

LET ICONS BE ICONS

THE ART OF R TOM GILLEON
C.M. RUSSELL MUSEUM

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C.M. RUSSELL MUSEUM
GREAT FALLS, MONTANA

AUGUST 16 - DECEMBER 28, 2013



C.M. RUSSELL MUSEUM
400 13th Street North Great Falls, Montana 59401
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Let Icons Be Icons: The Art of R. Tom Gilleon

August 16 - December 28, 2013

C.M. Russell Museum
Michael Duchemin, Executive Director
Sarah L. Burt, Chan and Clara Ferguson Chief Curator
400 13th Street North
Great Falls, Montana 59401
406-727-8787 • cmrussell.org

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Oil, 20 1/4 x 30 3/8"
Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma

Sengai Gibon
Circle, Triangle, and Square, Edo Period, early 19th Century
Ink on Paper, 11 1/8 x 18 15/16"
Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo

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R. TOM GILLEON
Tribal Triumvirate
 2007, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 120"
 Private Collection, Atlanta, Georgia

Like many of Gilleon's titles, *Tribal Triumvirate* makes reference to the number three. This is not a religious allusion to the holy trinity, but rather to cardinal numbers and their mysteriously frequent appearance in art and the natural world.

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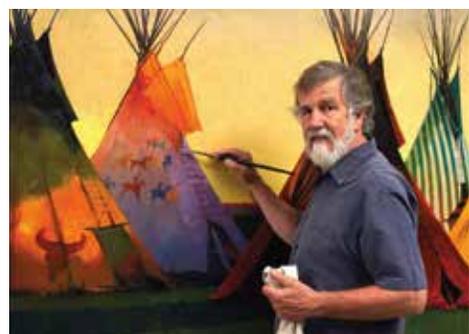
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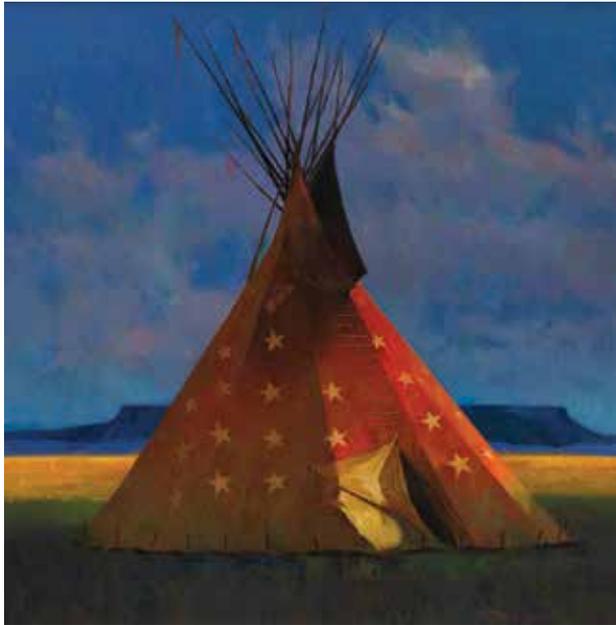
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R. Tom Gilleon



R. TOM GILLEON
Star Lodge
2006, Oil on Canvas, 48 x 48"
C.M. Russell Museum, Gift of Dan Gilleon

Patterned after a Blackfoot tipi design, *Star Lodge* is framed against the brilliance of the day's last light. The darkening sky will soon be decorated with stars of its own.

The painting was featured on the January 2006 cover of *Southwest Art* and is in the permanent collection of the C.M. Russell Museum.

PREFACE

By Michael Duchemin, Ph.D.

As the C.M. Russell Museum prepares to celebrate its 60th anniversary, I can think of no exhibition more fitting than **Let Icons Be Icons: The Art of R. Tom Gilleon**. I am honored to present *Let Icons Be Icons* as the first exhibition opening during my tenure as executive director of the C.M. Russell Museum.

I was new to Great Falls in March 2013 when I met Tom Gilleon. I was attending the silent auction and preview for *The Russell: The Sale to Benefit the C.M. Russell Museum* as part of a three-day interview for my current position. Museum board member Annie Thom introduced me to Tom and we chatted amiably. Annie concluded the introductions with a warning to consider carefully Tom's invitation to visit the "world-famous" Sip 'n Dip Tiki Lounge at the O'Haire Motor Inn, expressing concern that Tom might lead me astray.

Tom and I found affinity in talking about an exhibition I curated in the 1990s called *Walt Disney's Wild West*, as well as the people we know in common at Walt Disney Imagineering. Our paths crossed again the next day at the museum's *Art in Action* event, where I got to see Tom working at his easel,

experiencing firsthand his sense of color and form. Our final get-together took place during *The Russell* live auction on Saturday night, when Tom Gilleon became the highest-grossing living artist in the history of *The Russell*.

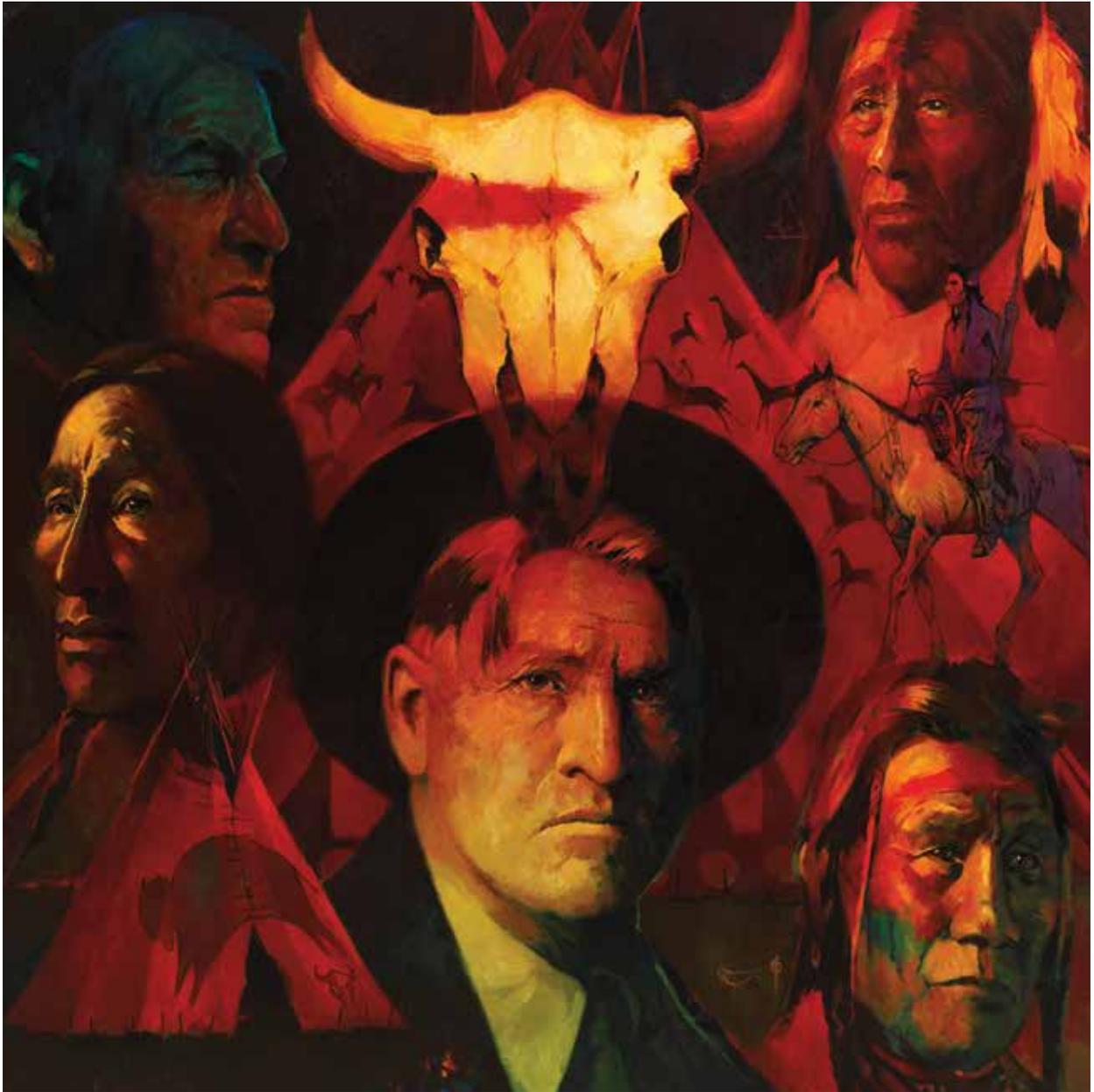
It was clear to me then that Tom would be an ideal ambassador for the C.M. Russell Museum, for Great Falls, and Montana. I looked forward to the prospect of working more closely with such an accomplished artist. Lo and behold, here we are a few months later: a dream comes true. I am particularly excited by the inclusion of Tom's first foray into the world of digital art, *Eternal Triangle*, a work that is sure to establish *Let Icons Be Icons: The Art of R. Tom Gilleon* as a breakthrough exhibition in the world of Western art.

Thank you to Mark Tarrant and our friends at Altamira Fine Art in Jackson, Wyoming, for making this exhibition possible. Enjoy the show.

Michael Duchemin, Ph.D., is executive director of the C.M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, Montana.

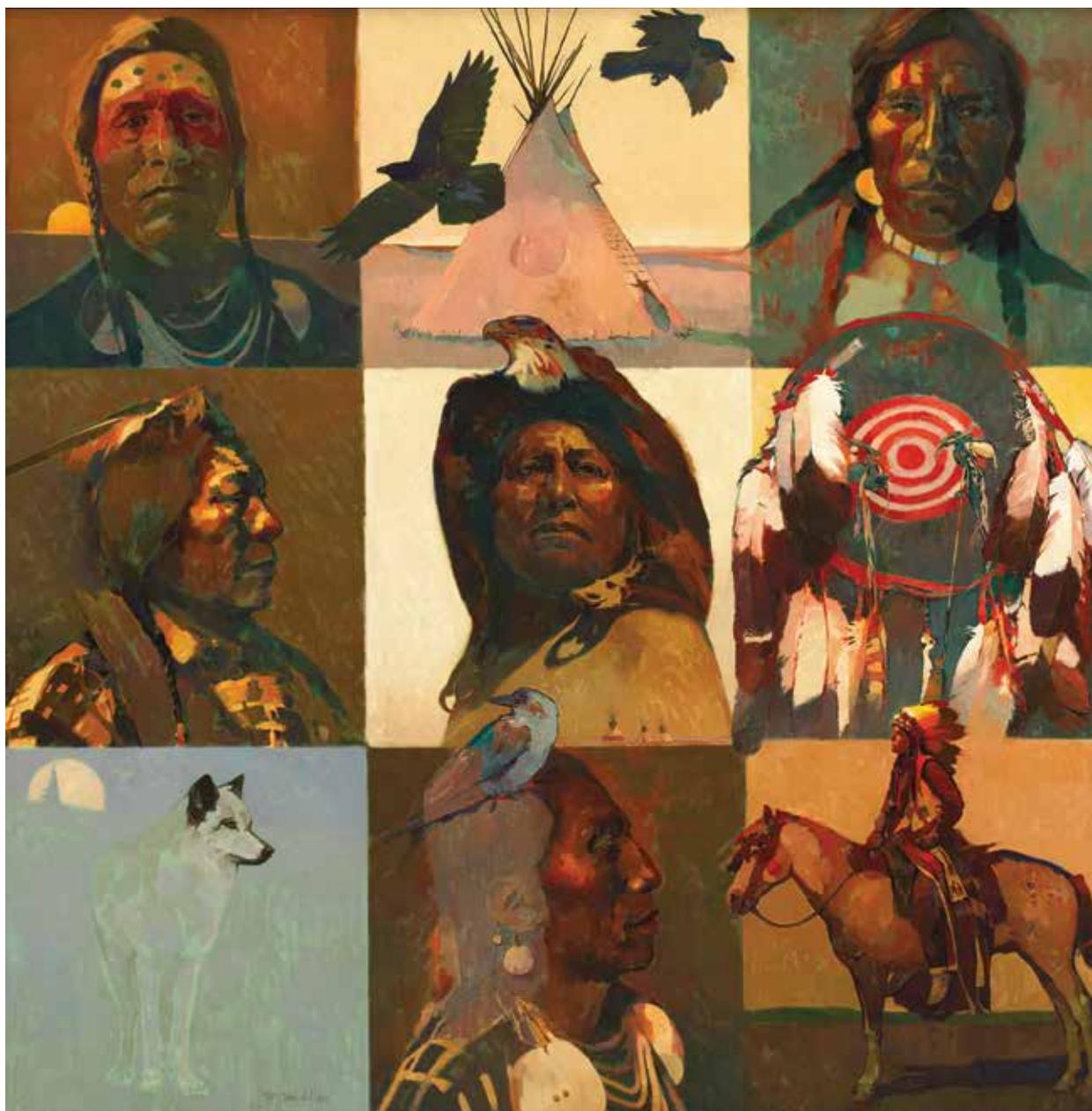
"Without tradition, art is a flock of sheep without a shepherd. Without innovation, it is a corpse."

— Winston Churchill



R. TOM GILLEON
Ah Wah Cous
2009, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Ted and Joyce Griffith, San Diego, California

The Blackfeet friends of Charlie Russell found his riding pants reminiscent of the rump of an antelope, hence his nickname "Ah Wah Cous" or "little antelope."



R. TOM GILLEON
War and Peace
2005, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Private Collection, Atlanta, Georgia

"There is but one war, the war within our hearts
between good and evil. When bullets and arrows
fly it is because good has lost and evil has won."

— Sitting Bull

"When my enemy comes do I wait until he is in my
lodge to fight him? No, I will meet him on his ground."

— Red Cloud

War and Peace is a meditation on the
complicated ethics of warfare. Is war ever just? Is
it ever unavoidable? When violence is necessary
to defend one's own life and the lives of others,
is there a right or wrong?

LET ICONS BE ICONS

By Todd Wilkinson

R. Tom Gilleon's *War and Peace* is a nine-story epic, an ennead that would make even Leo Tolstoy proud given the scope of its range. This visual tome, created by the painter who long ago adopted Montana as his home, covers a climactic sweep of Western indigenous history. Inculcated with symbolism, it sighs for a past that is no more, addresses the juxtaposition between seeking peace through appeasement and battling to defend one's own turf, and it invites us, in our 21st-century world, to engage in shared cultural remembrance.

From face-painted visages of warriors to feathers adorning a war shield and animal harbingers represented by magpies, ravens, and lone wolves, the massive 60-by-60-inch oil is yet another expression of Gilleon's iconography. Along with his widely recognized and perhaps best-known exploration of tipi motifs, Gilleon's nine-panel "grid paintings" have become his signatures.

At a time when many observers are complaining about the rigid monotony of subject matter that has come to define Western art, Gilleon's disregard for these unspoken rules serves as a counterpoint.

For art collectors the question is often posed: What is the fundamental threshold an artist must cross before she or he is considered great in a way that will stand the test of time? To some, the easiest metric used for forming an opinion is performance at auction. Using that rendered gavel price as a measurement of "investment value" in some cases is an unreliable determiner of status.

One gauge still held up as the gold standard for predicting an artist's posterity is the willingness of normally cautious museums to stage retrospectives for living artists.

For Gilleon, that moment of critical validation arrived in 2012 with a major one-man exhibition held at the Booth

Museum of the American West near Atlanta. In summer 2013, the C.M. Russell Museum in Great Falls, Montana, hosts its own Gilleon solo retrospective, highlighting forty major works borrowed from private collections. The showing, *Let Icons Be Icons: The Art of R. Tom Gilleon*, has a four-month run from August to December 2013.

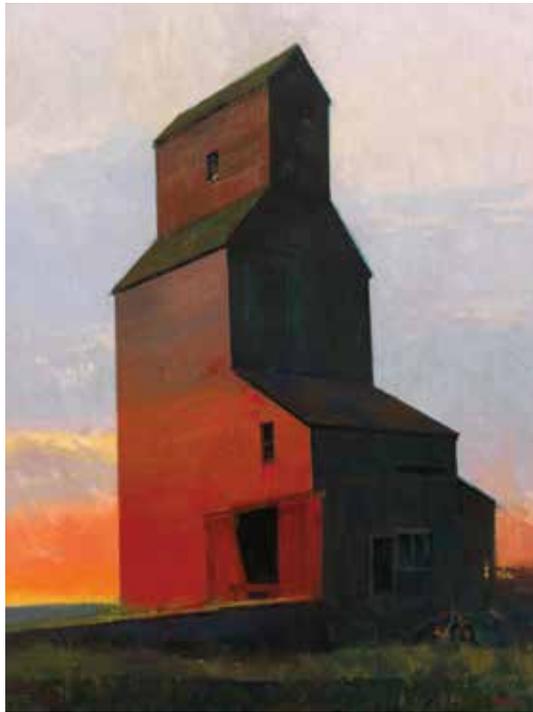
Although Gilleon has been featured in numerous one-man gallery shows, this is his first museum exhibition in Montana. Sarah Burt, the Russell Museum's chief curator, notes that although it is rare for her institution to single out living artists, Gilleon's body of work, the regard he commands, and his provocative reinterpretation of Western imagery make his formal recognition deserved and poignant.

"Technically speaking, Gilleon is a brilliant colorist. And he uses color in unusual ways to communicate the heroic qualities of Western themes, so that they are seen in new and refreshing ways," Burt says.

Mark Tarrant, owner of Altamira Fine Art in Jackson, Wyoming, describes Gilleon as one of the leading figures in Western contemporary art. "Gilleon is a master of composition and palette. His style produces an immediacy of impact on the viewer," Tarrant says. "A Gilleon

painting commands a room; there is an energy that gets projected, like the sun in the sky. His artwork creates the spirit of enchantment of the American West more powerfully and compellingly than most of what we see in traditional Western art."

Seth Hopkins, executive director of the Booth Museum, argues that Gilleon represents a new chapter in the time-honored tradition of former illustrators gaining renown as fine artists in the West. "Gilleon rejects portions of this tradition," Hopkins says. "Rather than create highly illustrative and highly detailed works that provide a



R. TOM GILLEON
Moose Jaw
2011, Oil on Canvas, 48 x 46"
Altamira Fine Art, Jackson, Wyoming

narrative story, Gilleon works to reduce detail and create hauntingly vacant compositions focusing on monumental Western shapes like tipis and grain elevators, in some ways reminiscent of the work of Edward Hopper."

Gilleon's path to the inner West is an enigmatic one. Born in 1942, he was raised in north Florida by his grandparents in the tiny outpost of Starke, near Jacksonville, and the winding banks of the Suwannee River. His heritage is a blend of the old and new world.

His granddad, a Scotsman, immigrated to the United States and became an acclaimed cabinetmaker. His grandmother was a full-blooded Cherokee, descended from the tribe traumatically and infamously uprooted from the landscape of its identity.

Growing up in a clan of athletes, Gilleon got recruited to play baseball at the University of Florida, where academically he entertained a future in architecture. Instead, he served in the Navy just prior to the Vietnam era and then utilized his draftsmanship skills to land a job with NASA's budding space program, turning out illustrations of rockets and the mechanical parts holding those crafts together.

Word of his drawing acumen circulated. While toiling as a freelance illustrator paying his dues, he came to another unexpected turn in the road: He was enlisted by the Walt Disney Company — one of just three illustrators — to help put together schematics for a new theme park proposed near Orlando. Some of the designs for Disney World originated on Gilleon's desk.

Subsequently, he was wooed to work in Disney's renowned "Imagineering Studio" in Southern California, helping to design the look of Epcot Center and then Disneyland Paris, Disneyland Tokyo, and Disneyland Hong Kong.

He also collaborated with art directors who left their marks on such films as *The Ten Commandments*, *Jaws*, and Alfred Hitchcock movies. His growing reputation

earned him coveted places on the call lists of the biggest theme-park operators in the world and, in addition, he had connections to prominent architects.

Along the way, Gilleon moonlighted as a painter and, once again, his career veered in a new direction. During the early

1980s, Gilleon and his wife attended an outdoor painting workshop in Montana and fell in love with a spectacular piece of property along the Dearborn River that snakes out of the Northern Rockies across the high plains. The couple purchased the parcel and spent nine years building a home. They paid for the construction using income they both derived from working as an illustrator and mural painter. One of Gilleon's jobs was completing matte paintings for the movie, *Dick Tracy*.

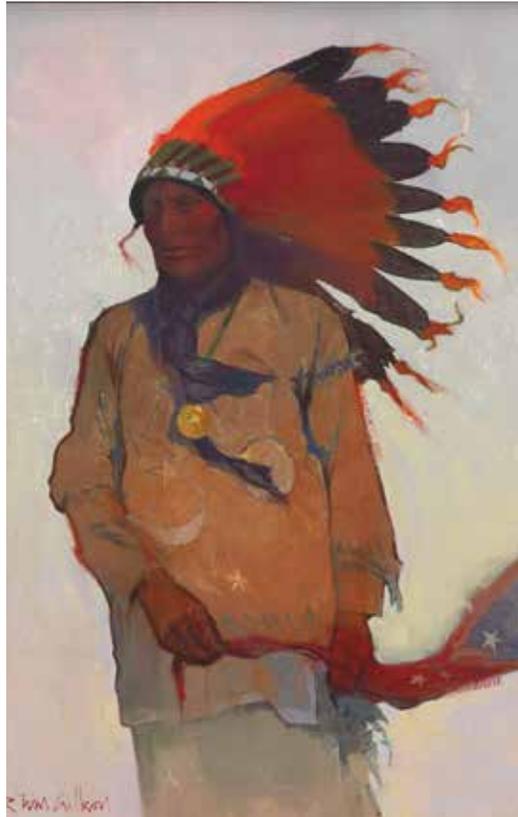
But when a Hollywood screenwriter-turned-producer made the Gilleons an offer for their Montana hideaway that they couldn't refuse, they took the proceeds and purchased a 2,000-acre ranch near Great Falls with the profile of Mt. Cecilia rising in the distance.

"I was never in need of work and was able to live in Montana while we were building our home and yet still maintain a presence in the industry," he says of his commuting, becoming one of the state's original "modern cowboys." "I did this for 30-plus years."

The Gilleon ranch sits near a crossroads, not far from the Old North Trail navigated for millennia by Indians, overlooking vistas once populated by vast bison herds, later traversed by Lewis and Clark, and, more than a century ago, chronicled by Charlie Russell.

Across America today, hundreds of private collectors have original Gilleon tipis and nine-panels above the fireplace mantel, on the walls of great rooms, and adorning living spaces and dining rooms.

Van Kirke Nelson, whose family has operated Glacier Gallery in Kalispell, Montana, since 1969, says that 100



R. TOM GILLEON

The Last Ghost Dancer

2012, Oil on Canvas, 24 x 16"

Ted and Joyce Griffith, San Diego, California

years from now he is certain that Gilleon will be recalled with the same reverence afforded the Taos artists of a century ago. Nelson says he first became entranced by Gilleon's work after he saw a showing of twelve small-format tipi paintings years ago. Clustered together on a gallery wall, the sight was mesmerizing, yet each piece was exquisitely distinct.

"Each little painting had its own impact and could stand alone, but as a grouping you could really see how Tom is a genius at approaching color," Nelson says. "That's one of the reasons why I so much enjoy his nine-panel paintings. There are themes within themes within themes." Nelson and others describe Gilleon's grid paintings as a nine-for-the-price-of-one composition.

That other artists are attempting to emulate him, Nelson says, demonstrates Gilleon's influence on both colleagues and the market.

Gilleon's first tipi painting, the artist admits, wasn't deliberate. It was born as an exercise to loosen up for another work he was contemplating. He laid down graphite lines and then brushstrokes. As the paint flowed it progressed into a large work that immediately sold to a prominent tourist guest lodge near Big Sky, Montana, triggering in turn an avalanche of requests for more that has persisted since the 1990s.

I asked Gilleon, "Why tipis?"

The word itself, he says, is a Lakota term meaning, "where the people live." Gilleon's fascination with the impermanent structures, as objects of personal reflection, is no accident. They're muses for thinking about mobile America, individual expression, the material talismans in modern life, and, as someone who once considered becoming an architect, they're the ultimate mobile dwellings.

Tipis are also, he adds, authentically American and as universally recognizable as the Egyptian pyramids. As an artist, they enable him to explore the fundamental elements of painting: striving to achieve color harmony through light, shadow and value, affecting mood by choice of palette, and incorporating age-old concepts about geometry into composition and design.

"I am attracted to the elementals, to the basics," he says. "Many of my designs are basic shapes and executed through variations on primary colors — square, triangle, and circle; red, yellow, and blue."

Another dimension is that his experimentation with geometric format is based on his study of ancient and still-enduring notions of natural order: Druid, Greco-Roman, Asian, Babylonian, Cartesian, and, of course, Native American. "Philosophically I feel the square shape denotes fairness and justice. The triangle introduces mystery and intrigue or romance. The flat horizon in many of my paintings is intended to give a feeling of stability."



R. TOM GILLEON
Pillar Assault
2012, Oil on Canvas, 36 x 48"
Private Collection, Omaha, Nebraska

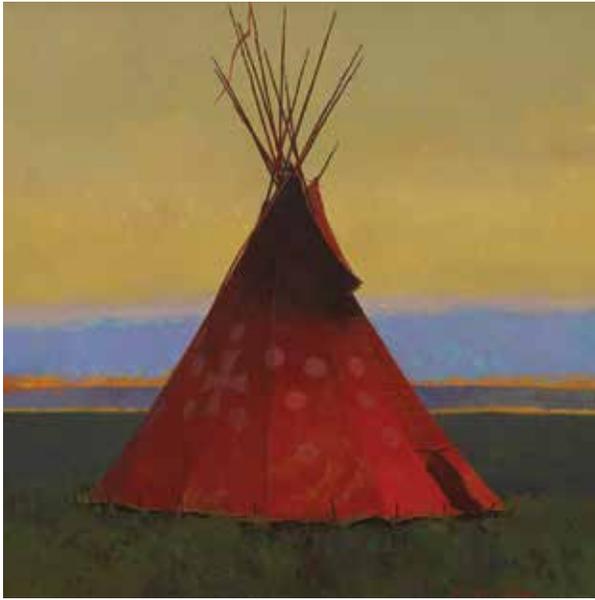
The tipi is no trope. Like the surface of water, ever-changing and influenced by wondrous atmospherics from above, absorbing light or casting it outward, being a receptacle for human thoughts and emotions cast upon it, welcoming the viewer to enter, Gilleon's tipi paintings are, in a way, not literally about tipis at all.

Nor should it be said, though some have contended as much, that

Gilleon is some kind of neo-Western pop artist. Sarah Burt, of the Russell, notes that Gilleon's approach to icons is markedly different from, say, the intent of Andy Warhol, who championed a modern iconography focused on the superficiality of celebrity, the power of commercial brands, and the hands-off approaches of mass production based upon a cartoonish extension of photo-realism. In that context, pop art was an homage to artifice.

Gilleon is a true painter, a stylist, Burt says, and he is after something that verges upon the sacred. "Honesty is not a policy, it is a principle," Gilleon says. "In general terms, people have thought of 'Western art' as art about white men dealing with horses and cattle or white men dealing with Indians. And yes, for many years it was. Today I think there is more emphasis on the land and all the inhabitants of the West, including its fantastic wildlife."

In describing the evolution in his thinking and the catalyst that transformed him from approaching subjects literally to more allegorically, Gilleon speaks of his friendship with Herb Ryman, Disney's first full-time artist and a generation his senior. "One day long ago when we were working from a human model that had ordinary features, Herb said to



R. TOM GILLEON
Pemmican Lodge
2011, Oil on Canvas, 30 x 30"
Collection of Craig and Cathy Roseland, Sartell, Minnesota

R. TOM GILLEON
High Summer
2010, Oil on Canvas, 30 x 30"
Mr. and Mrs. Steven Heinemann, Jackson, Wyoming

R. TOM GILLEON
Bear Paws
2012, Oil on Canvas, 30 x 30"
Altamira Fine Art, Jackson, Wyoming

R. TOM GILLEON
Red Badger Lodge
2009, Oil on Canvas, 30 x 30"
Collection of Greg and Deb Oswood, Great Falls, Montana

This set of paintings speaks to our primal understanding of simple shapes. All four share a flat horizon line, which imparts a sense of stability to the viewer: The tipi creates a triangle — a symbol found in nearly every culture, religion, and artistic tradition — signifying a range of powerful icons from sacred mountains to the chalice of fertility. Each painting is itself a square, and when arranged together, the paintings form a larger square. To the artist, this shape represents balance, justice, and fairness.

me, 'We have the option to make the drawing look like her or we can make it beautiful.' Apparently I had dropped back to the artist default position of copying what I saw, essentially like being a courtroom artist covering a trial."

Indeed, embellishment as a quest to transform the ordinary into the beautiful is a Gilleon hallmark, be it experimenting with banded color backdrops, featuring iconoclastic full-frame portraits of native folk heroes, or invoking wildlife on tipis like North American hieroglyphs, reminding viewers that the relationship between nature and humanity is indivisible.

Reached at his studio, Gilleon says that he works intuitively. One could even call his approach freewheeling. "I do not normally create a painting in a 'linear' point A to point B to point C manner," he explains. "Often the painting begins without a predetermined outcome, so when a storyline or narrative is attached, it is most likely a backstory."

How does Gilleon avoid redundancy? How has he managed to so effectively avoid being derivative of his own work? "How does the cast of *Les Miserables*, *Cats*, and *Phantom of the Opera* perform night after night, the same script, without being burned out, going stale, or becoming uninspired?" he asks. "How does a professional baseball player play, day after day, the same game? Every night is a different performance, a different feeling, and probably a very different show from the night before." Every tipi is different with a different challenge, he says. Every nine-panel, threes stacked on threes, has a different arrangement of icons and therefore different points of access.

Altamira's Tarrant says that Gilleon, at 71, is at the top of his observational power. "Many people think the change in an aging artist's 'style' is due to a deterioration of eyesight, or a shaky hand, or loss of stamina Some of that happens, of course, but I feel I know why so many artists' 'painting hand' changed with old age," Gilleon says.

"For many years my goal was to improve my technical skills, to improve the brushstroke, refine the color sense and compositions, to become a 'master artist.' That goal has changed. I want each brushstroke to be more like me ... a little unfinished, a little naïve, a little crude, sometimes whimsical but mostly honest. In short, to be the artist I was when I was only five years old, but with a larger perspective on the world."

In the beginning, he says, he never aspired to achieve fame. He had no idea that the subject matter would have such resonance. Today, he is easing off his output of works bound for galleries and focusing on requests from museums.

One of those, a potent nine-panel titled *Northern Plains* was commissioned by the Booth Museum as the centerpiece

of the 2012 retrospective. It remains a popular fixture in the Booth's expanded gallery space. Seth Hopkins, the Booth's executive director, said commissioning *Northern Plains* could be interpreted as a statement that the museum believes Gilleon is among a small group of living painters moving contemporary Western art forward. If the response to the exhibition among Booth visitors and patrons is any indication, Hopkins' assessment has been mightily corroborated.

Tarrant, who has seen hundreds of Gilleons, says the grid painting *War and Peace* ranks as his personal favorite. The masterwork was completed for a one-man show in 2005 and is one of several highlighted at the 2013 Russell exhibition.

Gilleon has never sought to "fit in" as a Western artist, conforming to the arguably out-of-date expectations of what the genre is supposed to be. "The term 'Western artist' limits everything it touches," Gilleon says. "I paint 'Western subjects' because I live in the West and love it. But I would be just as happy painting seascapes and Gloucester fishing boats, fishing villages around Rockport or Plymouth. From there, I could move to Paris and paint bridges over the Seine or the scenes around Montmartre. I could also be very happy ending my painting days in the south of Ireland."

Gilleon's point: Paint what surrounds you, live where you love to be, let the rhythms, seen and unseen, seep into the soul multidimensionally and, if you have the inclination, paint aspects of it that bring you closer to the truth of a place. For him, indigenosity, as an original reflection of human relationships with Western geography, is the platform from which his unforgettable meditations are sprung.

Todd Wilkinson is a Bozeman, Montana-based freelance journalist who writes about the environment, business, and the arts. This article is reprinted with permission from Western Art & Architecture, April/May 2013.



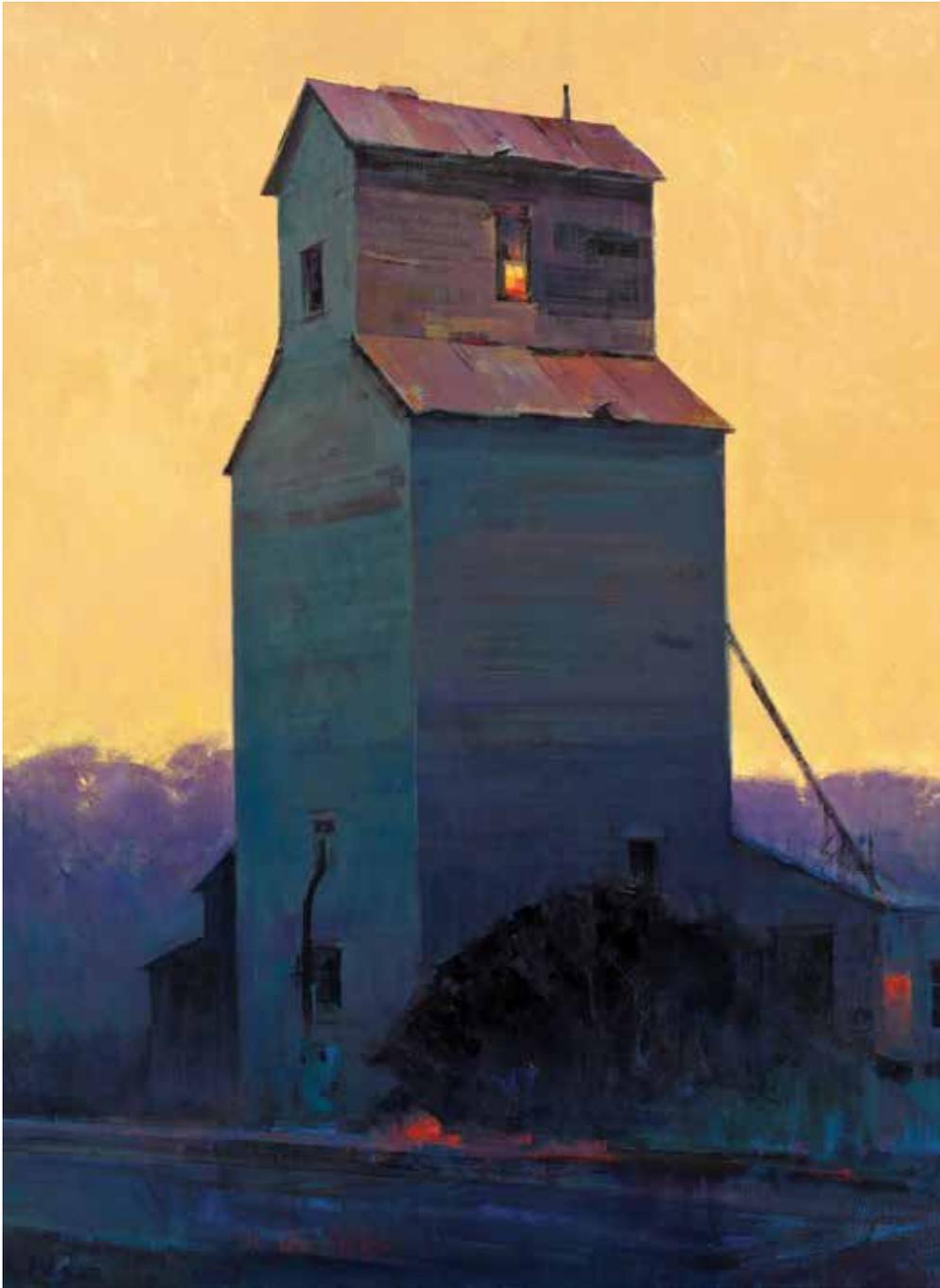
R. TOM GILLEON
Northern Plains Stop Sign
2008, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 72"
Altamira Fine Art, Jackson, Wyoming

Square Butte, pictured in the background, was named "Mountain Fort" by the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery. Gilleon uses the landmark as part of an allegorical warning against intrusion into Blackfeet territory.



R. TOM GILLEON
Hair Apparent
2013, Oil on Canvas, 50 x 50"
Ted and Joyce Griffith, San Diego, California

The black tassels of hair decorating this lodge are scalps won in battle. Only the fiercest warriors could make this kind of "trophy home" for themselves and their families. This painting is based on a sketch by friend and fellow artist Daniel Long Soldier.



R. TOM GILLEON
Big Sky Scraper
2012, Oil on Canvas, 48 x 36"
Altamira Fine Art, Jackson, Wyoming

The title is a double entendre: "big sky" could refer to the endless open skies of Montana, or it could be read more literally as a "big skyscraper." Standing at one hundred feet tall, grain elevators are still the closest thing Montana has to a city skyline.



R. TOM GILLEON
War Bonnet and Peace Pipe
1988, Oil, 32 x 24"

Dr. Tina and Dr. Don Harboway, Great Falls, Montana

War Bonnet and Peace Pipe explores the complicated, often conflicting roles of war and peace in native society. The virtues of the wise peacemaker and the brave warrior were both held in high esteem.



R. TOM GILLEON
Going to the Sun
2008, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Altamira Fine Art, Jackson, Wyoming

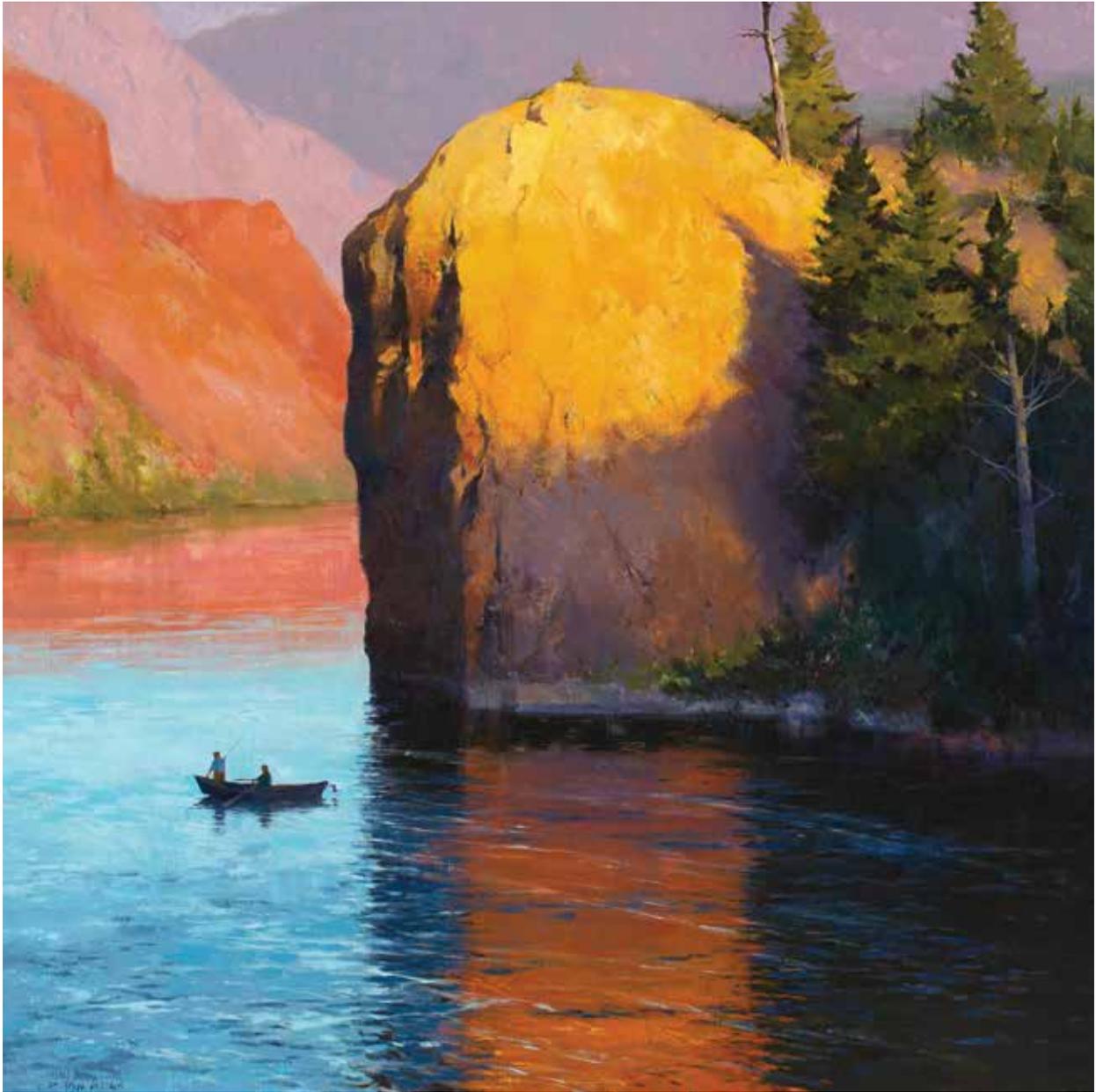
A Blackfoot legend tells of the Sun God ascending the mountain known as Going to the Sun. The Sun God promised to rejoin his people one day, but forbade them to clean their moccasins until his return. They have called themselves the Blackfeet ever since.

The Sun God's angelic wings point to the interesting similarities between the Blackfeet legend and the biblical prophecy of the Messiah's Second Coming.



R. TOM GILLEON
Bulls and Bears
2012, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Altamira Fine Art, Jackson, Wyoming

Today, bulls and bears bring the stock market to mind. When Native Americans still presided over the plains, bulls and bears represented two very important aspects of native life: food and warfare. In the painting, some of the shields are decorated with images of buffalo bulls, paying tribute to the animal that provided many tribes with the meat and hides they needed to survive. Other shields carry images of bears, hoping to imbue warriors with bearlike ferocity in battle.



R. TOM GILLEON
Over the Rainbows
2013, Oil on Canvas, 50 x 50"
Collection of John and Shirley Griffith, Whitefish, Montana

Where the Dearborn and Missouri rivers meet, an impressive rock face reflects the glowing sunset into a deep pool below. The waters here are a popular haunt for rainbow trout. By boat, one can drift "over the rainbows."



R. TOM GILLEON
Prima Facie
2006, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Collection of Mike and Kelly Worley, Zachary, Louisiana

The Latin term *prima facie* is translated as "at first sight." It means clear, apparent, or unambiguous. In this painting, it refers to the sincerity and lack of artifice of the figures depicted: what you see is what you get.





R. TOM GILLEON
Shadow of the Sixth
2009, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 120"
Private Collection, Virginia Beach, Virginia

Too much balance in a painting is not pleasing to the eye. As a designer, Gillean knows that elements often appear to be more symmetrical when arranged asymmetrically. The title playfully acknowledges a sixth lodge while adhering to the design principle of odd numbers and asymmetric composition.



R. TOM GILLEON
Luminarias
2008, Oil on Canvas, 60" x 100"
Private Collection, Evergreen, Colorado

SOMETIMES A TIPI IS *NOT* JUST A TIPI: Looking at a Gilleon Icon

By Sarah L. Burt

When R. Tom Gilleon casually decided to paint a picture of a tipi at his Montana studio about ten years ago, he could not possibly have predicted how deeply his new subject would resonate. Some 200 tipi paintings later, the motif remains Gilleon's most enduring, although the concept sprung from an act of pure serendipity.

"The way I came to paint my first tipi wasn't preplanned," he said. "I didn't sit down and say, 'I want to paint a tipi.' I was still working on retainer for Walt Disney Imagineering, and there was a period when no work was required. I was at my studio with a stretched blank canvas staring me in the face. I happened to look out the window and see the tipi that I had set up in the yard. The blank canvas and the tipi just merged as one in my mind. But as I was painting it, I was thinking, 'this could very easily be a lot of wasted

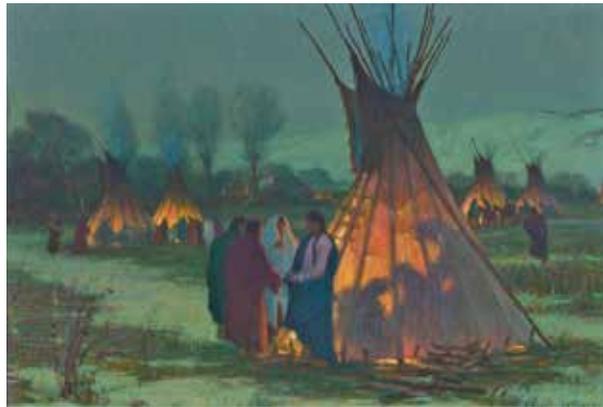
paint.' My nagging question was, 'Who in their right mind would buy a painting of a *tipi*?!'

"After I finished it, I took it to a gallery in Ennis, Montana, where it sold immediately. I thought to myself, 'This phenomenon is strange; it's probably one of those things that will go away in six months.' Now it's ten years later, and the enthusiasm for the tipi paintings has only grown. When galleries approach me about my work, they always say, 'We absolutely love your diversity of subject matter, but *do you have any tipis?*'"

What makes Gilleon's tipi paintings so compelling? For two centuries, artists of the American West have painted tipis, beginning with Titian Peale's *Sioux Lodges* of 1819 (the earliest known picture by an Anglo-European artist

of Plains Indian tipis) and continuing in the work of such notables as George Catlin, Karl Bodmer, Alfred Jacob Miller, and Charles Russell, who, ever the storyteller, focused more on tipi interiors—and the human activities within them—than on tipi exteriors.

For Gilleon, the great beauty of the tipi lies in its structure. “I have always been more interested in structure than surface detail,” he said. “As a tiny guy building model airplanes, I was much more intrigued by the skeleton of the plane than the exterior body.” There is no doubt about the fundamental beauty of Gilleon’s tipis, whether a single tipi in a square (*Horse Theft*, 2009, oil, courtesy of a private collection) or a cluster of tipis in an immense horizontal rectangle (*Luminarias*, 2008, oil, private collection).



JOSEPH HENRY SHARP
Crow Teepees at Night
1890s, Oil, 20 1/4 x 30 3/8"
Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma

The power of Gilleon’s images derives from clear, bold, geometric shapes articulated through a magical interplay of color and light. Gilleon’s light does double duty: it delineates the taut surface and the underlying structure of the tipi and also captures the glow of the evening lodge fire, recalling the work of such earlier Western artists as Joseph Henry Sharp. In Sharp’s beautiful *Crow Teepees at Night* (1890s, Gilcrease Museum), for example, tipis are truly lanterns on the plains, with firelight incandescing through translucent hide walls, a scene that evokes the peaceful harmony that once existed between the land and its original inhabitants.

Unlike the images by his artistic predecessors, however, Gilleon’s tipi paintings are devoid of human activity. These elemental tipis stand mute, resolute, and mysterious against infinite stretches of prairie land. No figures break the eternal stillness. The surrounding countryside is defined by low horizons, above which pulse bands of contrasting complementary colors announcing the rising or setting of the sun. Sometimes clouds spread out from the horizon line, inspiring a sense of indefinable longing. But for what? A bygone era? A vanished race?

Perhaps the longing comes from our collective memory of ancestral shelters that withstood the buffeting winds and driving rains of the North American plains. The tipi is the iconic architectural form associated today with all tribes, even though its use is specific to the Great Plains of North America. A brilliant invention, the tipi facilitated a nomadic

way of life, while also standing at the center of social, religious, and creative traditions. By the very definition of its triangular shape, the tipi symbolizes stability and endurance.

The evocative power of the tipi is not lost on Gilleon, nor is the associative power of its simple shape. The tipi is a visual archetype, and he exploits its universality. In his early work as an illustrator for NASA in Florida, he says he learned “the power of simple lines and the importance of distilling imagery into its simplest form.” His classic tipi compositions consist of a triangle, a square, and a circle—the latter added as a moon, perhaps, or as a design element on the tipi. The floor of the tipi is, of course, an implied circle.

“The tipi paintings connect to our primal understanding of simple shapes. We all relate to the circle, triangle, and square,” Gilleon says. “Using basic shapes might seem a simple formula, but ‘simple’ does not equate to ‘easy’ in the visual arts. Simplicity is the hardest city on earth to find.”

The efficacy of Gilleon’s visual strategies reverberates throughout the history of art. It is reinforced mostly compellingly by, of all things, a nineteenth-century ink painting by Sengai Gibon (1750–1838), the leading Zen master of the late Edo period in Japan. This world-famous painting consists of only three slightly overlapping geometric shapes: circle, triangle, and square. The image is understood to be a picture of the universe, and it speaks to us on a primordial level. Sengai added an inscription on the left, “Japan’s first Zen temple”—perhaps a reference



SENGAI GIBON
Circle, Triangle and Square
Edo Period, Early 19th Century, Ink on Paper, 11 1/8 x 18 15/16"
Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo



R. TOM GILLEON
Sicangu Lodge
 2007, Oil on Canvas, 48 x 48"
 Collection of Greg and Deb Oswood, Great Falls, Montana

The Sicangu are a branch of the Lakota Sioux. The word *sicangu* means "burnt thighs people" in Lakota — hence the tribe's French handle: the Brulé. Legend has it the Sicangu were given this name following an incident in which they narrowly escaped a raging prairie grass fire.

to the circle, triangle, and square as the geometric building blocks of temple architecture, the outward embodiment in the physical world of Zen spiritual teachings.

Similarly, for the Plains Indian, the tipi is a temple as well as a home. The floor of the tipi represents the earth (Mother), the walls of the tipi the sky (Father), and the poles the trails from earth to the spirit world (Heaven) linking its human inhabitants with *Wakan Tanka*, the Great Mystery.

When encampments of portable lightweight dwellings first appeared in the Stone Age, the most widespread form of the structures was conical. The shape referenced cosmologic symbolism—the image of the World Mountain—and the dwelling was perceived as a model of the world, in macrocosm and microcosm, where everything was arranged and organized in correspondence with ideas of a higher order.

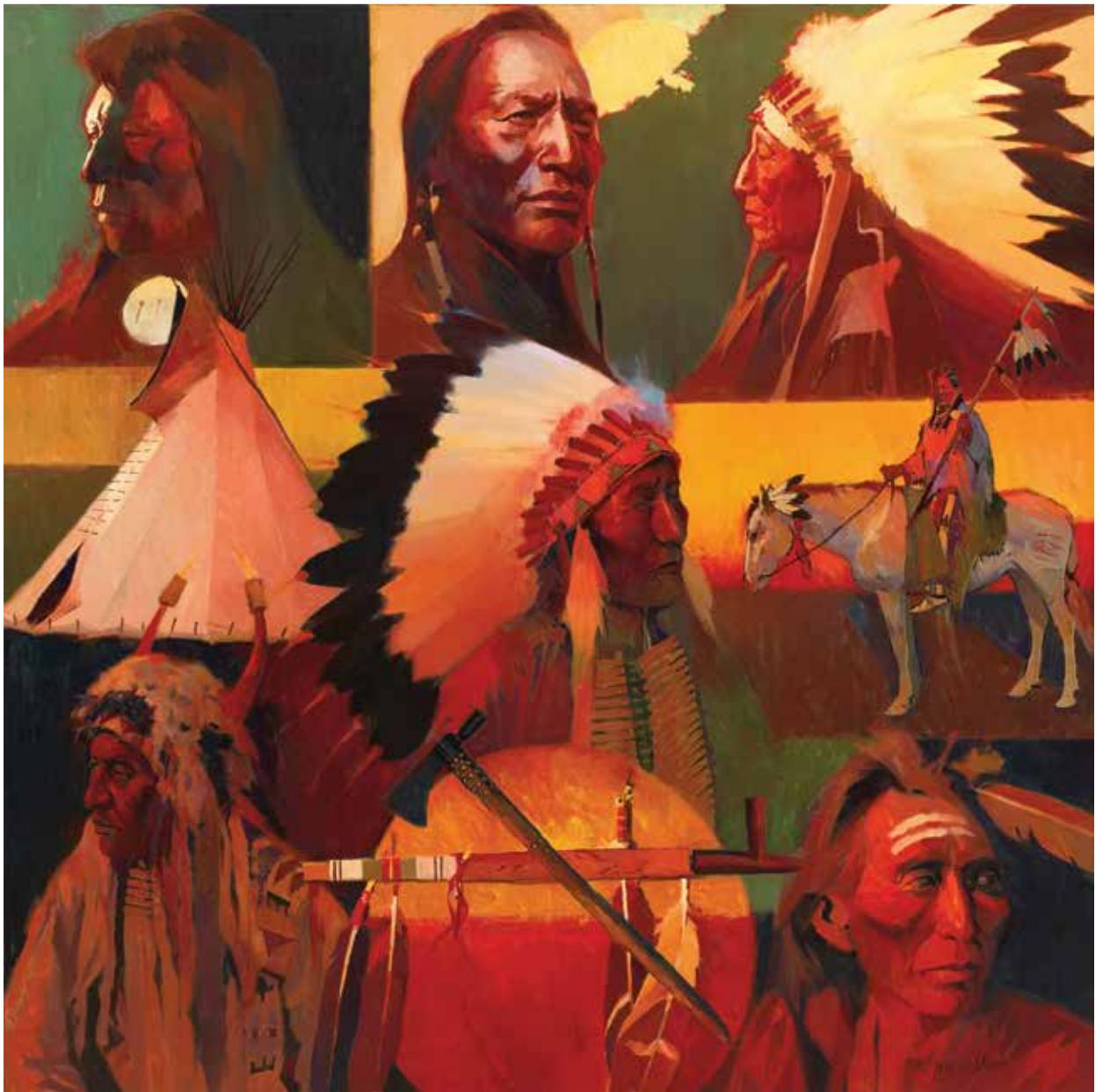
The universal power of the tipi reverberates through the centuries on Gilleon's own Montana ranchlands. From his studio, it is but a short hike to clusters of ancient tipi rings, evidence of Plains Indian encampments. Gilleon has slept inside the tipi rings, sketched within them, and meditated on how these villages must have looked long, long ago.

"When you walk among the tipi rings of an ancient camp

site and sit beside the fire pit inside the circle," says Gilleon, "you become part of what once was here. You can really feel the people who long ago sat and told stories around the lodge fire."

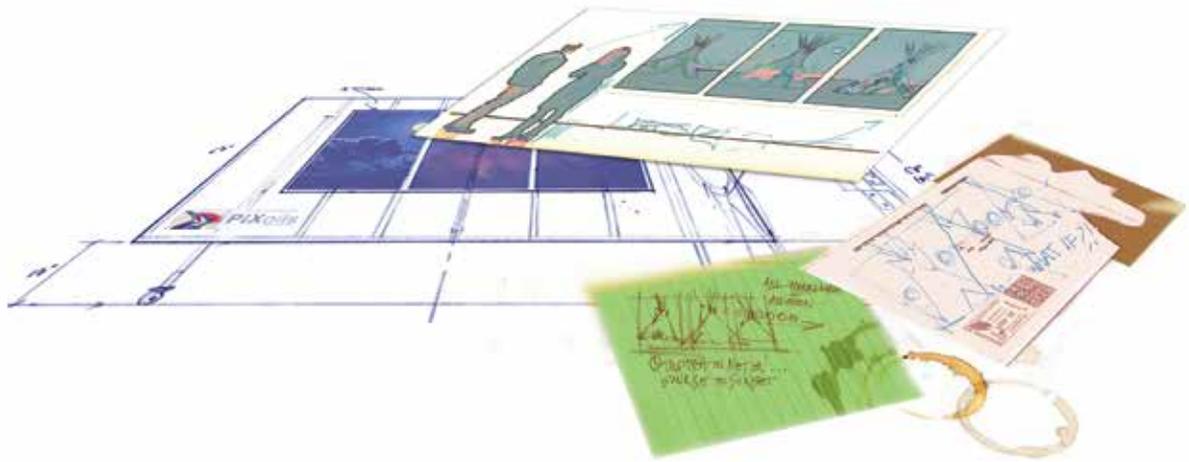
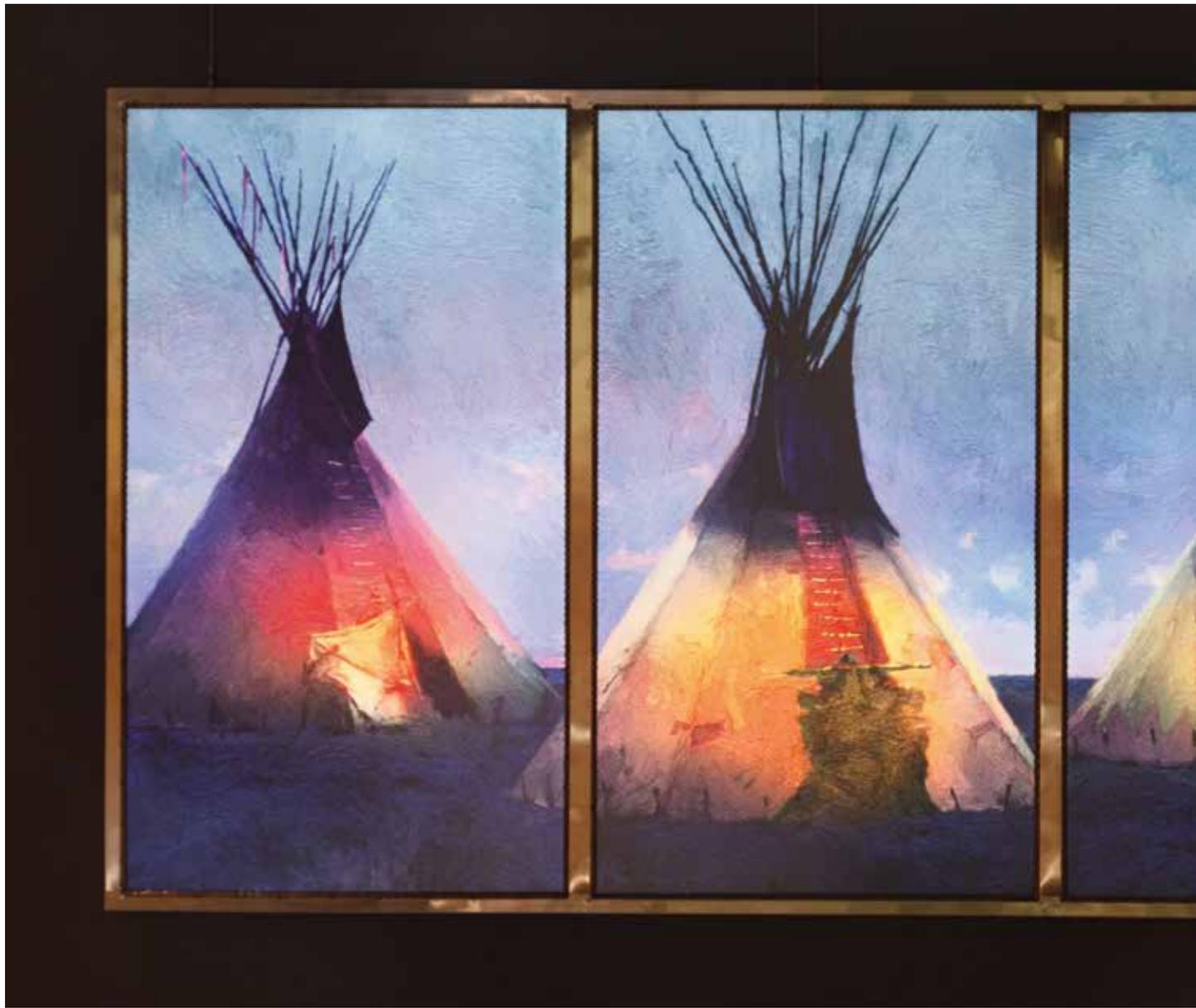
"The full moon had risen, flooding the camp with light," wrote photographer Walter McClintock during his first visit to the Blackfeet Reservation in 1896. "The tipis were lighted up by bright inside fires. The great circular encampment looked like an enormous group of Japanese lanterns, while the flickering lights of the multitude of outside fires resembled fire-flies in a summer's dusk. . . . A horse passed ridden by two young men singing together a Deer song. . . . They continued their striking duet at intervals through the night, not stopping until day began to dawn."

Sarah L. Burt is the Chan and Clara Ferguson Chief Curator at the C.M. Russell Museum in Great Falls, Montana. She wishes to acknowledge Tom Gilleon, the late Anne Morand, and Sharyn Udall, who lent their generous help and insights to the writing of this essay, and Mark Tarrant for his support. Walter McClintock is quoted from McClintock, "Sun Festival of the Blackfeet," lecture, 1926, McClintock Manuscript Collection, Braun Research Library, Institute for the Study of the American West, Autry National Center, Los Angeles, and McClintock, *The Old North Trail: Life, Legends, and Religion of the Blackfeet Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), pp. 281–282.



R. TOM GILLEON
Paha Sapa
2008, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Collection of Richard and Joan Rosenthal, Park City, Utah

The Lakota called the Black Hills *Paha Sapa*: from a distance, the tree-covered hills looked black. Paha Sapa was the tribe's spiritual center. It was also where General George Armstrong Custer began his ill-fated acquaintance with the Sioux.





R. TOM GILLEON
Eternal Triangle
2013, Digital Art, 49 x 86"
Altamira Fine Art, Jackson, Wyoming

NEW MEDIA DIGITAL ART

The idea for the *Eternal Triangle* installation began the way many conversations between Disney Imagineers begin: by asking, "what if?" Gilleon asked his friend and associate Marshall Monroe, "what if we could make a painting kinetic? What if we could capture the changing light from sunrise to sunset and watch the moon's journey across the sky? What if we could watch the snow falling inside a painting or the shifting aurora borealis?"

Monroe replied, "When do you want to start?"

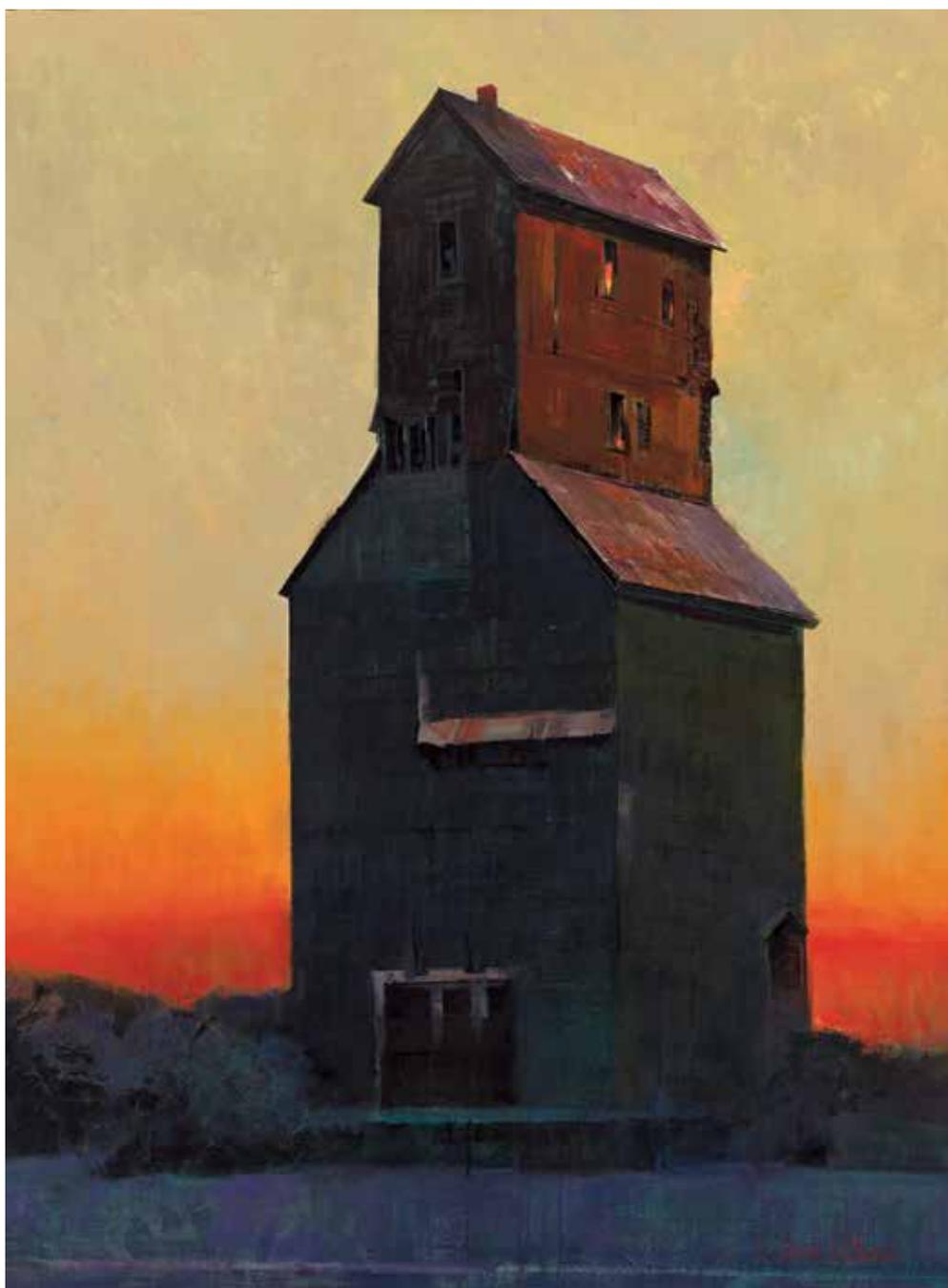
The installation was developed over the course of a year: Gilleon's napkin sketches, sticky notes, and coffee-stained envelopes eventually became working drawings. In the skilled hands of Monroe, twelve separate paintings became a single living, moving work of art.

Eternal Triangle debuted at Gilleon's one-man show at Altamira Fine Art in Jackson, Wyoming, in July 2013.



R. TOM GILLEON
Monad Nomad
2008, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Collection of Allan and Frances Tessier Jackson, Wyoming

In the metaphysics of the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the monad is the ultimate indivisible constituent of the material universe. Contrary to our Western European emphasis on the individual as the primary social unit, in native cultures it was the tribe. Despite seasonal migrations over long distances, the sense of interconnectedness between individuals in Northern Plains nomadic tribes was often stronger than the connection between individuals in our own sedentary society.



R. TOM GILLEON
Prairie Dare
2009, Oil on Canvas, 48 x 36"
Altamira Fine Art, Jackson, Wyoming

The weather on the Northern Plains is notoriously fickle and unforgiving. Constructing anything on the open plains is enough to tempt fate. However, building something as tall and narrow as a grain elevator on the prairie is nothing short of a dare.



R. TOM GILLEON
Bull Shield
 2012, Oil on Canvas, 40 x 28"
 Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Jones, Coldspring, Minnesota

The warrior in this painting is holding the "Bull Shield": Gilleon's interpretation of an important and well-known visionary Arikara shield.



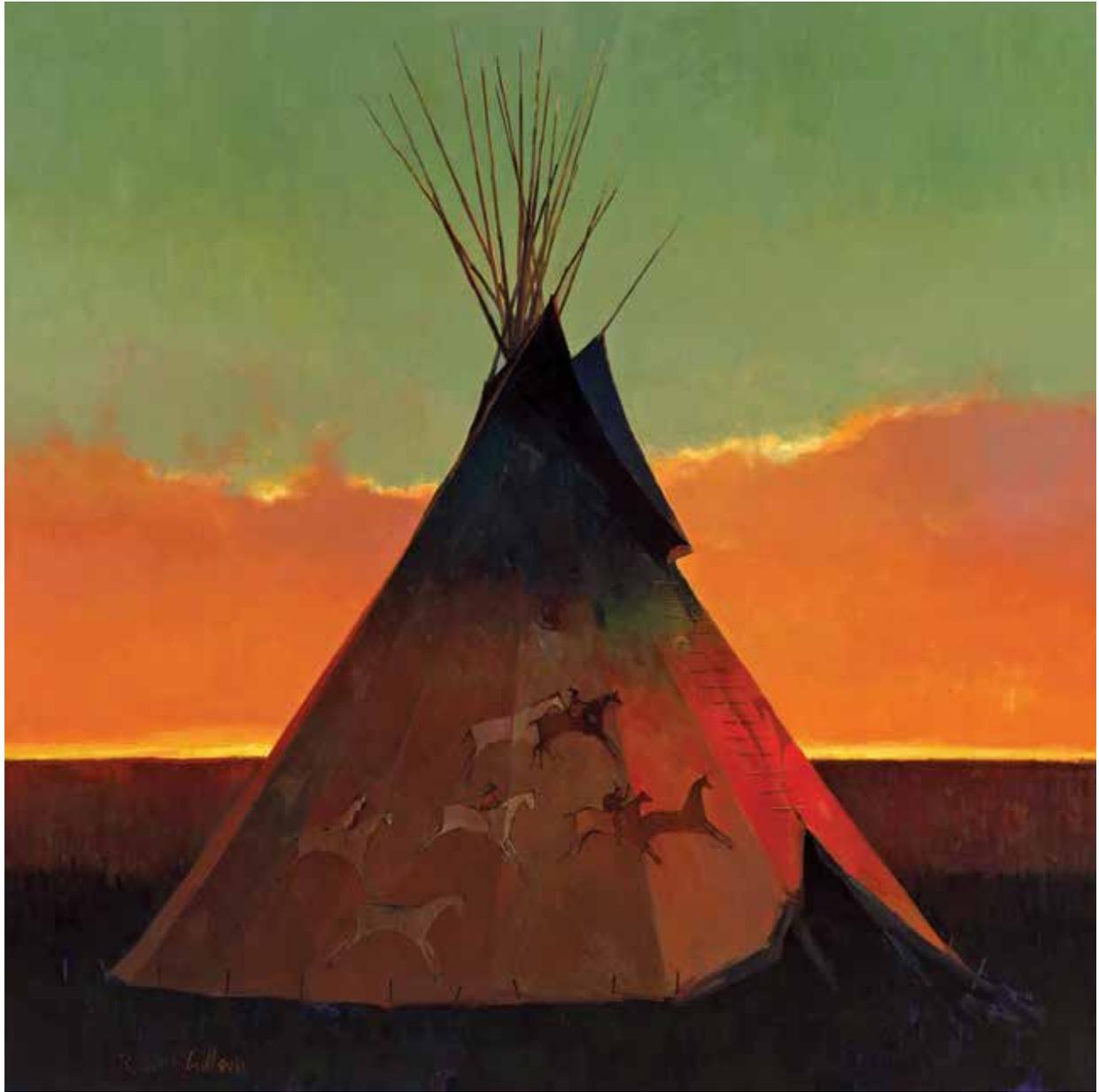
R. TOM GILLEON
Little Plume
 2012, Oil on Canvas, 40 x 28"
 Altamira Fine Art, Jackson, Wyoming

Little Plume, a Piegan Blackfeet chief, was one of six chiefs who rode in Theodore Roosevelt's 1905 inaugural parade.



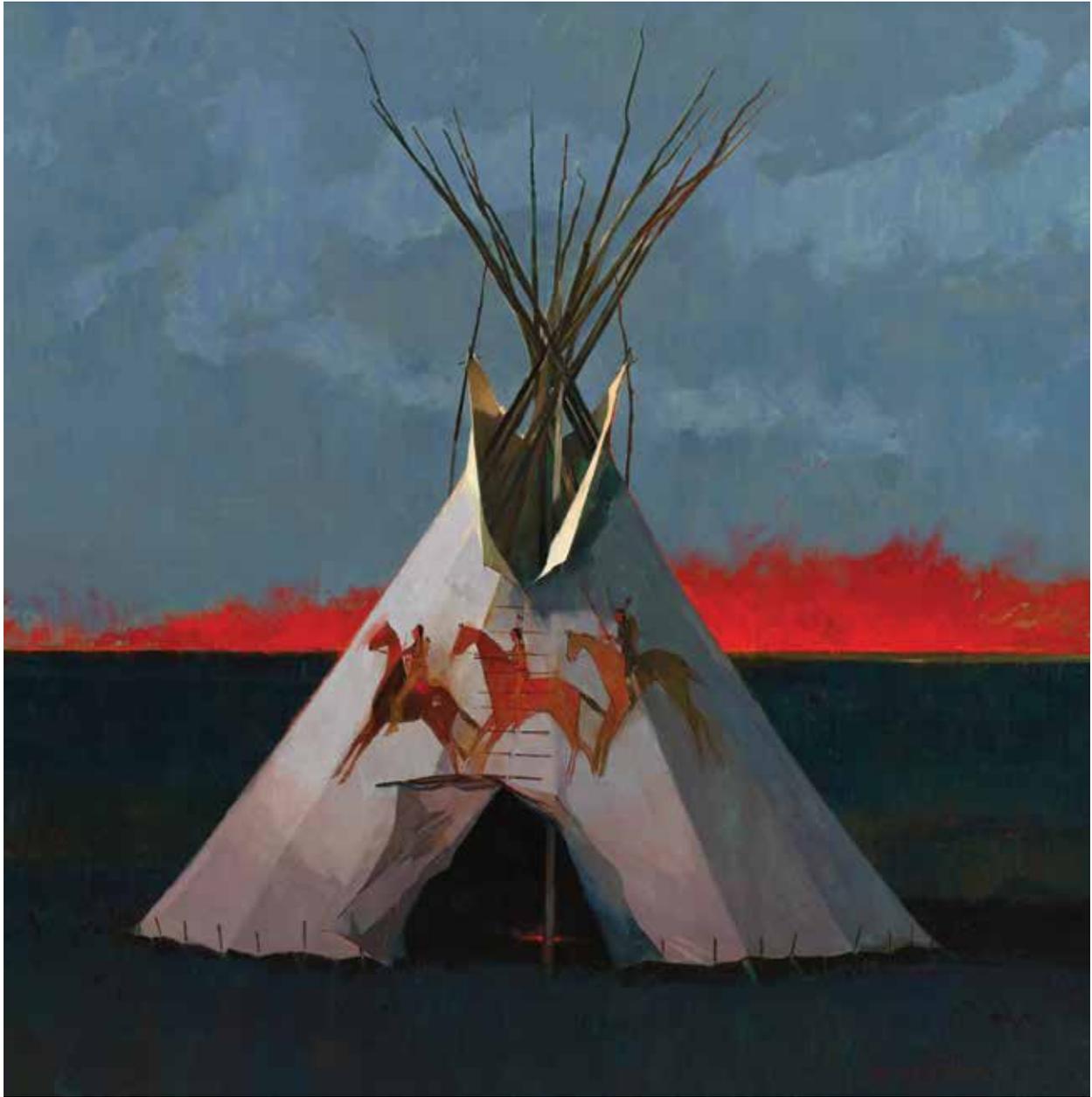
R. TOM GILLEON
Red Arrow
 2012, Oil on Canvas, 40 x 28"
 Altamira Fine Art, Jackson, Wyoming

Red Arrow is not the individual's name. Arrows were often painted with the individual's personal color or pattern in order to identify the owner.



R. TOM GILLEON
Horse Theft
2007, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Collection of Allan and Frances Tessler Jackson, Wyoming

To the tribes of the Northern Plains, horse theft was similar to counting coup — it was an act of bravery rather than an act of theft. Warriors would raid enemy camps and steal their horses to prove their courage and prowess and to deal a blow to the pride of their rivals. In the minds of many, a blow to the ego was worse than a blow to the head.



R. TOM GILLEON
Three Dog Soldiers
2009, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Private Collection, Atlanta, Georgia

The Dog Soldiers were elite fighting units made of the bravest warriors: the Spartans of the Northern Plains. Three of these Dog Soldiers are depicted on horseback, preparing for either victory or death.

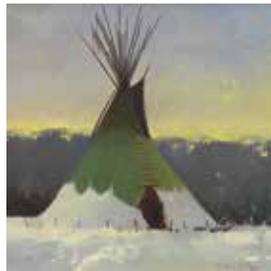


R. TOM GILLEON
Men of War
2009, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Private Collection, Marfa, Texas

This piece is one of the artist's personal favorites. Each of the three shields depicted is a traditional war shield: an homage to the warriors of the Northern Plains tribes and to the historic importance and necessity of warfare in Native American culture.



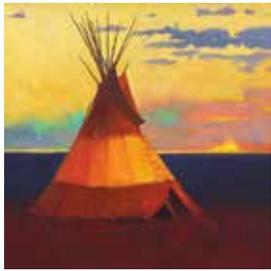
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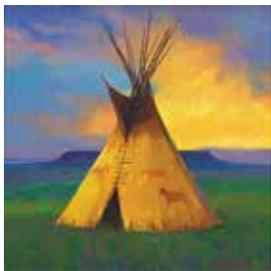
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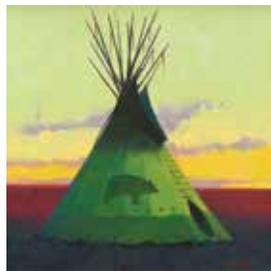
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TEN LITTLE TIPIS

1. *Nouveau Vert*
2. *When Trees Snap*
3. *Canicule*
4. *Old Moon*
5. *Time of Yellow Leaves*
6. *Distant Fires*
7. *Mountain Fort*
8. *Green Bear*
9. *Three Dog Night*
10. *Mountains and Ponies*

all paintings:
2013, Oil, 16 x 16"
Collection of the Artist

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

- Ah Wah Cous*
2009, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Ted and Joyce Griffith, San Diego, California
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- Alpaca Lips Now*
2013, Work on Paper, 20 x 16"
Collection of the Artist
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- Bear Paws*
2012, Oil on Canvas, 30 x 30"
Altamira Fine Art, Jackson, Wyoming
Page 10
- Big Sky Scrapper*
2012, Oil on Canvas, 48 x 36"
Altamira Fine Art, Jackson, Wyoming
Page 14
- Bulls and Bears*
2012, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Altamira Fine Art, Jackson, Wyoming
Page 17
- Bull Shield*
2012, Oil on Canvas, 40 x 28"
Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Jones, Coldspring, Minnesota
Page 30
- Canicule*
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Collection of the Artist
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- Catalogue Raisinettes*
2013, Work on Paper, 20 x 16"
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Page 37
- Dark Knight*
2013, Work on Paper, 20 x 16"
Page 37
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2013, Oil on Canvas, 16 x 16"
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- Earliest Artist*
2013, Work on Paper, 20 x 16"
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- End of an Ear*
2013, Work on Paper, 20 x 16"
Collection of the Artist
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- Eternal Triangle*
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- Melancholy*
2013, Work on Paper, 20 x 16"
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- Men of War*
2009, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Private Collection, Marfa, Texas
Page 33
- Monad Nomad*
2008, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Collection of Allan and Frances Tessler, Jackson, Wyoming
Page 28
- Moose Jaw*
2011, Oil on Canvas, 48 x 36"
Altamira Fine Art, Jackson, Wyoming
Page 7
- Mountain Fort*
2013, Oil on Canvas, 16 x 16"
Collection of the Artist
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EXHIBITION CHECKLIST CONTINUED...

Mountains and Ponies
2013, Oil on Canvas, 16 x 16"
Collection of the Artist
Page 34

Northern Plains Stop Sign
2008, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 72"
Altamira Fine Art, Jackson, Wyoming
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Nouveau Vert
2013, Oil on Canvas, 16 x 16"
Collection of the Artist
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Old Moon
2013, Oil on Canvas, 16 x 16"
Collection of the Artist
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On the Walls of Altamira
2013, Work on Paper, 16 x 20"
Collection of the Artist
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One Man Show
2013, Work on Paper, 16 x 20"
Collection of the Artist
Page 37

Over the Rainbows
2013, Oil on Canvas, 50 x 50"
Collection of John and Shirley Griffith, Whitefish, Montana
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Paha Sapa
2008, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Collection of Richard and Joan Rosenthal, Park City, Utah
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2013, Work on Paper, 20 x 16"
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Pemmican Lodge
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Pillar Assault
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Private Collection, Omaha, Nebraska
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Prairie Dare
2009, Oil on Canvas, 48 x 36"
Altamira Fine Art, Jackson, Wyoming
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Prima Facie
2006, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Collection of Mike and Kelly Worley, Zachary, Louisiana
Page 19

Red Arrow
2012, Oil on Canvas, 40 x 28"
Altamira Fine Art, Jackson, Wyoming
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Red Badger Lodge
2009, Oil on Canvas, 30 x 30"
Collection of Greg and Deb Oswood, Great Falls, Montana
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Rosebud Reservation
2013, Work on Paper, 20 x 16"
Collection of the Artist
Page 37

Shadow of the Sixth
2009, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 120"
Private Collection, Virginia Beach, Virginia
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Sicangu Lodge
2007, Oil on Canvas, 48 x 48"
Collection of Greg and Deb Oswood, Great Falls, Montana
Page 24

Star Lodge
2006, Oil on Canvas, 48 x 48"
C.M. Russell Museum, Gift of Dan Gilleon
Page 4

Teebow Tipi
2008, Work on Paper, 24 x 30"
Private Collection, Marfa, Texas
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Three Dog Night
2013, Oil on Canvas, 16 x 16"
Collection of the Artist
Page 34

Three Dog Soldiers
2009, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Private Collection, Atlanta, Georgia
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Time of Yellow Leaves
2013, Oil on Canvas, 16 x 16"
Collection of the Artist
Page 34

Tribal Triumvirate
2007, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 120"
Private Collection, Atlanta, Georgia
Page 3

War and Peace
2005, Oil on Canvas, 60 x 60"
Private Collection, Atlanta, Georgia
Page 6

War Bonnet and Peace Pipe
1988, Oil, 32 x 24"
Dr. Tina and Dr. Don Harboway, Great Falls, Montana
Page 15

When Trees Snap
2013, Oil on Canvas, 16 x 16"
Collection of the Artist
Page 34

Wholly Acrimony
2013, Work on Paper, 20 x 16"
Collection of the Artist
Page 37

B.S.

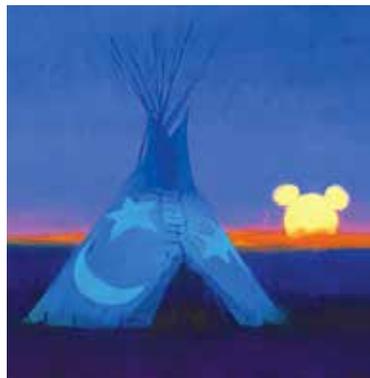
By Kristi Gilleon

It is often assumed “B.S.” refers to deceit or a certain vulgarity. It does not. To the artist, B.S. stands for “Both Sides,” the serious and the satirical. Artists are esteemed in our society as creators of beauty — a spokesperson for human nobility and imagination. But the artist has also played the roles of trickster, jester, and illusionist throughout history. The poet Keats once remarked, “Beauty is truth, truth is

beauty.” Some truths are beautiful — the awe of sunset, the glow of an evening campfire on the prairie — but not all truths are so easy on the eye. Satire embraces the other side of our experience: the tragic, laughable, misguided, mishap-laden nature of human beings and their art.



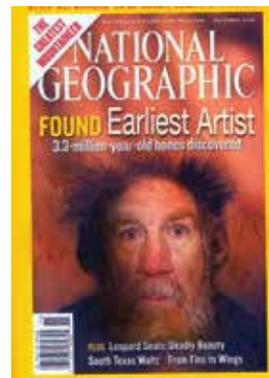
Alpaca Lips Now



End of an Ear



Dark Knight



Earliest Artist



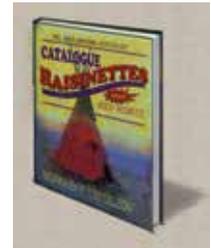
One Man Show



On the Walls of Altamira



Rosebud Reservation



Catalogue Raisinettes



Leaning Left



Pas de Deux



Melancholy



Wholly Acrimony

YOU CAN EITHER BUY CLOTHES OR PICTURES

by Patrick Hemingway

My father, Ernest Hemingway, always regretted that the illustrated editions of his books were so poor, the one exception being Edward Shenton's "decorations" for *Green Hills of Africa*.

One of the most talented collectors of twentieth-century European art, Hemingway chose paintings by Miro, Gris, and Mason that at his death were appraised in millions of dollars and are now, half a century later, priceless in museums. To a young couple with a baby boy and very little money, Gertrude Stein, by far the greatest collector of her time, gave my father and his first wife, Hadley, very good advice. She said, "You can either buy clothes or pictures." She certainly followed her own advice: her clothes and those of her partner, Alice B. Toklas, in a city famous for high fashion, were truly frightful.

How lucky for Hemingway, had he and Tom been of the same "Lost Generation," with Tom as his illustrator?

My wife, Carol, and I own three very good oil paintings by Tom Gilleon that precisely and elegantly keep reminding us every time we look at them of our decision to live a considerable portion of our one and only life on the west bank of the Missouri river in western Montana. Tom and

his family live a little farther downstream in a house and a spread that is worthy of his talent.

Now why tipis? Tom has answered that himself, as one might expect, in a series of YouTube interviews with the man who stretches his canvases. One of my hobbies is mathematics and especially geometry, not that I am any good in either, just an aficionado. The cone, along with the cylinder and sphere, is one of the three examples titled "primitives" that are given free with every Mac laptop in an app called Grapher. Apple gives very little support to this graphing calculator app, which was originally developed by an independent contractor, but savvy users have filled the gap. The significance of "primitives" comes alive if one calls up another example called "conchoid." Both examples give in the left-hand margin the matrix-type mathematical code creating the graphic image that will be familiar to anyone who has used MATLAB, the dominant computing language of scientists and engineers. All this is tech stuff, no doubt, but Tom can draw it all for you freehand on a white board: Apollonius of Perga (c. 262–190 B.C.), Omar Khayyám, Kepler, and, last but not least, Issac Newton, all tipi types, only they called them right circular cones and generators instead of lodge poles! Make no mistake, Tom is a genius.



R. TOM GILLEON
Freezeout Farewell
1988, Oil on Canvas, 20 x 24"
Collection of Carol and Patrick Hemingway,
Bozeman, Montana

Ten snow geese glide over the dusk-red marshlands of Freezeout Lake near Choteau, Montana: a sure sign that winter is on its way.

SO MUCH WIT IN A DETAIL

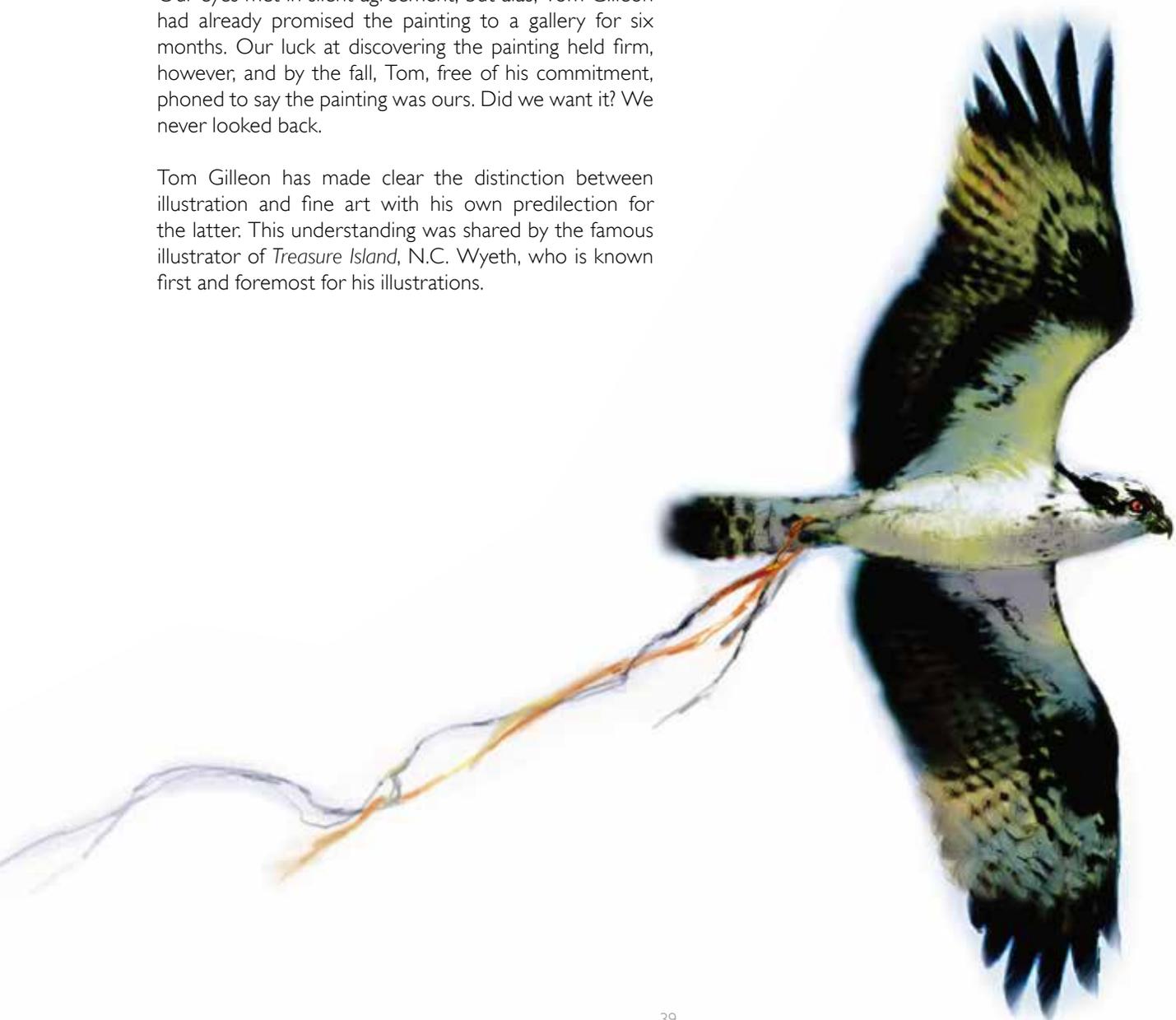
by Carol Hemingway

When my husband, Patrick, came to me during the C.M. Russell Art Auction some years ago and said, "I want to show you something," I was surprised. He led the way to one of the private artist showrooms at the Heritage Inn in Great Falls and, voilà, a gorgeous painting of snow geese in flight: *Freezeout Farewell*. In the painting, the viewer is one with the geese on their thrilling migration; Square Butte is but a dim shape in the background.

Our eyes met in silent agreement, but alas, Tom Gilleon had already promised the painting to a gallery for six months. Our luck at discovering the painting held firm, however, and by the fall, Tom, free of his commitment, phoned to say the painting was ours. Did we want it? We never looked back.

Tom Gilleon has made clear the distinction between illustration and fine art with his own predilection for the latter. This understanding was shared by the famous illustrator of *Treasure Island*, N.C. Wyeth, who is known first and foremost for his illustrations.

Hence, I was amazed and grateful when Tom Gilleon agreed to "illustrate" my children's book, *Oswald, An American Osprey*. And what an illustrator he is, ever faithful to the bird and my story: chicks with ruffled feathers, the blow-out of the nest on the power pole, and the final view of Oswald standing on the head of a fake, plastic owl. But my favorite is the trail of orange binding twine across two pages of text as Oswald continues to strengthen his nest. So much wit in a detail.





R. TOM GILLEON
Teebow Tipi
2008, Work on Paper, 24 x 30"
Private Collection, Marfa, Texas

Gilleon's alma mater is the University of Florida, which is where famed quarterback Tim Tebow began his athletic career. Because of this connection, many have assumed that *Teebow Tipi* is a nod to a football hero. In reality, this painting is not a tribute to a great quarterback — it is a tribute to a great artist: Wayne Thiebaud. Gilleon has used an unusual bird's-eye-view perspective in this painting which figures prominently in many of Thiebaud's landscapes.

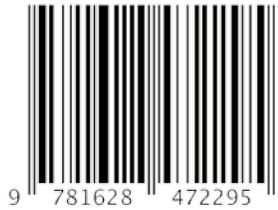
“Any man that can make a living doing what he likes is lucky, and I am that. Any time I cash in now, I win!”

— Charles M Russell



C.M. RUSSELL MUSEUM

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