

HOW THE WEST WAS WON, OPTIONED, AND TURNED INTO A HUGE SUMMER BLOCKBUSTER

NICHOLAS WEIST ON MICHAEL KRUEGER



In the comparatively short history of the United States, within what hasn't been relativized, swept under the public carpet, or rewritten entirely, there exists a narrative of factual events transmuted into myth. The tales are long and familiar; they manifest outside the oral record in entertainment media and as the schlock available in roadside emporiums, theme parks, and lateral merchandising campaigns. Kansas-based artist Michael Krueger's work operates in the interstices between these pseudo-truths, combining the razzle dazzle of edutainment with impressionistic renderings of American collective memory.

Krueger's colored pencil drawings and lithographs are like the grey area in a white lie. They beat a loosely organized path across history, picking up anecdotes and scraps of local lore along the way. For instance in a series of works picturing single subjects positioned in negative space like a Key Point at chapter's end, Krueger heroicizes the forgotten cowboys, tramps, and adventurers who were so vital in shaping the contemporary conception of the West. But their gaucho hats and bandanas, among their many too-perfect signifiers of Western-ness, are offset by startling anachronisms. Take the drawing of Frank James; he's in a pair of cheap sandals from across the border, or maybe Urban Outfitters. In another, a figure that looks like an extra in *Tombstone* toys with a can of spray paint. These ripples in the gloss of Krueger's characters plunge one, otherwise transfixed by the steady gaze of an ideal, back into the realm of the real. Imagine spotting a digital watch in a period film—the immersive fantasy crumbles and before you know it, its particulate elements are exposed as props (in both senses) and nothing more.

Krueger's interest in the hidden recesses of universalist narrative continues in works that take place in specific environments

as well. In *Monsters that Walk Among Us*, the taxidermied collection of hometown naturalist hero Lindsay Lewis Dyche populate a tract of scrubland. Dyche, whose name is not widely known although it graces a building at the University of Kansas (where Krueger teaches), was described in an 1893 *New York Times* piece as having "risen to his position...from the estate of a child in the woods, nursed by an Indian squaw, hunting and trapping along the banks of the Waukarusha." It's a perfectly American story: the brilliant success of a boy estranged from culture but returning to the bright light of institutionalized education. It is also a story, as with most things American, under-girded by a low current of racism. Krueger deftly, perhaps too much so, skirts this systemic national flaw, focusing instead on the personal. Here Dyche's assortment of long-dead snakes, rams, and polar bears—the ghosts of history made manifest—are collapsed into a sort of tea party with the present.

Leaving the West, Krueger travels even farther back, to the North Carolina of 1590. A black sun sets on Roanoke Island, picking out the letters "CROATOAN" scratched into the bark of trees. The reference, if middle school history taught us anything, is to a cryptic message left after the mysterious disappearance of an English colony. *Return to Roanoke* is a haunting landscape littered with the detritus of colony life. The densely patterned natural features, here and in other works as well, mirror the scattered facts of years of retelling, and the frame, organized in forced perspective, reads like a roadmap (there are even tiny blue squiggles denoting water) to a narrative. The story of the lost pioneers, by now equal parts dry fact, Rod Serling, James Patterson, and Michael Bay, seems tailor-made for Krueger: the historian of nothing but the now.

Left: Michael Krueger, *Monsters that Walk Among Us*, 2007; colored pencil. Right: Michael Krueger, *Flip Flop*, 2006; colored pencil.