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WESTERN ART

C O L L E C T O R



SAGE & SOLITUDE

Painter Glenn Dean brings his stunning cowboy figures to a new solo show at The Legacy Gallery in Jackson, Wyoming.

By Michael Clawson

A crushing silence can fall over the desert. It can be terrifying and suffocating, and yet also tremendously calming and beautiful. The wind whistles in the tall grass and through clumps of sage, insects click from unseen hiding spots, and birds squawk in the distance. Listen long enough, though, and even those faint sounds fade away. It can feel like the earth is grinding to a halt on its axis, like every atom in the universe suddenly pauses, as if nothing else even exists. For one brief second, a viewer can feel completely alone in their thoughts, their skin and their spiritual being.

When Glenn Dean started painting, he focused almost entirely on landscapes, which allowed him many opportunities to paint alone in the desert, where he was suddenly explicitly aware of the “implications of human existence” and how it felt to be alone in the most profound way with nature spread out in every direction. “When you’re alone in nature, it’s such a beautiful thing,” he says. “It started feeling a little too lonely, though, so I started painting a horse and rider. I wasn’t experiencing being alone; I was experiencing it through the rider. He was an extension of how I felt in the landscape.”

While some viewers look on Dean’s solitary figures as liberated characters, unbound from nature’s reluctant grasp, others can feel an existential dread as the desert seems to stretch into eternity and the silence swallows them up. That’s what makes his works so remarkable: not only are they stunning in composition, color and subject, but they ask the viewer to contemplate the desert and what it means to them. “I feel like it’s a spiritual connection just being out there with no distractions,



The Courtship, oil, 32 x 40"

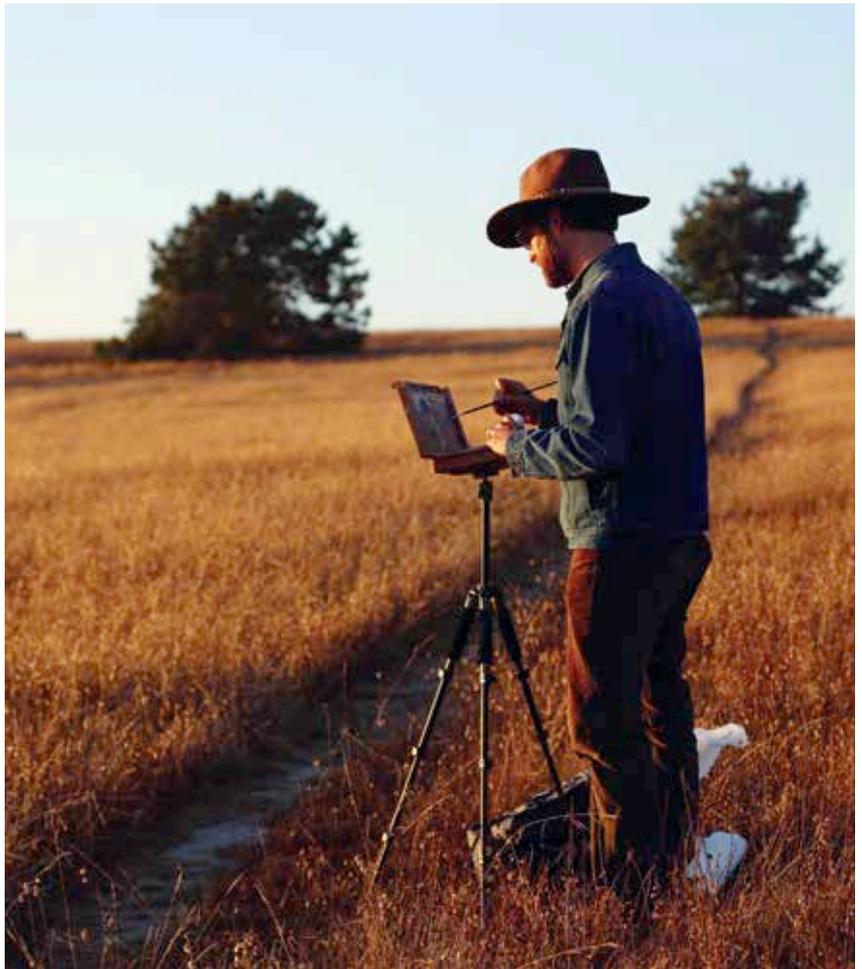


just you and the wide-open space in front of you," Dean says from his studio in Cambria, California. "You're going to form a relationship of sorts with these elements of nature, these experiences. You can feel them more when you're out there by yourself."

Dean will present new desert scenes, many of them with single figures lost in thought as they share canvas space with the landscape, in a new solo show opening September 16 at the Legacy Gallery in Jackson, Wyoming. The painter is aiming for about 15 major works, which would be a significant body of new work for the artist, who has been rising steadily through Western art with his carefully and expertly painted cowboy scenes.

Desert vistas and quiet cowboys are a long way from where Dean thought he would be. In high school, the painter was a semi-professional bodyboarder and he always intended to explore a career as a professional athlete. (It should be noted here, that if anything comes close to the desert's vast silence and size, it is the ocean, both of which Dean has mastered, albeit in very different mediums—brush and board.) When his parents moved to Tucson, Arizona, they didn't want to cut short their son's ambitions, so he stayed in California and lived with a friend, whose parents became his legal guardians. "They made a choice to let me stay and pursue what I was interested in, and I was very grateful for that choice," he adds.

In Tucson, his mother started a plein air painting group. When Dean would come out to visit, he would attend painting sessions. He had always been artistic and had a natural drawing ability, but plein



Glenn Dean painting plein air on location.



The Scout, oil, 18 x 36"



Sage and Solitude, oil, 24 x 30"

air flipped a switch somewhere within him. "I just loved the experience trying to paint what was in front of me. It kicked off my huge level of interest to pursue outdoor painting," he says. "Suddenly I became really interested in Edgar Payne and William Wendt, and all these California guys who were showing me what could be achieved with paint." And the rest is history, although he admits he still has a bodyboard in the house.

The pre-figure years of Dean's career are remarkable, especially when you see the quality of the work: coastal scenes that sing, desert views that hearken back to Maynard Dixon and Payne, and nuanced paintings of California that are composed brilliantly and full of gorgeous light.

But as he kept painting, his brush was urging his hand into new territories. "Painting the landscape gave me direction to pursue, wholeheartedly, a beautiful and inexhaustible subject matter that can never be fully understood. I have always had an interest in pursuing figurative work, but early on I decided to narrow my focus to landscape painting as a primary study," Dean says, adding that his desire to paint figures came quickly and completely. "I guess I never really felt like I had permission before, being a landscape painter. These figurative works have opened up a whole new world of imagery and possibilities for new ideas in my work. It was just about timing, I suppose. The subject of horse and rider in the Western landscape seems a very natural

integration, in fact, a belonging. I'm just trying to make the best paintings that I can. I don't feel like I reinvented myself or anything like that. I just feel like I'm applying the next thing that my work was calling for."

Today Dean's cowboy images are recognized from coast to coast for their careful rendering of his subjects against magnificent landscapes. New works for the show include *The Cowpuncher*, featuring a figure watching over cattle that linger in the distance of a grassy field, and *Tranquility*, its main figure in a tan poncho as he leads his horse past a hazy sunset.

"*Cowpuncher* was done in Paso Robles, California, with that classic summer dry grass. The cattle in the distance really helped the



Tranquility, oil, 24 x 30"

composition, mostly because they're not painted with any importance, but they are presented to show you that the cowboy is there watching them," the artist says. "For *Tranquility*, I found that time of day really interesting. It's that time of day right before it gets dark and there's still a glow in the sky. I love the grays and the subtle amount of color happening in the sky."

In *The Courtship*, Dean seems to channel N.C. Wyeth when he paints his cowboy figure posed heroically in front of a cloud that never seems to end, even as it rises out of the back of the painting. On the left side of the work there is a female figure with a horse—the white of her blouse and the white coat of the horse play with the clouds and horizon line. The piece has a soft glow to it, a glow that would seem almost unnatural if you had never been to the desert to see it for yourself. "I was searching for a tonality on that one," he explains. "I was trying to find a palette that was natural to what

you might see in nature."

Fellow California painter Logan Maxwell Hagege, a friend of the artist who has shown with him on numerous occasions, says Dean's work strikes a chord within collectors and viewers, as well as other artists. "Glenn Dean fills a void in the Western world by creating work that is refined, simplified, painterly, well drawn and masterfully composed. His work is powerful and gentle all at the same time. His compositions are imaginative and unique. His years of work in the field painting countless on-location landscape studies has informed his studio work to a degree that can't be taught. This skill must be learned through trial and error as well as through painting miles and miles of canvas," Hagege says. "Glenn is one of the most dedicated artists I have ever met. His work ethic is strong and his self-critiquing is tough. I have seen him destroy what seemed to be perfectly fine paintings in my eyes. Yet, these canvases

didn't hold up to his personal standards."

Dean admits this himself, that he's a hard critic of his work. In *Sage and Solitude*, featuring a female figure riding through an endless sea of short sagebrush, he struggled to find the right focal point. "I wanted the sage to be just as important as the rider. The same with the background, but I can't paint them all as the focal point," he says. "I had to make decision on where to unify the sage, and where to join the patterns together and create larger shapes. I didn't get too caught up in the detail, mostly because my goal is to achieve the illusion of detail without getting up close and painting individual hairs or veins. I'm more interested in the overall feeling of the picture."

In the end, *Sage and Solitude* finds the perfect balance with everything at play and it, like almost all of his works, allows the viewer to ponder the desert, its silent presence and the isolated figures within it. Although Dean paints



Glenn Dean mixes paint in his California studio.



The Cowpuncher, oil, 30 x 36"

regularly with other artists—including Hagege, Josh Elliott and others—it's not hard to picture him out in the desert alone with only a brush, palette and canvas. It's also not hard to picture the peaceful tranquility and contemplative nature of his subjects originating from the artist himself, grafts of his own ideals implanted onto his characters.

"Life is short, and I'm just painting what I can while I'm here," he says. "That keeps me at the easel. I'm just trying to do the best work I can, and learning more as I go."

The desert might be a vast ocean of beautiful and at times unsettling silence, but there is a loud voice coming from Dean's works. And it's asking viewers to ponder the scenery for just a minute or two longer. 🌵

Glenn Dean – One Man Show

When: September 16-25, 2016

Where: The Legacy Gallery, 75 N. Cache,
Jackson, WY 83001

Information: (307) 733-2353,
www.legacygallery.com