



The distinctive identity of Texas harks back to 1836, when the people of this territory declared their independence from Mexico and created, as its tourism bureau still boasts today, “a whole other country.” Nine years later, Texas became the 28th state in the Union. In your imagination, combine New England, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois: that’s the actual size of Texas, which is also the country’s second most populous state. Anything *that* big is bound to foster tall tales: Mention Texas and iconic images flash through the mind faster than a rodeo rider rounding a barrel. Unfortunately, much of what we know of Texas comes from films, books, and music. Think cowboy shoot-em-ups. Think Larry McMurtry novels. Think Nanci Griffith crooning “I’m in a lone star state of mind ...”

Beyond these myths, in fact, is a state of architecturally original city skylines, world-class museums, and skillfully rendered art. The first of three selling exhibitions in a series titled *Texas Traditions* is on view now through September 4 at Heritage Auction Galleries in Dallas, to be followed by one in October at InSight Gallery in Fredericksburg, Texas, and then a final one in November at Ventana Fine Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Curator Michael Duty, who is Heritage’s director of art of the American West and has worked in this field more than 30 years, explains, “We wanted to present living Texas artists of the highest caliber who, as visual historians, show a genuine interest in portraying this state.” Each of the 36 artists selected is sending one or more pieces to each venue and will attend most, if not all, of the three opening celebrations.

A remarkable range of subject matter, styles, and media is on display, guaranteed to impress anyone not already familiar with Texas’s art scene. While it’s not

possible to discuss every exhibitor, it’s useful to highlight a handful who represent this project’s diversity and appeal.

## LANDSCAPES

Texas’s landscape is usually envisioned as rugged — sparsely decorated with tumbleweeds, purple sage, and prickly pear cactus. In reality, its topography, climate, foliage, and wildlife are extremely varied: The east’s pine forests contrast with the west’s cactus, agave, and yucca, while the grassy plains of the north differ considerably from the semi-arid brush to the south.

To paint a landscape requires the use of visual metaphor to articulate a particular moment in time when the light strikes the land in a memorable way and inspires the artist to replicate it. Those who paint nature take on the challenge of imbuing an image with the awe they



TALLIE MOORE (B. 1933)  
*THREE MESAS*  
2008, OIL ON CANVAS, 47 x 56 IN.



CHUCK RAWLE (B. 1945)

*SILVER RIBBONS*

2009, OIL ON LINEN ON BOARD, 30 X 40 IN.



have experienced themselves. Three artists in *Texas Traditions* — Tallie Moore (b. 1933), Chuck Rawle (b. 1945), and Nancy Bush (b. 1947) — wield the tools of their craft to achieve highly individual interpretations of the West's geography.

Moore honors the vastness, colors, and textures of her home state's big sky, a limitless horizon-to-horizon patch of blue. As seen in *Three Mesas*, one of the many vistas she prays will "remain for eternity," Moore often places her horizon low and closely crops her windswept cloud formations to emphasize the sky's dominance. In the distance, typical afternoon squalls scour the mesas, intensifying the picture's sense of motion and vitality. Moore frequently edits out any signs of human activity, preferring the scene to be revealed in a totally natural state.

Beneath the arching Western sky, water is scarcer than gold. The land, the people, the wildlife, and the

NANCY BUSH (B. 1947)

*ASCENDING MOON*

2009, OIL ON BELGIAN LINEN, 11 X 14 IN.



ROY ANDERSEN (B. 1930)  
**BUFFALO COMANCHE**  
 2006, OIL ON LINEN, 32 x 48 IN.

livestock all revel in rain's arrival and cluster around every river, creek, or stream. For a Texan *plein air* painter such as Chuck Rawle, water brings vitality to any scene, shapes the land, and literally reflects the surrounding grandeur. Rawle wanders the West regularly and can be stopped in his tracks by a scene such as that portrayed in *Silver Ribbons*, which was painted near Moran, Wyoming. This showcases the aptly named Snake River as it loops through the Buffalo River Valley, shadowed by passing clouds and backed by the dramatic Wind Mountains. In an era when most Americans live in or near cities, an image like *Silver Ribbons* reminds us of this country's stunning natural beauty and of just how adventurous the pioneer settlers were to move west into such forbidding terrain.

As night falls, the moon slides into the darkening sky and sheds its muted glow across the landscape, creating a mysterious, ethereal vision that contrasts sharply with daylight's intensity. In *Ascending Moon*, Nancy Bush records this trans-



WAYNE BAIZE (B. 1943)  
**SUNSET TRAIL**  
 1999, OIL ON LINEN, 16 x 20 IN.

BRUCE GREENE (b. 1953)  
*A Cowboy's Commute*  
2006, OIL ON LINEN, 42 X 56 IN.

formation by employing atmospheric middle values that convey a soft, dreamlike quality. She then enhances these meditative aspects through skillful layering of transparent and opaque glazes. The results are sheer poetry, imbued with an eloquence that resonates with anyone who recalls such a dusky, lonely night.

#### THE WESTERN NARRATIVE

Participating in this season's exhibitions are several artists who portray the history, culture, lore, and workday lives of people living west of the Mississippi River, especially Texans. The trio discussed here offer a glimpse into the broad range of figurative subjects that form the heart of *Texas Traditions*.

Roy Andersen (b. 1930) is best known for his vibrant depictions of the Plains Indians' horse culture. For the past decade he has focused on the Comanche and Kiowa, once renowned for their raids into northern Mexico, as seen in *Buffalo Comanche*. Andersen researches his scenes thoroughly, striving for authentic detail in every aspect from attire to weapons and tack. He is quick to note that his favored backdrops of dramatically illuminated skies and cloud formations are not imagined — these are, in fact, the astonishing colors, shapes, and textures one sees above the West Texas desert. Andersen truly loves a good story and he brings this narrative passion to his paintings, creating a suspense that keeps the viewer wondering, "What happened next?"

Ever since Cortés brought them to North America around 1519, horses have contributed crucially to the continent's development by



transporting people, guiding livestock, tilling the land, and exploring terrain, not to mention providing companionship. Emblematic of the West's pioneering spirit, the horse features prominently in the art of Wayne Baize (b. 1943), who has used both the camera and the brush to document four decades of ranch life, always highlighting the essential synchronicity between land, animals, and humans. Baize skillfully uses patterns of light, color, and contrast to draw viewers more deeply into his compositions. In *Sunset Trail*, for example, we can discern the two cowboys' camaraderie as they slowly move their horses up a dusty trail through rough terrain. Such a scene is typical for Baize, perhaps reflecting his own nostalgia for simpler times.

Beyond Native Americans, horses, and cattle, you can't think "Texas" without cowboys. Bruce Greene (b. 1953) not only paints and sculpts; he also cowboys. Every spring he heads to the historic JA Ranch in Texas's Panhandle, where he helps brand cattle and gains inspiration for his art. Greene feels that painting from life is critical to capturing the energy of everyday activities, and indeed the lively, impressionistic brushwork and textured surfaces employed in such canvases as *A Cowboy's Commute* bring his scenes to life. Cresting a rise from the river below, the men depicted here sit easily in their saddles, neither posed nor static. We sense immediately the horses' movements beneath them, even as we feel the ever-present west wind whipping up the low-lying grasses and dust along the trail.

#### THE SINGULAR IMAGE

While paintings of nature or figures often allow viewers to imagine themselves in the scene, something quite different happens when an artist zooms in to sculpt a moment, or when a still-life artist moves in close for an eye-level look at an object or grouping. Here there is no wiggle room, no ambiguity, and an intense intimacy can arise between viewer and artwork.

JIM EPLER (b. 1950)  
*JACK RABBITS I AND II*  
2009, BRONZE, LIFESIZE (RESPECTIVELY, 8 3/8 AND 19 IN. HIGH)





TERESA ELLIOTT (B. 1953)  
**YOUNG LONGHORN BULL**  
 2007, OIL ON CANVAS, 36 X 60 IN.

Three *Texas Traditions* exhibitors who have mastered this sense of focus are the painter-sculptor Jim Eppler (b. 1950) and painters Teresa Elliott (b. 1953) and Kyle Polzin (b. 1974).

Eppler has watched animals closely since he was a boy. Anyone who has ever observed jackrabbits in their harsh desert habitat will immediately recognize his genius for capturing their essence in the bronze *Jack Rabbits I and II*. Wily and muscular, the jack freezes in just this manner when it senses a predator; its nose quivers and its long ears twitch like antennae as it seeks to assess the danger. In a millisecond, it can charge away, its powerful legs seemingly eating up the ground beneath it.

No Texas story would be complete without longhorn cattle, of course. Descended from a wild breed that had adapted to the plains' parched conditions, these creatures nearly became extinct in the early 1900s. For painter Teresa Elliott, longhorns are icons symbolizing the tough independence of Texas and Texans, and portraying them has become her specialty. Her classical training in drawing and portraiture has served her well in *Young Longhorn Bull*, where Elliott's eye for detail instantly conveys this youngster's formidably muscular power. In its way, this bull encapsulates the slogan "Don't Mess with Texas": Posed against a vast sky and nearly featureless horizon, its form speaks volumes about the legendary ruggedness of the West.

There are also inanimate objects that epitomize the Texas lifestyle, a challenge taken on admirably by Kyle Polzin. Still lifes are often overlooked, but, as Mark Doty notes in his meditative essay *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (2001), "A still life is more like a poem than it is like a portrait." In figurative works, he reminds us, we are "concerned with the experience of animation," with the action that is occurring or might occur. But with still life, we engage directly with what is right there, often something quite commonplace. Polzin bypasses classicized arrangements of flowers and porcelain in favor of the work-worn items used on

KYLE POLZIN (B. 1974)  
**CALL OF THE TRAIL**  
 2010, OIL ON CANVAS, 16 X 28 IN.



#### A PUBLICATION, TOO

The tour of *Texas Traditions* this autumn is accompanied by a handsome publication that opens with Michael Duty's comprehensive overview of Texas art from its earliest days, followed by art historian Susan Hallsten McGarry's elegant dossiers on each of the 36 exhibitors. McGarry demonstrates how each artist has drawn on his or her personal vision of Texas to create images that honor a lifestyle and environment found nowhere else on earth. Dramatic, inventive, and inspired, these artworks are sure to bring fresh energy and new perspectives to their new owners' collections. ■

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**Information:** *Texas Traditions* is on view through September 4 at *Heritage Auction Galleries* (1518 Slocum Street, Dallas, TX 75207, 800.872.6467, [ha.com](http://ha.com)); October 1-24 at *InSight Gallery* (244 West Main Street, Fredericksburg, TX 78624, 830.997.9920, [insightgallery.com](http://insightgallery.com)); and November 19-28 at *Ventana Fine Art* (400 Canyon Road, Santa Fe, NM 87501, 505.983.8815, [ventanafineart.com](http://ventanafineart.com)). The accompanying 250-page, hard-cover book is available for \$85 from *Fresco Fine Art Publications* ([frescobooks.com](http://frescobooks.com)).