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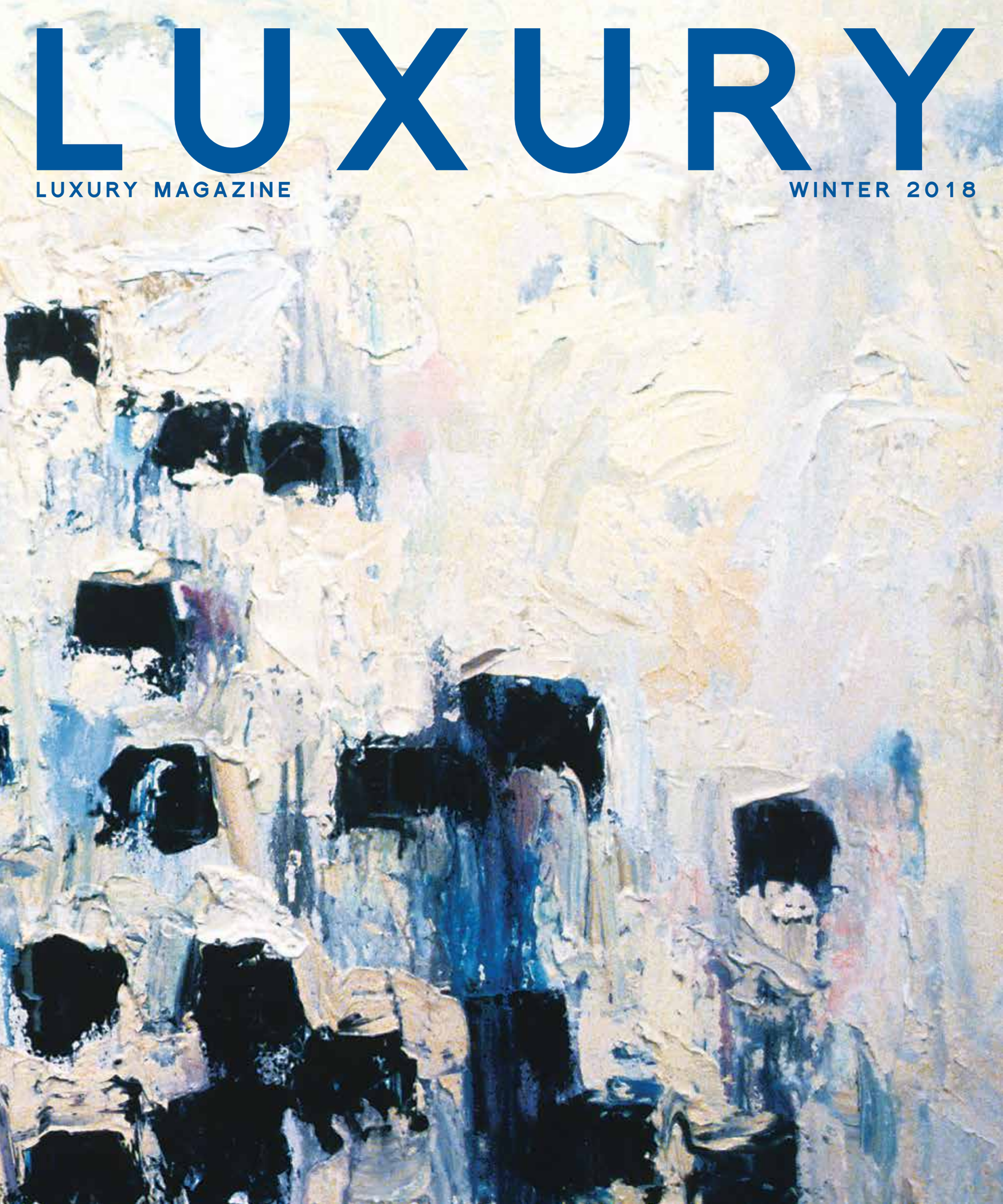


WADDELL'S WEST

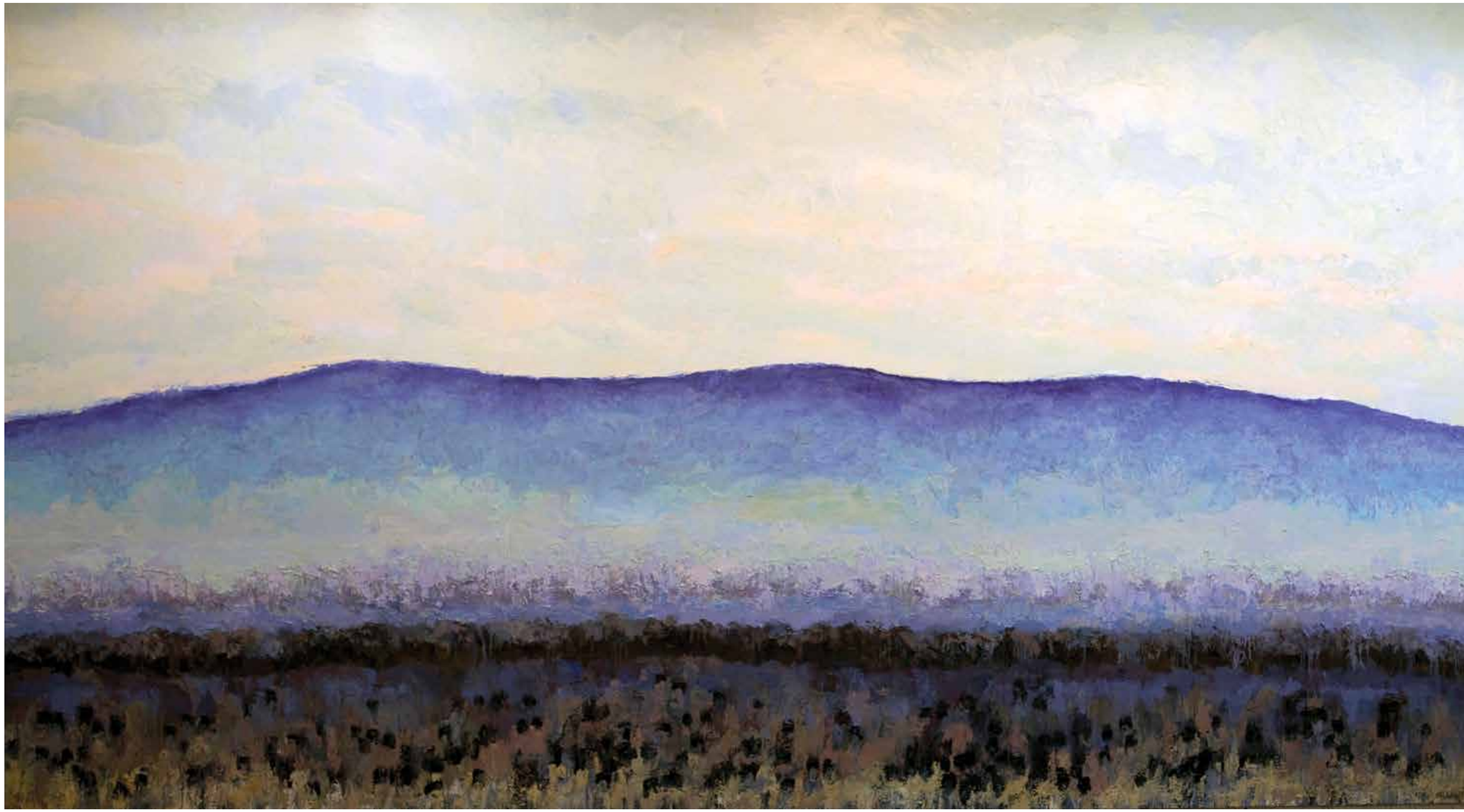
In his majestically abstract paintings of animals grazing in Western landscapes, **THEODORE WADDELL** marries passions for ranching and modern art.

by Jason Edward Kaufman

Monida, 1999, 120 x 216 inches.

Theodore Waddell with his favorite breed.

Big Sky Angus, 2018, 120 x 216 inches.



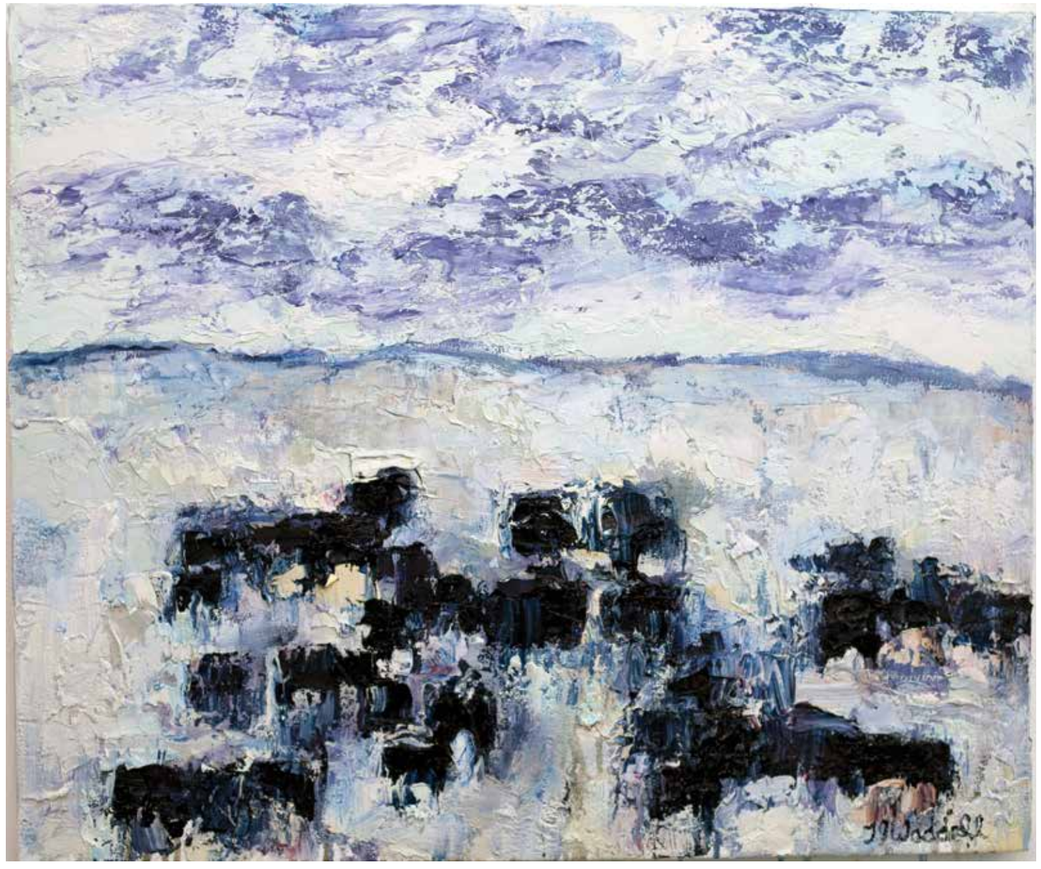
A lot of artists teach, but not many run cattle ranches. An exception is Theodore Waddell, a 77-year-old, award-winning painter of the American West. Most of his life Waddell worked cattle ranches in his native Montana and neighboring Idaho, while at the same time pursuing a thriving career as an artist. Among his most admired works are large canvases that depict cattle, horses, and buffalo grazing the high plains and mountain valleys of Big Sky Country. He portrays these landscape scenes as brooding abstractions, broad expanses of heavily brushed bluish-white paint dotted with rectangular swatches of contrasting tones that read as animals in the snow. It's a unique melding of modern and Western that has earned Waddell a devoted following.

Born in Billings, Montana, in 1941, he grew up in Laurel, a small railroad community where his father painted boxcars for the Northern Pacific and encouraged his son's learning and creativity, which included playing trumpet in a band that performed at country dances. When he was 17 he enrolled at Eastern Montana College, where he met the painter and rancher Isabelle Johnson. Her example inspired him to become an artist and later to take up ranching. When he won a fellowship to the Brooklyn Museum Art School, he left Montana for the first time. In New York he worked for a gallery, delved into museums and the jazz scene, and discovered the abstract expressionists. A year later when he moved back West, he took the lessons of modern art with him.

After a domestic stint in the Army, during which he played trumpet in the band, he married his high school sweetheart Betty Leuthold in 1965. He then graduated from Eastern Montana College, and received an MFA in sculpture and printmaking from Wayne State University in Detroit, where he learned to weld and make stainless steel minimalist sculptures. He joined the art faculty of the University of Montana at Missoula for eight years but retired to take over his wife's family's ranch west of Billings, beginning three decades of raising cows and sheep on several spreads. On the ranch he began making reliefs about animals and death—a roadkill coyote, papier-mâché deer, and fish trophies—and gun-shaped sculptures made of bones, but he soon settled on painting the Montana landscape and the animals he raised.

His big break came in 1983 when he was invited to participate in the Corcoran Biennial of American Art in Washington, D.C., a traveling exhibition devoted that year to Western painting. Soon he was showing in galleries and museums and was able to paint full-time. Since then he has had more than 90 solo exhibitions, mainly in the western United States, and his paintings have been acquired by art museums from the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis to the Autry Museum in Los Angeles and The National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City. The US State Department's Art in Embassies program has placed his work in diplomatic facilities around the world. In 2015 he received the Montana Governor's Arts ▷

Winter Angus #5, 2016, 30 x 36 inches.



Twin Bridges Angus #3, 2012, 24 x 30 inches.

Award and was named Artist of the Year by the Yellowstone Art Museum in Billings, and in 2017 he became the subject of a major monograph, *Theodore Waddell, My Montana* (Riverbend Publishing and University of Oklahoma Press).

He is now married to Lynn Campion, a photographer and horsewoman who authored a book about rodeo and long served as a philanthropist working with the foundation created by her grandfather Arthur Johnson, owner of the Argo oil company. (The foundation closed in 2016 after disbursing major grants to fund an equine hospital at Colorado State University, a leadership program at the Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs, and galleries for Western art at the Denver Art Museum.) The couple, who each have two daughters from their first marriages, divide their time between Hailey, Idaho, near Sun Valley, and a house and studio in Sheridan, a cow town of 800 in southwestern Montana.

Here Waddell discusses ranching, Western art, and selling art by the square inch.

Before we talk about art, can you tell us about your life as a rancher?

I was in the cattle business for more than 30 years. My ex-wife Betty's family weren't pleased with the guy who was managing their ranch, so Betty and I decided we would take it over. I was ready to quit teaching, so I traded my house for a tractor. A lot of people thought I was dumber than hell, and maybe I was, but it was really good for me. My nearest neighbor was four miles away. We had 200 cows and 150 sheep on about 4,000 acres and raised all our own hay and grain. I grossed $22,000 over an 11-year period. The government said we qualified for food stamps, but I said, "Get the hell off my place. I don't need any handouts." My kids were fed and okay in school, my bar tab was paid up, and I had money in my pocket. We got along just fine. It was a great life.

Betty's family thought we were cheating them, which we weren't, so we quit that ranch and bought a little place up on the Musselshell River at Ryegate, about 70 miles northwest of Billings. I started with 15 acres and ended up with 800 acres and 50 head of cattle. We'd buy cow-calf pairs in May and run them through the summer and sell them in September. I never set the world on fire, but most of the time I didn't lose any money either, which I guess is a pretty good accomplishment.

We were there for 11 years, and that ranch went in my divorce. When Lynn and I were married we bought a ranch west of Bozeman and had that for 11 years. We have about 40 acres here in Idaho and we've run cow-calf pairs on this place. Not a lot of them, but they're my models. We haven't had any cattle now for four years, but we still have our horses.

All images courtesy of Theodore Waddell.

How was daily life on the ranch?

After the middle of October, the hay is put up and you just kind of do maintenance. All you have to do is take care of the cows until you start calving in mid-February. I used to get up at 2 a.m. and check the cows, and then I'd paint for seven or eight hours before most people had their first cup of coffee. Painting is solitary, and winter closes in in the most wonderful kind of way. I absolutely love the winter.

Do you consider yourself to be a Western artist?

I say I'm less of a "Western" artist than that I live in the West and I make art. I have a unique position in a way. "Western" artists don't care for me because my work is abstract, and abstract guys don't care for me because I use subject matter. I don't know. I just keep on keeping on.

My grandfather was a blacksmith who shared time in a cow camp with Charlie Russell, the famous cowboy painter. Most people think the West ended when Charlie Russell died in the 1920s. You still get artists that celebrate that nostalgic part ▷

Ruby Valley Angus, 2009, 120 x 216 inches.

Ruby Valley Angus #2, 2018, 76 x 108 inches.

of things, and that gets overdone in a very short time. The West isn't like that anymore. There are seven Indian reservations in Montana and five in Wyoming and you won't see many teepees there. Instead, you'll see burned-out trailers and old cars. You have to separate the historical material from the contemporary. To me, contemporary Western art isn't nostalgic.

How did you start to paint the herds?

Raising cattle in Billings, we bought black Angus because the pigmentation in the winter keeps them warmer. One day I'm sitting in the kitchen looking out and these cattle were walking across the snow. All of a sudden a light bulb went on. I had seen a movie about Robert Motherwell making drawings on the floor. He was bent over and very lyrically making these wonderful drawings with black paint. I looked out and saw the cattle and I thought, "bingo."

I've been painting black cattle a long time. That's kind of how the whole thing started. Across the road they've had a herd of sheep that I paint. We have elk right outside our kitchen window. They come by every afternoon and fight and spar, and I'll continue to paint them if I can see them. I can't paint anything that I can't see.

Your herd paintings are abstractly painted so the animals merge with the surrounding terrain. They have a somber, ghostly quality. Do you think in terms of metaphor, about the passage of time and death?

I really don't. I'm just trying to learn from what I see and get better. The terrain and the animals that I see are constantly shifting and it totally fascinates me. I don't want my work to be the same next year as this year. I can't tell you anything about clouds or buffalo that you can't see for yourself. But I can tell you how much I love them and how much I love this place. To me, it is spiritual.

Are you religious at all?

I think I am religious. We have belonged to a local church. I tell them that I'm "CEO"—I go on Christmas, Easter, and Occasionally. I pray every day and I thank God for letting me be alive. I pray for my wife and my animals, but I do it privately and nobody knows that I do that and I don't make an issue out of it.

Can you talk about your attention to the weather and the seasons in your pictures?

The weather determines everything you do in ranching, especially when you are running cattle. If you make a mistake you could be dead. I was down in the pasture about a mile and a half from the house with my daughter picking up hay in the tractor and I got stuck in about 2.5 feet of snow. She was 7 or 8 and I had to carry her home. I thought I was going to die, but we made it. Another time I was in the pasture looking for a cow because I was pretty sure she was having her calf. The snow was coming so hard you couldn't see. I found my way to the fence and knew which way to go only because I had repaired that fence. But you could make a mistake, and it doesn't take much.

Do you paint outdoors?

I haven't for a while, but I have, even in the winter. I took one of those wagons that they have at the plant store and made a pallet on top with the paint underneath. I'd take a bunch of canvas and the dogs and this portable palette and stop someplace and start painting. I haven't done that for two or three years.

I paint in the studios. I don't do sketches beforehand. I make works on paper, but they're not preliminaries to doing the paintings because they stand on their own. For the canvases I just paint directly. I start usually with a wash drawing and just start manipulating it and then just keep going. I use oil paint, and sometimes mix in wax. I've got probably 100 brushes in various states and I've painted using spatulas that they use for toweling on masonry. I'm careful about the composition because the structure of the painting is critical. If you don't get that right, then it'll fail more likely than not.

Is the work intended to evoke thoughts about conservation of natural resources?

I've always maintained that ranchers are the original conservationists and they take care of the ground and take care of the animals. But being a conservationist is an intentional decision, and I've never felt that my work had that as an intent. Some people may like the things I'm painting and think maybe it's worth saving, but that's for somebody else to decide, not me.

What would you say inspires you?

It's the land. The land determines who we are and what we are. Montana is huge and the most varied terrain of any place I've ever been. Out east is flat ground, and as you move west it's kind of broken country. Then west is the mountains. Art requires a lot of private time; that's one of the reasons why I love winter. I don't have to see anybody if I don't want to. When I go to our studio in Montana I don't know anybody and my cellphone doesn't work too well, and I don't have to check emails, so I paint 10 or 12 hours a day.

Can you talk about your price range?

One of the things I've learned is to price by size. A lot of artists will want $2,000 for a painting that's 2 feet square, and for another one the same size they'll want $10,000. I price everything by size. For every idea, there's a size that's appropriate. I've done probably 8 or 10 that are 10 by 18 feet. We just sent one of these 10-by-18-footers to Jackson Hole priced at $300,000. Normally, that's way out of my price range. A painting that's 6 feet square is around $34,000 and a painting that's 4 feet square is $20,000. They're all priced by square inch so there's no surprise to a collector. I also do drawings. A 10-by-10-inch is $1,300 and the 30-by-40s run 4,500 bucks. I use oil and graphite, the same materials as ▷

Trophy #14, 1986, 19 x 33 x 34 inches.

my paintings, but it's on paper rather than on canvas.

I printed at Experimental Workshop in San Francisco for more than 30 years, and when [the owners] retired I bought their press and all the huge equipment. About three years ago I decided to downsize so I gave the entire print shop to Sheridan Junior College. It took a full semitruck to move all this stuff. I recently gave them my entire print collection, my own work and all the work that I traded for or bought over the years. They're selling my prints to raise money for scholarships and visiting artists. Most are priced from $800 on up to $2,000.

Earlier in your career you made minimalist sculptures, then on the ranch you started making bone guns in velvet-lined wooden caskets. How did your sculpture shift into Western themes?

In the city, when something dies they make a chalk mark around the sidewalk and whisk it off before anybody can respond. But when you lose something on a ranch you have to go through the loss, the grieving, and the disposal of whatever it is. I started gathering bones out of these bone piles and that led to these pieces of sculpture shaped like guns. Bob Broughton, who I've known forever, did all of the boxes for these pieces. We did it for about 20 years, but not for a while. They deal with Second Amendment rights, but also with life and death.

Can you talk about your relationship with guns and hunting?

In the West, nobody thinks twice about it because most everybody, except in a few population centers, they grow up with guns. Hunting's an annual fall ritual that everybody goes through. There are gun training schools, fathers teach sons, and all of that. When I was going to high school I used to have a shotgun in the rack in my pickup. Nobody thought anything of it or said anything. There have been so many mass shootings in the country. Many of them were done in gun-free zones. That should tell us something. I don't know what.

Have you ever killed a deer or anything else?

When I was about 14 I was working for this sporting goods store. The guy I worked for was like a second father to me. He gave me a gun and took me out and I did shoot a deer. Then a few years later I shot another one with friends. Then when I was on that first ranch, my neighbors would go goose hunting. I shot one. Then they told me that they mated for life and I haven't shot anything since. That was the 1970s, or somewhere in there. I'm spoiled because when I was a kid if we saw somebody on the same stretch of stream in two days, we'd think it was crowded. Now, there are fishermen everywhere, and also the manners in the stream aren't what they used to be, so I quit fishing.

Are you a horseman?

My wife is, and we used to ride horseback. But I'm not a good horseman. The only thing I ever knew was to stay on. But I love horses. I have this wonderful horse Bailey that I'll go feed in a while, him and Lynn's cutting horse Woody, who won championships as a 3-year-old and now he's 35. Bailey and I communicate well together. He weighs about 1,200 pounds and he will follow you around like a pup.

Longhorn Dr. #10, 1983, 20 x 26 inches.

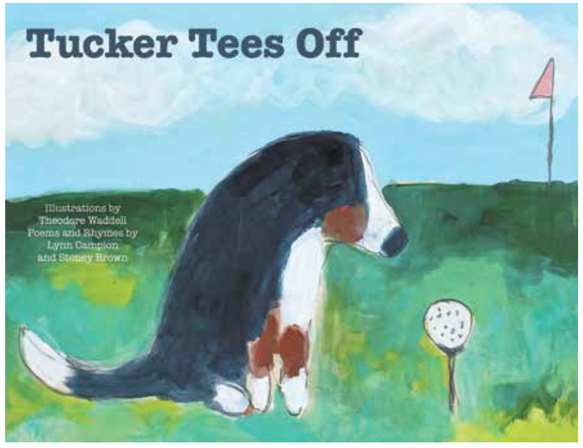
Where is the best museum to see your work?

The Yellowstone Museum in Billings, where I have a storied history. When I was 17 I got picked up for illegal drinking and spent a night in the county jail. That jail became the Yellowstone Art Museum, so I was in the museum before it was a museum. They have collected my work forever. Four or five years ago I gave them all the journals that I've been keeping since I was 17. There's 60 some years of journals and they have archives there. That would be the primary place.

Do you have any exhibitions coming up?

I used to do as many as 18 shows a year. Now, because I don't work as much as I used to, I don't have to be on the hamster wheel. I'm scheduled for a show at Gail Severn Gallery in Ketchum for February, and I'm going to do a ▷

Waddell's children's book series about a Bernese Mountain Dog.



show with my artist daughter Arin in Montana next summer. I haven't been represented in New York for a long time. People in New York think that nothing happens except in New York, which is probably true. But I love the West and my work is doing well, so I don't need it. I'm in galleries in Lexington, Kentucky; Aspen, Colorado; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Palm Desert, California; Jackson, Wyoming; Denver, Colorado—mainly in the West. These are ongoing relationships and they're like family.

The protagonist of your illustrated children's books is a Bernese Mountain Dog named Tucker. Do you actually have a dog named Tucker?

We did. Lynn had him before we were married and we've had others since we've been married. We have three right now. We have a dog cemetery and when I die I'm going to have my ashes put with the dogs'. The breed is so wonderfully goofy that I started to make drawings of them for books and Lynn has written a text for two of them: *Tucker's Seasonal Words of Wisdom* and *Tucker Tees Off*. We've taken up golf in the last eight years and that's how that came about. I've got ideas about a book called *Tucker Plays the Back Nine* that's going to try to deal with aging issues.

Looking back on your early career, could you ever have imagined the success you enjoy now?

No, not really. It was always a goal to be able to sell work. A sale of a piece of work is always a real rush for me. It means that somebody thought enough of what I'm doing to want to buy it and pay. I think the prices I get for what I do are pretty amazing. I always wanted to do that, but never quite knew that it was going to happen until all of a sudden, here it is. It did happen. I've been making my living at it since the early '80s. And I love where I live and I'm crazy about the dogs. I'm the luckiest man in the world, and I know it. I'm living the dream. ◆

Argenta Horses, 2009, 120 x 216 inches.