

Reimagining history at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center

By Michael Paglia

published: November 27, 2008



"The Flaying," by Edie Winograde, archival inkjet on watercolor paper.



"Combat," by Walt Kuhn, oil on canvas.

Details:

Through January 4,
Colorado Springs
Fine Arts Center, 30
West Dale Street,
Colorado Springs, 1-
719-634-5583,
www.csfineartscenter.org
.For a slide show of
these exhibits, go to
westword.com/slideshow.

Subject(s):

[Blake Milteer](#), [Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center](#),
[Walt Kuhn](#), [Edie Winograde](#)

Colorado — and its prominent place in romantic notions about the Old West — has achieved celebrity status. It's one of the reasons we're invaded year-round by armies of scenic paparazzi seeking to hunt down picturesque landscapes and take candid photos of them. It might be an embarrassment to some, but fantasies about cowboys and Indians have as much to do with Colorado's international fame as do the mountains, and the familiar imagery is not only part of the history of Hollywood, but the history of art, too.

It was with this in mind that Blake Milteer, curator of 19th-, 20th- and 21st-century art at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, came up with a pair of marvelous shows that function both individually and in consort: ***Walt Kuhn: An Imaginary History of the West*** and ***Place and Time: Reenactment Pageant Photographs by Edie Winograde***.

"The Fine Arts Center has a long history of showing Western-themed art, and I wanted to pick up on that," Milteer says. "When I first got here last year, I found the Kuhns in storage and knew I wanted to do a show with them."

Kuhn is an early modernist who worked in the first part of the 20th century. His pieces from that series range from fairly abstract to very abstract and are based on the artist's memories of an earlier trip out west. Winograde, a contemporary postmodernist active right now, also does work about the role of memory in the depiction of the American West, but she appropriates other people's memories rather than her own.

Milteer has installed the two shows in an interconnected set of rooms on the second floor of the FAC, just off the main north/south corridor.

Born in 1877 in New York, Kuhn began his career as a professional illustrator while still a teenager. In 1899, after attending art school in Brooklyn, his fascination for the West led him to San Francisco, where he worked as a cartoonist. In 1901 he decamped for Paris and studied

briefly at the Académie Colarossi before going on to the Royal Academy in Munich. Returning to New York in 1903, he quickly made a name for himself and was one of the founders of the Association of American Painters and Sculptors; this led to his being among the organizers of the famous *Armory Show* of 1913, which introduced European abstraction to American audiences.

The paintings in *An Imaginary History of the West* were painted between 1918 and 1920 and demonstrate how much Kuhn had learned from the European modernists, particularly Cézanne.

This is interesting, considering that this style was not the one that made him famous. Kuhn was a realist, and his work is associated with American scene painting and not European vanguard art. Even more interesting is the fact that Kuhn did not destroy these paintings later in his life, since that's what he typically did. Instead, they remained in his studio until he died, in 1949, and were given by his widow to the FAC in 1950. They may have never been shown in their entirety before.

Milteer notes that the paintings vary stylistically; some are almost cubist, while others are more expressionist. Nonetheless, they are all somewhat alike. In each, Kuhn has laid down an abstract ground, using lots of toned-up colors; then, on top, he has used black lines to define the subjects. In the sublime "Indians and Cavalry," smears of pink, blue and brown, along with a lot of white, are used to bolster a highly abstracted depiction of Indians and soldiers on horseback exchanging gunfire. The swatches of color are barely held in place by the lines, which makes sense, because Kuhn put on the colors first and then defined his subjects. In the magnificent "Combat," he aggressively attacks the canvas with scumbled brushwork in strong tones. Scribbled marks across the middle convey a group of Indians on horseback before melting into the background.

The spectacular if diminutive Kuhn paintings — sketches, really — are the perfect setup for the monumental Winograde photos on view in the adjacent spaces. Winograde was born in California but spent a dozen years in New York working as a professional artist before moving to Denver last year. She's been a fine-art photographer since she was a teenager, but this current series dates back only to 1999. It was at that time that she had a residency at the Millay Farm in upstate New York and met Vicki Lindner, a writer who hails from Lusk, Wyoming. Lindner wanted to do an article about the re-creation pageant in Lusk called the "Legend of Rawhide" and asked Winograde to take some documentary photos to accompany it. While in Lusk, Winograde also did some fine-art photos for herself; it was these that started the series.

Because the "Legend of Rawhide" was reenacted at night, Winograde used a slow shutter speed, causing the images to be blurry. This was the perfect device to both create distance between her and her subjects and to hide the details, making them seem like photos of actual events as opposed to re-creations of them. "I liked the blurriness because they made them look like paintings," Winograde says. In one of the most powerful of the images, "The Flaying," Winograde captures actors playing Indians dancing around a bound man who is the star of the play and will pretend to be skinned alive.

The Lusk photos led to several others, with Winograde traveling the country in search of these elaborate re-creations, all of which are held in the middle of nowhere. They differ widely, not just in their details, but in their specific approaches. In the Lewis and Clark re-creation in Montana, for instance, there's a more theatrical quality, and the actors perform before a painted set erected outside. The set blends in subtly with the actual view of the hills beyond and provides a compelling aspect.

One of the most interesting groupings comprises the dueling re-creations about the massacre of General Custer, also performed in Montana. The Indians — in this case, members of the Crow tribe — restage the "Battle on the Little Bighorn" on their reservation. Not far away, modern-day descendants of the white settlers put on "Custer's Last Stand" outside the town of Hardin. They are both memorializing the same event, but in different ways. Now, here's an ironic twist: The Crow fought *with* Custer, but in the re-creation, they are playing the Sioux who fought *against* him.

Winograde's photos exemplify postmodernism in many ways — too many, in fact, to fully explore. The most obvious is the notion of simulation, with the actors simulating historic figures and acting out simulations of historic events. But Winograde is also simulating her role, playing the part of a documentary photographer but producing non-documentary photos and recording something that is itself unreal. Plus, there's that whole postmodern hermeneutics going on. The re-creation actors are interpreting history based on previous interpretations, including Hollywood treatments of the West, while Winograde is making her own interpretations.

Milteer's pairing of these two bodies of work is brilliant and reveals a young curator who is among the top art-world talents on the Front Range and one of only a handful in the region capable of putting on a great show — or, in this case, two of them.