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they all share, is exploring the concept of the frontier, a meeting point or boundary that is always shifting.

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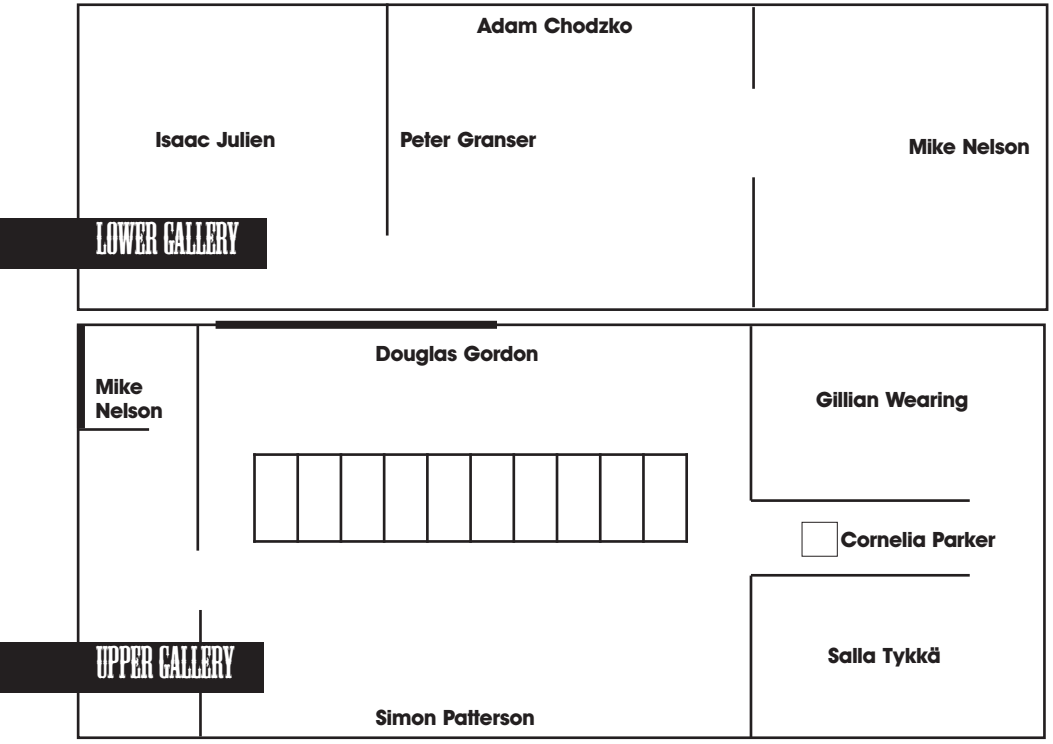

print the legend
the myth of the West
Patricia Bickers
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Print the Legend

The Myth of the West

ADAM CHODZKO
DOUGLAS GORDON
PETER GRANSER
ISAAC JULIEN
MIKE NELSON
CORNELIA PARKER
SIMON PATTERSON
SALLA TYKKÄ
GILLIAN WEARING

Curated by PATRICIA BICKERS

Exhibition 1 March – 4 May 2008
Always free

The Fruitmarket **Gallery**

"THIS IS THE WEST, SIR. WHEN THE LEGEND BECOMES FACT, PRINT THE LEGEND."

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (Dir. John Ford), 1962

The title of *Print the Legend* comes from this much-quoted line referring to the story of the person who was believed to have shot the outlaw Liberty Valance, but didn't. The line's appeal comes from its broader application to any fiction that gains the status of legend, and the fact that the American West is the place where myths are made. For this exhibition, the phrase encapsulates the myth of the West as an imagined place. The exhibiting artists all critically respond to westerns, but in different ways, exploring themes such as narrative, conflict, fiction and truth, justice and injustice, frontiers and desire in light of the myth of the West. Guest curator Patricia Bickers, an art historian, lecturer, writer and editor of *Art Monthly*, brings her knowledge about, and longstanding passion for, westerns to The Fruitmarket Gallery in this exhibition of installations, sculpture, photography and film.

As Bickers contends in the catalogue, the myth of the West existed long before anyone actually wrote or produced a western. Ideal worlds such as Paradise, the Garden of Eden, and Shangri-La were invented because people wanted to

believe in them. All westerns are set within, and framed by, the myth of the West, configured as both geographical entity and idea: an American West of boundless horizons which becomes the 'Wild West' for those outside it. Although North American Easterners were directly responsible for this construct, Europeans also contributed to the formation of the idea and reality of the West. This 'special relationship' continues in *Print the Legend*, with Northern European artists who maintain a fascination with the western and the West, but make work that is structured by critical and geographical distance.

Installations, sculptures, photographs and films projected both inside and outside the Gallery all incorporate the western as a form and reference point, a subject ready for deconstruction. Set in wasteland across the street from the Gallery, the enormous expanse of white screen visible during the day might make us feel uncomfortable as we stand on a busy road, and become too self-conscious as we look for something that we can't find on this blank canvas. As the sun goes down, however, **Douglas Gordon**'s *Five Year Drive-By (The Searchers)* (1995) comes up, and we witness the projection of the classic western *The Searchers* (starring John Wayne) slowed down to match the narrative framework of the plot: the literal enactment of the five-year search will take, frame by frame, five years. Drivers stopping at the traffic lights might experience a momentary vision of the vast horizon of the West.

Other allusions to the never-ending expanse of the West through the western are opened up in the work of **Simon Patterson** and **Adam Chodzko**. Patterson has written about 'the paradox of the all-encompassing frame and limitless horizons' in the western, and in his wall drawing, *Western: The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1997), he references the concept of the frame and horizon, portraying a metaphorical moral landscape through the representation of the Kodak™ Gray Scale, an exposure-testing format used in photography. The names of the three main actors in the film, Lee Marvin (who plays the outlaw Liberty Valance), John Wayne (the gunfighter) and James Stewart (the lawyer), are painted in black, grey and white, respectively, to denote their relative ethics, and good and bad actions – the equivalent of the black hat and the white hat in early westerns. Real rather than metaphorical landscapes are conjured up in Chodzko's *Better Scenery* (1999). Set in a grey north London car park, one sign transports viewers to the wild west of sun-bleached Flagstaff, Arizona, where an equivalent sign bearing directions to the same north London car park completes the link, conceptually bridging contrasting geographies.

A more surreal take on the capacity of western landscapes to overwhelm and envelop is experienced in **Mike Nelson**'s installation *Untitled No.22 (High Plains Drifter)* (1993/2001/2008) in which he references the film *High Plains Drifter*, but also painting, and in particular the work of the artist Niele Toroni, whose signature style is the measured repetition of a single brushstroke. In *High Plains Drifter*, Clint Eastwood's character takes revenge on the citizens of Lago, getting them to paint their own town red, transforming it into a living hell. In this way, Nelson shifts from abstract art to popular culture, and extends the parody inherent in the first western Eastwood both starred in and directed. On entering the installation, we are led into a otherworldly place. Like the myth of the West, Nelson's work changes the way we look at the world afterwards; the legacy of the installation colours the world outside it.

The internal landscape of the mind is fertile ground for the artists in *Print the Legend*. For North Americans, the myth of the West offered an opportunity to start over, as a place where alternative identities could be explored. The invention of photography coincided with the formation of the West, and the photographic studio provided clean, respectable clothing and accoutrements for their subjects, who were otherwise engaged in the hard work of survival from working the land rather than concerned about developing their wardrobes. Today, the work of both **Peter Granser** and **Gillian Wearing** concentrates on the realisation of fantasy through dress. Granser's photographs capturing prosperous middle-class German cowboys re-enacting the myth, calmly situated within their natural habitats, whether standing outside a *biergarten* (beer garden) selling Erdinger, as in *Family* (2003), or on horseback in traffic on a suburban German street as in *Man on Horse* (2003). The subjects in Wearing's *The Regulators' Vision* (1995/6), on the other hand, engage in frenetic play dressed as cowboys running amok, and pretending to shoot each other. But both Granser's and Wearing's subjects reveal more about themselves while in disguise, living within a fiction, than in the real world.

Iconic objects also play an important part in our constructions of the West. In many of these works, the gun registers on several levels: everyday accessory, protection for the inhabitants of the West, and most crucially, as a straightforward, terrifying killing machine. With *Embryo Firearms* (1995) **Cornelia Parker** transforms the objects used in the first phase of production of the Colt .45 into baby guns placed in uterine positions. In *Lasso* (2000), **Salla Tykkä** uses the action of the lasso to attract the girl to the window, but the focus of her gaze falls on the body of the cowboy who expertly spins the lasso to the soundtrack from *Once Upon a Time in the West*. The idea that we always want what we can't have, and that desire rises with the impossibility of attainment is also a metaphor of the idea of the West explored in **Isaac Julien**'s *The Long Road to Mazatlán* (1999). His rich, multi-layered, triple-screen projection, choreographed by the dancer Javier de Frutos, places the homoerotic tensions so repressed in westerns at the centre of this work. The main subjects, young beautiful Latino men, begin their journey when they eye each other up at the cattle market, and move through the exotic and exquisite world of contemporary western fantasy, complete with swimming pools, saloon girls, a mariachi band and an albino python.

For the artists in *Print the Legend* the attractions of the western and the myth of the West are many and varied. Like the myth of the West itself, the works in the exhibition offer the viewer a space in which to project their own responses to what appears strange and captivating. Indeed, for Patricia Bickers, *Print the Legend* acknowledges the continuing power of the myth of the West as both image and metaphor, used and abused by U.S. politicians to wage unjust wars at home and abroad. The artists in *Print the Legend* have been drawn to the western, to paraphrase Simon Patterson, not because of what it tells us about the past, but because of what it tells us about the present. Perhaps what is most compelling for these artists, and what