

COMMENT

susanburnstine.com

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AMERICAN CONNECTION

With a style rooted in classical Western imagery, **Maura Allen** has spent two decades documenting the through line that connects America's ranches, their landscapes and their wranglers – despite the distances between them. Susan Burnstine reports.

Maura Allen's striking images of the American West chronicle the people, the land and the bonds between them. For the past 20 years she has created several stunning bodies of work that explore ranch life and rodeos, and while the themes in her latest series, *Rooted*, are unchanged, it exudes an even deeper reverence for the individuals, culture, animals and untamed beauty of the land.

Allen was raised in Menlo Park in the San Francisco Bay area. During high school, she bought her first camera with babysitting money and immediately fell

in love with black & white photography and darkroom printing. After studying in Rome she returned to California and started seeing the American West anew. 'I began to explore how our idea of the West was shaped, both the real and the romanticised,' she says.

During this time, Allen began working in several artistic disciplines including printmaking, painting, kiln glass and photography. By working on all of these disciplines in unison, she found that the act of creating in each approach would inform the other. Initially, she'd visit a ranch or rodeo to capture moments that would fuel her paintings, but she soon adopted a more holistic approach.

'After taking a workshop with Sam Abell, I realised that I was intentionally, but unnecessarily, viewing the two worlds as distinctly different. I build my paintings from the back forward, incorporating Old West elements to create a history and feeling of depth. I learned from Sam that a great image is setting first, subject second. Separation in photography is the cornerstone for a strong image; the same is true in painting. And, of course, elements such as gesture and composition and how that can create energy.'

During the mid-1990s Allen wanted to find a way to combine her love of printmaking and painting with photography.

'I discovered the answer in the basement of the International Center for Photography in New York at an Andy Warhol exhibition showing how he used photographic images (his own and those he appropriated) to create serigraphs (silkscreens) and then used those in original paintings or limited-edition prints,' she says. That inspiration led her on the path to creating multimedia work featuring the American West, which allowed her to gain representation in multiple galleries.

Allen's documentation of the American West has resulted in a 20-year path of discovery. 'From Texas to Utah, Montana to New Mexico, I began to sense that the people and the work were connected; there were



differences, of course, but there was a palpable "through line" in the way cowboys and cowgirls interacted, how the land and animals were revered,' she says. 'I also saw how on many ranches, the landscape and wranglers mirror each other, wild and untamed, dry and dusty. Even with hundreds of miles between them, I knew these people were connected – rooted to the land, each other and themselves.'

Allen's style often calls back to 19th and early 20th-century classic American landscape and

portrait photography from the West, thus making it perfectly suited for black & white. 'I'm drawn to graphic forms – in photography, in painting, in my life. Black & white photography, for me, provides that strong graphic sensibility,' she says. 'I use a Leica M10 Monochrom, as well as cameras that photograph in colour (Leica M10-R and Leica SL2), but I programme those to display the scene in the viewfinder in black & white. I've done that for 20-plus years – it has helped train

my eye (and brain) to see shapes and graphic forms first and that, in turn, directly informs how I paint.'

Allen's current project, *Natural Order*, explores the role of women in the American West today. For that work, she's creating images that expand viewers' awareness of women and their role in ranching in the West. In the autumn her work is part of a two-person show at Gallery Mar in Park City, Utah.

mauraallenphotography.com
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EXHIBITIONS USA

DENVER

Denver Art Museum
1 May to 28 August
Modern Women/Modern Vision: Works from the Bank of America Collection
denverartmuseum.org

FAIRFIELD

Fairfield University Art Museum
Until 18 June
Adger Cowans: Sense and Sensibility
fairfield.edu

HOUSTON

Catherine Couturier Gallery
Until 14 May
Maggie Taylor: Internal Logic
catherinecouturier.com

NEW YORK CITY

Museum of Modern Art
Until 2 October
Our Selves: Photographs by Women Artists from Helen Kornblum
moma.org

OBERLIN

Allen Memorial Art Museum
Until 7 August
Between Background and Foreground
amam.oberlin.edu

