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Review of *Heart of the West: New Painting and Sculpture of the American West* Edited by Laura Caruso, with essays by James H. Nottage, Ann Scarlett Daley, Gordon McConnell, and Mindy A. Besaw

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*Heart of the West: New Painting and Sculpture of the American West.* Edited by Laura Caruso, with essays by James H. Nottage, Ann Scarlett Daley, Gordon McConnell, and Mindy A. Besaw. Denver: Institute of Western American Art, Denver Art Museum, 2007. 64 pp. Illustrations. \$21.95 paper.

Since the valorization of abstraction beginning at midcentury, Western realist art has suffered from the sense that it is too regional, nostalgic, conventional, and populist to be considered a significant and relevant contribution to the contemporary American pictorial tradition. Richly illustrated and drawing upon the resources of the Denver Art Museum's Institute of Western American Art, as well as an exhibition of drawings and sculptures by George Carlson, *Heart of the West* attempts to reposition contemporary Western realist

art and situate this work as an important and persistent contribution to American art. In addition to an introduction by the director of the Institute of Western American Art, four essays limn the continuities and differences within Western art, outline the importance of the Contemporary Realism Group, discuss in detail the work of Carlson, and consider the notion of the artist as explorer.

Although the individual essays vary in focus, they are unified by two major themes. The first is an effort to enlarge and enrich ideas about Western art. The second is the notion that "the influences exerted by the landscape upon artists have remained relatively consistent ever since the first painters encountered the West" (Daley). Thus, in the book as in the galleries, contemporary works appear alongside historic Western art so that continuities as well as ruptures—of style, of landscape, of the landscape genre itself—are teased out by the juxtapositions. This comparative strategy makes clear how certain iconic aspects of the landscape, thought to be immutable, have been altered by industrial expansion, "gnawed at by the new," as Gordon McConnell writes. The juxtapositions indicate too the extent to which human figures have become increasingly rare in contemporary Western art, which is itself a comment on the changing nature of the American West. The pairing of old and new also enables the realization of how varied the terrain—and therefore the art—of the West is, and helps to convey a sense of the region visually and, to the extent possible, experientially. Seeing the old and new in conjunction further makes clear, as James Nottage notes about Carlson's work, how critical close observation of and sensitivity to the landscape and its people are to Western representational art.

*Heart of the West*, while by no means a comprehensive survey of Western art, is a good introduction to the history and depth of the contemporary Western realist collection of the Denver Art Museum. More importantly, *Heart of the West* provides its readers with a sense of rediscovering a landscape long thought to be familiar, demonstrating that rather than being

relegated to the past, Western realist art is a vital, continuing, and expanding tradition.

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