

TODAY'S  
MASTERS

# SCOTT CHRISTENSEN & QUANG HO INSPIRED BY THE WEST

The myths of the American West, one-sided narratives of manly bravery and Manifest Destiny, were undone by scholars long ago. In 1991, for example, the Smithsonian American Art Museum offered its own revisionist view with *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the American Frontier, 1820–1920*. While idols have been toppled and ambitions decried, the landscape — so central to any understanding of the West — remains. It has certainly changed since Albert Bierstadt rendered the Sierra Nevada and Thomas Moran produced *Shoshone Falls on the Snake River* (1900), but as one of nature's finest expressions, it continues to captivate artists.

While it may be difficult for some to see nature plainly — not as the locus of conquest, but as what Willam Blake called “imagination itself” — the Museum of Western Art (65 miles northwest of San Antonio in Kerrville, Texas) is now examining how two contemporary painters return to the land again and again, finding magic and meaning in its inexhaustible depths. The title of its newest show is *Two Perspectives: Scott Christensen*



SCOTT CHRISTENSEN (b. 1962), *March Snowpack*, 2024, oil on canvas, 44 x 48 in.





SCOTT CHRISTENSEN (b. 1962), *High in the Wind River Range*, 2024, oil on canvas, 26 x 40 in.

and Quang Ho, and it's on view July 20–September 21.

While still life or portraiture can be pure exercise, landscape requires a deep connection between artist and subject, a sympathy for the vista, no matter how humble, no matter how not picturesque. And where the nature-driven abstractions of Georgia O’Keeffe (to cite just one artist) can offer a deeply formalist pleasure, for most viewers it is representational landscapes that provide a visceral sense of escape. The best of these are more than mere replication, combining accuracy and interpretation, observation and expressiveness. As Scott Christensen notes, “When I started out, I wanted to paint a tree that looked like a tree. I didn’t think in terms of pattern and design. But then I wanted to do more; I wanted to paint aesthetically.”

Wyoming-born Christensen (b. 1962) came to art after his life as an athlete



SCOTT CHRISTENSEN (b. 1962), *Comin’ In*, 2024, oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in.





---

QUANG HO (b. 1963), *The Sentinel*, 2024, oil on linen, 24 x 36 in.

---



---

QUANG HO (b. 1963), *Autumnal*, 2024, oil on linen, 36 x 24 in.

---

took a turn. Injured while playing football at Chadron State College in Nebraska, he felt directionless. An art class, taken to fulfill a requirement, proved to be more than just that; he eventually earned a degree in art education. Yet teaching proved unsatisfying and Christensen set about making himself a professional painter: “I painted all kinds of things – horses, cows, wildlife – and then I got excited about just painting light.”

Christensen’s creative development was built on his serious study of a range of painters, from the Barbizon-inspired British artist Alfred East (1844–1913) to the American Edgar Payne (1883–1947), whose imagery includes the Canyon de Chelly in Arizona and California’s High Sierra. Still another hero is the Swedish master Anders Zorn (1860–1920), whose oeuvre encompasses landscapes in watercolors and oils.

“I have learned so many things from many different artists,” says Christensen. “Design and composition from the Czech painter and illustrator Alphonse Mucha, soft and hard edges from John Singer Sargent, opening up the shadows from Zorn.” And the lessons keep coming. “Many painters in history bounced all around trying to understand how to paint high key or low,” Christensen observes. “Or they didn’t know what harmony was. Our knowledge precedes our execution. That’s key to me. I seek to build my knowledge base so that I have more ways to solve problems.”

Although he always loved being outdoors, it was a while before Christensen, who often worked from photographs, took his brushes

---



---

**SCOTT CHRISTENSEN** (b. 1962), *August Teton Valley*, 2024, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in.

---

there. He told *Art of the West* magazine, “What you see in a photograph is not at all what it looks like... I needed to get out there and break it down.” Indeed, Christensen gets out there in an SUV kitted out with all of his supplies, or takes a pack horse to the backcountry, where he’ll stay for a week or longer working. “I might start with a gouache and do five more, pursuing an idea working with shape and scale. I don’t always know where I’m going. And I don’t call everything *plein air*, because these are not finished things most of the time. I consider myself a pretty rough painter outside. I’m looking for ideas.”

Whether taking in the landscape not far from his home near Victor, Idaho, or trekking deeper into the country, Christensen always balances what he sees with what he wants the viewer to see. Referencing his canvas *March Snowpack*, the artist notes, “I was driving from Bozeman [Montana] along the Madison River and I looked out and saw a high bank with all these chunks of snow falling off. I edited most of them out so that there’s a steep grade. So the bottom half of the painting is completely made up. It’s all about taking something and making it more interesting, if you can.”

#### A SEARCH FOR VISUAL HARMONY

Born in Hue, Vietnam, in 1963, it seems Quang Ho came into the world destined to create. “My first memory of drawing was getting into trouble for drawing on the wall before I was 4 years old,” he recalls. “I didn’t know any artists growing up, but somehow developed a keen interest in drawing. When I immigrated to the U.S. in 1975 at the age of 12, I didn’t understand English, so I spent most of my time in class drawing while my classmates did real schoolwork.”

Ho, who divides his time between Denver and York County, Pennsylvania, attended the Colorado Institute of Art, where he was mentored by René Bruhin, director of the life drawing program. “Although I was top of the class in drawing, he demonstrated to me that I knew nothing about painting. René



---

**QUANG HO** (b. 1963), *Dahlias*, 2024, oil on linen, 24 x 30 in.





QUANG HO (b. 1963), *Blue Rider*, 2024, oil on linen, 24 x 24 in.

the lines of the great Hudson River School painters — Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church, Thomas Moran. The viewer is brought into the picture by the grandeur of the scene itself. Quang, on the other hand, draws us into his works in an entirely different way. He is interested in representing the mundane details of an immediate environment.”

Beauchamp continues, “Two of my favorites in this exhibition are Scott’s *High in the Wind River Range* and Quang’s *The Sentinel*. I love the former for its fully thought-out composition. All parts of this simple landscape work together to tell the story of rocks, trees, wind, snow, and clouds. The mountain has a rugged majesty to it, while the foreground trees are both delicate and wind-beaten. I love Quang’s piece for many of the same reasons. It is expertly composed and includes broad strokes and yet also exquisite detail. I love the simplicity of a lone human figure — not easily seen at first — emerging from behind the ancient tree, walking the edge of the creek, in solitude.”

Christensen and Ho, who have exhibited together previously at the Booth Western Art Museum (Cartersville, Georgia), have developed a substantive friendship over the past 15 years or so. “Once I got to visit with Scott in person, I immediately knew that we were brothers in arms,” Ho recalls. “Scott is a grand painter of big open spaces

and I am the intimate painter of close-up spaces. His paintings are about distance, and I like to fractalize space, making order out of chaos and giving it rhythm. Scott and I inspire each other with this show, in a way, daring each other to push our limits a bit.” Christensen adds, “We’re both big experimenters. I’m always surprised by the things Quang does in his paintings.”

While Christensen fully explores the mountain peaks and rushing water that signify wilderness in the West, he also addresses the often overlooked and less romantic facets of its landscape. With *August Teton Valley*, for example, he presents a view of agricultural land, far-reaching fields that seem filled with a silence as profound as any that pervades the backcountry. With *Blue Rider*, Ho takes the emblematic image of a man on a horse and sets it against a ground of blue and coral — water and sky. You can feel the horse at rest in its stance; the rider, shaped by deep shadow, projects an Everyman aspect. Light hitting the rider’s shoulder and the horse’s hindquarters pulls the two figures into a diagonal, bringing them closer to the viewer.

“Art of the American West is constantly changing,” Beauchamp declares. “Today it properly encompasses the majestic views of Christensen’s landscapes and also Ho’s colorful florals and intimate portraits of figures emerging from the woods. Both artists carry on the tradition of the West while stepping away from it to say, ‘This is my American West.’” ●

**Information:** [museumofwesternart.com](http://museumofwesternart.com)

**THOMAS CONNORS** is a Chicago-based cultural reporter whose work appears regularly in *The Magazine Antiques*.

introduced to me the essential language and vocabulary of painting. Everything was abstracted down to raw visual material. I used to think that painting a face meant that I needed to get a likeness through good drawing, but then I learned that to paint a face, or any object in front of me, means to paint the play of light as it travels across the planes of the subject. This was a pivotal shift in how I looked at the world from that point on.”

Ho likens the elements of painting — line, value, color, texture, edges — to notes in music. “It’s when the notes are brought together intentionally that they become jazz, classical, or blues,” he observes. “Same with painting. Those elements become impressionist works, or realism, or abstract expressionism. What drives my work, which the exhibition at Kerrville perfectly demonstrates because of its wide variety of styles and subjects, is the search for visual harmony within the constraints of each painting’s particular visual idea.

“I play guitar, and sometimes I aim to think like a jazz musician, sometimes like Beethoven, sometimes like a balladeer. With painting, sometimes it is the light that fascinates me. Other times, I just want to take a familiar subject that I’ve painted for 40 years, such as the figure, and go outside the box with it — to explore paint expressing itself in a new way.”

Like Christensen, Ho draws inspiration from nature, but he does not work exclusively outdoors. “When I was younger, most of what I painted was from life in the studio and on location outside. This was invaluable to teach me to evaluate and understand what I was looking at. As I mature as a painter, I can now take an idea and develop it using whatever is necessary. For example, the iPhone is an essential tool for information-gathering. And oftentimes I will fabricate an entire painting from imagination.”

#### ALWAYS EXPERIMENTING

“Both of these men take a unique approach to the world of landscape,” says Darrell Beauchamp, executive director of the Museum of Western Art. “Scott’s work tends to be more traditional in approach, along