

**“CANON SIN NOMBRE” - Billy Schenck, Artist
Bob Schneeweiss, Provisional Docent, 2016**



I grew up in NYC, and the only canyons I knew were formed by the grey skyscrapers of Manhattan. When I was 10 my family took a transcontinental road-trip, and as a result of that, I fell in love with the West and started collecting the posters of the Santa Fe Railroad. Those posters depict canyons, and expanses of the American West in a recognizable style (Southwestern Pop). The western films and TV shows of the era formed my romanticized reality.

The artist Billy Schenck (born 1947) grew up (in what he claims) rural America and studied at the Kansas City Art Institute (BFA 1969) and the Columbus College of Art and Design. He too was drawn to the heroism, the expanse and the ideal of the West. In his current life he lives in Santa Fe New Mexico on his Double Standard Ranch where he paints and also competes in Equestrian Ranch Sorting Events. He has held the title of World Champion.

Schenck has been exploring images of the West for over four decades. His favorite subjects are gunslingers, cowboys, and rodeo riders. As the Pop Art style of painting bloomed in New York in the 1960s led by Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, and Robert Rauschenberg, Schenck moved east. Fueled by his greatest influence film director Sergio Leone's Spaghetti westerns, and the palette of Maynard Dixon, his works were well received. His paintings then and now tell tales of cattleman, and indigenous people, and the vast open landscapes of the West. He does this by blending what is eternal and what is contemporary.

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Armed with his camera, he goes out to shoot (he is a gunslinger with a Nikon) scenes, and then when creating a canvas he fuses photography and Pop Art. Pop Art flourished on the East Coast and blended consumerism and mass media into a style that made often a harsh comment. Schenck's painting made him unique in the Western genre. Amy Abrams in Schenck in the 21st Century says "... he debunks long standing myths of the cowboy and his country while celebrating what is truly magnificent about the land."

Canon Sin Nombre oil on canvas (49 X69") is included in the Contemporary Art Collection of the Museum. It was painted in 1985, a gift by Steven and Ursula De Christopher from the estate of Stephen De Christopher Sr.

Canon is currently is on display in the Singer Gallery of the Denney Wing. The canvas depicts a lone Native American on horseback in what is Canyon De Chelly (AZ). The name of the painting is intended not to identify a specific location and therefore makes a universal statement about the subject. Schenck has fused 4 photo slides with rearranged elements and then painted in the style of Pop Art. He told me in an interview that he has a self-designed system of "paint by numbers".

As one approaches the painting, the canyon walls/landscape are reminiscent of those Santa Fe Railroad posters of the 1950s. Adobe hues cover the walls and the floor of the canyon. The walls are also accented in a dark brown. The far walls are purple and lavender. The foreground is the only portion of the canvas with vegetation, a low shrubbery. This line creates a visual boarder. Bold grey clouds dominate the sky. The largest cloud forms a downward arrow that points to the central subject of the painting the man on his horse.

In this vast space appears the rider, alone a Native American, but I hypothesize from the look on his face he is looking at someone. His head is not down, but it is not erect, up or proud... he looks tired and resigned. Since he has a spear (hunting weapon) one might assume he is returning from a hunt for food and has nothing to show for his effort. Although the rider and his horse are in native regalia the treatment makes him look modern and not from another time on the frontier.

12/6/16

References:

Billy Schenck by Holly Henderson Cowboys and Indians 2015
The Return of Bill Schenck By Johnny D. Boggs Summer/Fall 2011
Schenck in the 21st Century Amy Abrams
Info Sheet Palm Springs Art Museum
Telephone conversation/interview with artist 11/18/16

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INTERVIEW WITH BILL SCHENCK on 11/18/16

I had sent Mr. Schenck an email asking several questions ... I had hoped that he might respond; but the fact that he called was cause for real excitement. During our 10-15 minute conversation we covered several topics. Here are my notes and impressions.

Mr. Schenck was unpretentious and admitted he had little technical ability (computer related) and therefore; he was unable to perfect his images in photorealism, so he happily by default practiced his talents in pop art.

I asked him about the title of the painting Canon Sin Nombre. He explained that because the elements are rearranged in truth the image is not of Canyon de Chelly but rather a place of his invention.

His paintings are created from as many as 14 slides, in an order of his choosing. He laughed that there are people who look at this images and swear that they know where this painting was created. He doesn't correct them; he doesn't want to insult the buyer. I clearly got the impression that painting for him was as much art as it was commerce. Schenck's paintings and prints afford him a very fine living, and he is very appreciative.

Schenck also shared that he has development a personal system of "paint by numbers." He said that he projects the slides on to the canvas, and then he draws and labels each small area with a code of color, and then paints the colors in. He said the results are "reductive".

The rider on the horse, Schenck said he dressed a friend of his and had him pose for the photos/slides. He made it sound it was like all in a day's work.

Bob Schneeweiss
Provisional Docent