

Sullivan Goss

AN AMERICAN GALLERY

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The Search for the Modern West

JANUARY 5 - FEBRUARY 20,, 2023

OPENING RECEPTION:

1ST THURSDAY, JANUARY 5TH | FROM 5-8 pm

SANTA BARBARA, CA - For its first exhibition of 2023, Sullivan Goss will present *The Search for the Modern West*, an exhibition of paintings, sculptures and prints that speak to the mythology, history, and the real life experience in the West as interpreted by Modern and contemporary artists.

The West – and here, we mean the *American* West – is not one place, one thing, or one culture. For many Americans – both those who live there and those who don't – it can feel more like an idea or a sensibility. It has its own loose fitting mythology and a rich set of symbols and archetypes. Think horns and hats, mesas and mountains, light and space. Think *GIANT*. This reflects the fact that it was delivered with good branding through popular illustration and imagery by the likes of Frederic Remington, Charles Russell, and Maynard Dixon. It was poeticized and published by Charles Lummis, the first editor of the *L.A. Times* and then later publisher of his of own periodical, *The Land of Sunshine*. Venturing further back into art history, it was given scale and romance by the likes of Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt. It was codified in the global imagination by that uniquely popular American export, the Western movie. It was associated with music that the Industry calls Country Western. In short, it is familiar territory.

The Search for the Modern West is an art exhibition that seeks to expand, or maybe even escape, this all-too-familiar story. It will not be a show full of images of stoic cowboys or noble Native Americans, though audiences can expect a subtle nod here and there to that shared iconography. First, the exhibition intends to be Modern and contemporary. The earliest work in the exhibition dates to the 1940s and is by the French and Mexican poet and Surrealist painter, ALICE RAHON (1904-1987). She paints a pared down nocturnal landscape with a red moon looking down on a platoon of black triangular shapes that feel either like conifer trees or mountains. She was inspired both by the cave paintings at Altamira in France as well as her travels through California and Mexico. She is joined, across the room, by a large work called *Blue Corn Window, Taos, 1974-1977* by LEE MULLICAN (1919-1998) who was closely

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associated with her husband, Wolfgang Paalen. Both sought out a mysticism – or perhaps a spirituality and space for idealized imaginative practice – that they associated with pre-Modern life.

New York-turned-San Francisco artist SIDNEY GORDIN (1918-1996) was also influenced by the Abstract Surrealist movement of the late 1930s. He arrives – perhaps by accident – at shapes and materials that may resonate with some Western folks.

A companion exhibition is currently on view at the L.A. County Museum of Art, where one can see the works of a group of painters from New Mexico known as the **Transcendental Painting Group**. Working with certain similar ideas around the same time, they were inspired by the spaciousness, the light: the spiritually-charged atmosphere of the place itself.

The Sullivan Goss exhibition also nods to this group with works by CHRIS WINFIELD, whose subtle glazes and luminescent surfaces share their interest in geometry and sensation. MARIA RENDÓN likewise seeks both a higher plane and a place for intuition in her practice. CIEL BERMGAN moved from Santa Barbara to New Mexico and changed her name to CIEL, the French word for “sky.” She developed representational and abstract bodies of work there, some with an eye towards the long view of the human journey.

Each artist relates differently to the West. Some artists try to express the history of its culture. Among these, ANGELA PERKO, HOLLI HARMON, and DAVE LEFNER each have something interesting to say. Each looks at the layering of cultural symbols across time.

In the 50s, such portrayals were more straightforward. When artists like RICHARD HAINES (1906-1984), EDGAR EWING (1913-2006) and JEAN SWIGGETT (1913-2006) arrived to California from the midwest, they fell in love with their new home, drinking deep from the well of local cultural symbols to paint the women of a Southwestern village, a Spanish saddle, and an uncanny vision of chiles and peppers.

Can Western art be abstract? Ask CHANNING PEAKE (1913-2006) or HARVEY LEEPA (1887-1977).

HANK PITCHER, PHOEBE BRUNNER, MARY-AUSTIN KLEIN, and NICOLE STRASBURG are essentially native contemporary Westerners. Phoebe paints her memory of all the places she has explored as a horseback rider, skier, and traveler. Mary-Austin Klein travels by bike and is most interested in the Western clarity of light. Hank usually paints his home, but is represented in this exhibition by a painting of the Colorado Rockies, with the distinctive mountains we know all too well from a certain brand of beer in the background. Rocky mountain vibes attend NATHAN HUFF’s *Encounter* too, if from a certain distance.

It’s to be hoped that some of the imagery will be as familiar as *Storm Cloud* by WERNER DREWES (1899-1985). It is also hoped that some of the work will challenge expectations as much as NELSON PARRISH’s *RNP X RL Foil*.

ARTISTS INCLUDED IN THE EXHIBITION:

Natalie Arnoldi | Ciel Bergman | Werner Drewes | Edgar Ewing | Sidney Gordin | Richard Haines | Nathan Huff | Mary-Austin Klein | Harvey Leepa | Lee Mullican | R. Nelson Parrish | Channing Peake | Hank Pitcher | Alice Rahon | Maria Rendón | Nicole Strasburg | Jean Swiggett | Chris Winfield

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