

Schenck - NEW EDIT 8/2/19

“Lost Angel Flakes,” 1982, Billy Schenck, Oil on canvas

Spotlight Presentation by Joan Behrmann, 2019



Billy Schenck, American, 1947-

Billy Schenck stands squarely in the crossroad—a dusty, desert crossroad fringed by purple mountains- between Pop art and contemporary Western art.

Some writers have credited him with inventing this genre, as the originator of hundreds of artworks peopled by cowboys both authentic and dubious, buxom cowgirls, pensive Native Americans, recognizable celebrities, perhaps a Rolls or a palomino...framed by Western hills.

But the roots of Schenck’s Wild West are planted in the blend of mass media and consumerism that we know as Pop Art.

Schenck, whose work is in museums and galleries worldwide as well as in homes of major collectors, has told interviewers that a huge early influence was the “spaghetti Westerns” of film director Sergio Leone. “Some people find God,” he says. “I found Sergio Leone.”

Those images of a square-jawed Clint Eastwood --- coupled with early exposure to Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s soup cans and Roy Lichtenstein’s comic-book Ben Day dots—make up the life work that Schenck fans collect today.

Schenck fell in love early with a mythical, iconic West—but, he says, “I can’t help throwing a hand grenade at it.”

Born in rural Ohio, his early childhood was marked by a tragic car accident in which his father was killed. Early influences were Disney characters like Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge, and he recalls being enthralled by cartoons with their sense of greatly enlarged sound effects—ZAM! BLAM!

He says that he couldn’t get in to a “regular” school, so decided to enter the Columbus College of Art and Design, in Columbus, Ohio, in 1965.

"I had been in art school for two weeks when I was introduced to Warhol's soup cans," he recalled. "I was a clean slate."

But his first foray into that environment was not a success. Broke and at loose ends, he joined some friends on a trip to New York in 1966. Somehow —perhaps because he was tall and not unattractive—he found work on a lighting crew with Andy Warhol's coterie. The boy from Ohio plunged into the world of Nico and the Velvet Underground.

Back in art school, this time at the Kansas City Art Institute in Kansas City, Mo., he met the New York art dealer Ivan Karp and was introduced to the work of artists such as Chuck Close, Duane Hansen and John Clem.

After earning his BFA in 1969, he returned to New York. There he began painting Pop interpretations of classic ceiling paintings by such Old World masters as Raphael.

Then --along came Sergio Leone, whose influence on Schenck's work cannot be overestimated.

Referring to himself as a "hardcore leftwing hippie," at first he was hesitant to explore the Western genre from the East Coast. "Why pretend I'm a cowboy?," he recalls thinking.

But then he discovered movie stills. He began to originate "Western" art by projecting those movie images on a canvas, finding drama in the contrasts of light and shadow.

The success of his first solo show, at 24, took him by surprise. Delaying his arrival at the opening with a combination of alcohol and poker, he arrived at 4 p.m. to find it was a sellout.

Early success was followed by a downturn in his mood and his fortunes...and a decision to move West. Living first in Wyoming, then Arizona, and currently in a compound just south of Santa Fe, N.M., he found his niche as an artist.

In his search for the "authentic West," Schenck has visited movie sets, met iconic figures like Jay Silverheels ("Tonto") and traveled extensively throughout the Western states seeking subject matter for his restless imagination.

In the mid-70's, he began painting rodeo scenes, hoping to capture the masculinity, comradeship and rivalry of that milieu. Then he made the leap from observer to participant. He began riding broncs himself, until a concussion gave him double vision and ended his rodeo career.

He kept his identity a secret at rodeos, he says, wanting acceptance as one of the boys. His home contains stacks of buckles and saddles collected at rodeos... "I lived out that fantasy."

In the early '80's, Schenck began painting a series of what he calls "contemporary cowgirls,"—sexy, in-your-face women. To enhance those stories, he began using captions in his work a la Roy Lichtenstein. But while the graphic qualities of his work share similarities with Lichtenstein, his own social and political commentary differs. Today he has notebooks full of captions just waiting for the right painting to come along.

One such work is a painting of a naked, blindfolded Native American woman. The caption: "Pocahontas Awaiting the Arrival of Western Civilization.".

Another illustrates the male/female mashup in which he delights. In a work entitled “Those Wolves,” a cowboy and his gal cling to each other. The cowboy says, “Those wolves were terrifying.” Her reply: “It’s okay.”

Schenck says that he worked in this genre many years before the film “Thelma and Louise.” “Hollywood was way behind me.”

His work includes a graffiti series, using front pages of the National Enquirer as a backdrop. There’s also a series of surfer girls, which he explains are heavily manipulated in Photoshop.

Today, horses and cattle roam his Santa Fe compound, Double Standard Ranch. He has become an expert - and a multiple prize-winner—in ranch sorting, an activity in which men on horseback separate cattle into pens. It’s a team sport, with riders racing against the clock.

Now that Schenck is truly a Westerner, he no longer needs to rely on movie stills. He calls his creative process “paint by numbers,” adding that this is really a classic approach to Pop art. Multiple photographic slides are projected onto a canvas, and he breaks down the image in terms of light and shadow. He seeks what he calls a “raking light.”

Each section is numbered, paints are mixed and the sections filled in. He uses 35 mm. film, never digital, believing that film lends more luminosity to the image.

Photographs of his home studio show great stacks of slide carousels.

Turning to the work now hanging in the Chase Wing of the Palm Springs Art Museum, we learn that “Lost Angel Flakes” is a promised gift of Irv and Elaine Sitron.

(In this series, Schenck also painted a “Flamingo Flakes” and “Suicide Flakes.”)

This piece rewards long and careful attention, since it holds multiple layers of meaning.

Taking close-up photos with an iPhone is helpful in revealing details not readily noticeable to a casual viewer.

Let’s start with his use of the Kellogg’s brand, but misspelled as “Kellog’s.” Schenck says that this was an intentional misspelling, to avoid a charge of trademark infringement. But this could be another Schenck put-on. It’s not unprecedented for artists to incorporate brands into their work. Warhol used the Campbell’s brand name exactly as seen in supermarkets. Ray Johnson has used the “Lucky Strike” logo with its traditional green and red framework in a James Dean portrait.

And why “Kellog’s”? “Pop art is always about appropriation,” Schenck says. At the time he painted “Lost Angel Flakes,” Kellogg’s cereal boxes reproduced images of popular athletes, with the implied promise that the consumer would run faster, jump higher, and be a healthier, all-around person.

“I wanted to do something really demented,” Schenck said.

Apparently, the Kellogg’s brand still seeks that linkage. In 2018, photos of the medal-winning USA Olympics gymnastics team graced boxes of Kellogg’s Special K cereal.

The title “Lost Angel Flakes” refers to Los Angeles, but the words themselves may directly reference this unlikely cowboy. Is he a “real” cowboy, dressed for rugged outdoor work? Or is he a drugstore cowboy, with the emphasis on drugs? Check out his hatband, with the motto “I (heart) LA.”

Check out his sunglasses, which reflect a lanky figure in Western garb, leaning against a pinkish-violet Rolls Royce. And is that a price tag, or a label, hanging from the hat brim?

This “cowboy” - or perhaps we can call him a male hustler - slouches against an unseen post, wearing a multi-zippered jacket, tight-fitting jeans and a leopard-skin print T-shirt. Ever see a cowboy wear leopard skin? And could that possibly be nail polish on that languidly draped hand?

Schenck says that he posed for the photo from which this image originated, on the front porch of his home in Mesa, Az. The person leaning against the Rolls is a former girlfriend, he says, and the Rolls belonged to the gallery owner Elaine Horwich. “We borrowed that Rolls many times.”

The lettering of “Lost Angel Flakes,” with white palm trees and beige sand against a bright blue sky, was done by a cartographer hired for lettering skills. “I wanted it to look like chrome,” he adds.

What do we make of the label “Free do-it-yourself Frontal Lobotomy Kit Inside”? Here, Schenck’s tongue is planted firmly in his cheek.

A frontal lobotomy is a once popular surgical procedure, now seldom used, in which connections in the brain’s prefrontal cortex are severed in an effort to treat mental disorders. The belief was that cutting certain nerves in the brain could eliminate excess emotion and stabilize a mentally ill patient.

A “frontal lobotomy kit” would exist only in the mind of a rebellious, let’s-jerk-the-establishment-around kind of artist.

And what do we make of the wording on the advertising banner in the upper right corner ---“A Very Smart Start Fortified with 8 Essential Drugs”? This banner could be on a cereal box at your corner market—just substitute the word “Vitamins” for “Drugs.”

This is vintage Schenck, portraying a “cowboy” who could lead you in all the wrong directions. Is the cowboy the “Lost Angel”? And is he dealing in “flakes”? It’s a Western image, with a twist.

Another cowboy currently roams the Palm Springs Art Museum. He’s in Rodney Graham’s “Paradoxical Western Scene,” part of the “Unsettled” exhibit.

Graham’s piece, painted in 2006, is a painted aluminum lightbox, based on a color transparency.

Based in Vancouver, Graham (1949- ) has been termed a photographic conceptualist. He has made short films in a Western genre, and is known for a theme of people trapped in cycles of repetition.

Graham often uses himself as a model. Like Schenck, he himself was the model for this work.

In “Paradoxical Western Scene,” El Capitan, a peak in Yosemite National Park, looms in the background. A man we assume is a cowboy wears a backpack and carries a pistol in a low-slung holster. He is shown striding by a tree on which a “Wanted/Reward” poster bearing his image is tacked. That image is repeated within the poster...on and on unto infinity.

The piece actually references the cover of an album by country-Western singer Marty Robbins, “More Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs.” On that cover, Robbins wears cowboy garb and carries a gun. Behind him, a Wanted poster is tacked to a tree.

On the surface, Graham’s work is yet another cowboy-Western image. But Graham, like Schenck, asks the viewer to think twice about this cliché. Is Graham’s “cowboy” ready to ride the range, or is this another tongue-in-cheek take on the contemporary Western art genre? Viewers walk away with a smile—a gift from an artist who uses a slightly different medium to share a tilted view of the world.

Viewers might also draw parallels with a “Lost Angel Flakes” neighbor in the Chase Wing, Armando Lerma’s “Shoplifter.” Like “Lost Angel Flakes,” Lerma’s work asks viewers to re-examine stereotypes and take a more discerning look, challenging their perceptions.

On adult tours, docents might emphasize this connection with “Shoplifter,” just a few feet away.

As noted above, photos taken on visitors’ iPhones will bring details of this work to light that are difficult to see with the naked eye.

Possible questions: “What do you notice that you didn’t at first glance?”  
“What is the artist’s intention?”

Sharing a story: the artist has ridden in rodeos, is a champion ranch sorter, runs horses and cattle on his compound.

In my opinion, this piece is not suitable for a school tour.

Schenck can poke fun at a mythical West, but he loves it, too. His Native Americans are dignified, never satirical. His landscapes capture the brilliance of a desert sunset.

Currently, he’s working on pieces he calls “nocturnes,” pushing himself to use a different palette. He cites the artist Frank Tenney Johnson (1874-1939), known for his scenes of moonlit Western nights, as an inspiration.

A collector as well as an artist, Schenck has amassed many early works by New Mexican artists. He holds back some of his own works from the art market, and has talked about someday turning his Santa Fe compound into a museum.

He travels extensively for shows and lectures, but at home, “I’m a recluse.” With a collection of some 3,500 movie DVDs, he often watches a movie a day. They’re not Hollywood blockbusters; he prefers somewhat obscure foreign films by little-known directors.

Says Schenck, “I don’t watch comic book movies.”

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