

Kit Carson | Jane Fonda on life in New Mexico | Pueblo pottery

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Best of the West

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EXCLUSIVE:

Why Joe Wilson
and Valerie Plame
are settling down in Santa Fe

PLUS. Secrets of Northern New Mexico's legendary light

billy schenck's new west

One of art's latest trends revolves around the idea of a New West—a refiguring of the landscape and those rugged individuals from days of old. In fact, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's recent blockbuster, *The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890–1950* (see book review, page 65) has generated thoughtful criticism about the “truths” of the West, including its status in relation to the supposed acme of American art—New York City. Billy Schenck, successful artist and self-confessed cowboy, lives the mythic Old West life right alongside the contemporary realities of the New. He's got a rodeo spread and old adobe home filled with traditional Western art; his outrageous post-Pop paintings line his studio walls. Rather paradigmatic; we call it “postmodern.” —KMD

Which came first: your career as an artist, or your avocation as a cowboy?

My art led me into rodeoing. I started out making Western imagery based on black-and-white movie stills as a result of seeing Sergio Leone Westerns. Before that I dismissed cowboy culture altogether—I thought they were a bunch of narrow-minded, rednecked jerks. Then the next thing I knew I was riding bareback and saddle broncs in small local rodeos in northwestern Wyoming. This continued each summer, then I'd go back to my loft in New York, from 1970 to '75, where I had an international career going by the early seventies. [Schenck's first New York exhibition of his Pop photorealist paintings, held in 1971 when he was only 24, sold out. By 1980, he was known as Billy Famous, a take-off on Billy Name, of Andy Warhol's Factory entourage.]

I stopped rodeoing when I turned 30, but I continued helping to produce them. Then someone introduced me to team penning, and I was back. You have a herd of 30 cows, you pick specific ones out of the herd, and then jam them into a pen at one end of the arena. It's a whole different discipline. Out of that they started doing two-man ranch sorting. I do that still. It can involve kids and old people as long as they can get into a saddle. I'll do it till I die—with my boots on; best way to go, strapped onto the back of my saddle.

How did you get into collecting art?

I collect early New Mexico pre-Modernism: the Taos Ten, early Santa Fe and Albuquerque painters. I'm not much of a fan of Modernism. I was 18 when I bought my first painting—a fellow student's triptych. Then I was hooked on collecting art. I did step it up when I moved to New York [in 1969] and started collecting my peer group, the first generation of contemporary realism and Pop. I bought Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Motherwell, Warhol—on paper because I couldn't afford anything else.


I started collecting in general when I was 10 years old: arrowheads and Donald Duck comic books. I still have the comic books. In fact, my current artwork is a result of my passion for comic books and *Mad* magazine. It's no wonder

no one takes me seriously! My early work was a re-interpretation of Hollywood's West. Then I began exploring Western iconography—undermining it as much as I respected it. The captions [on my paintings] started in 1981, blatantly political, social, and sexual commentary.

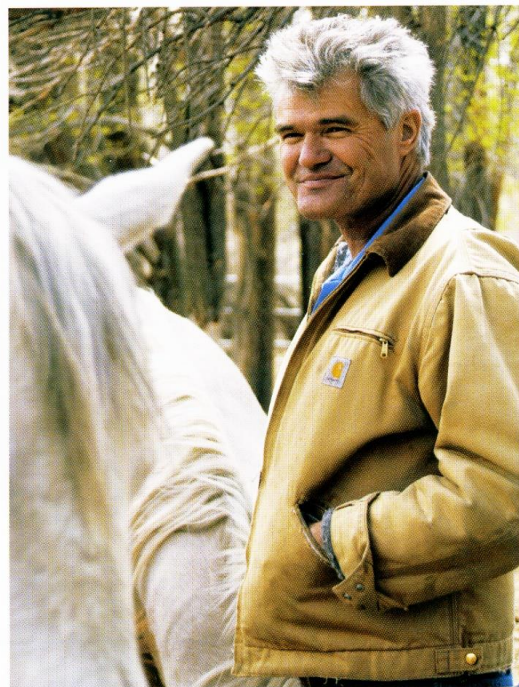
Tell us about your starting a gallery of contemporary art.

I've been in the business of selling art under my company Schenck Southwest for years. Now Mark McDowell and I are partnering in a gallery venture at my publishing studio in La Cienega. We'll have at least three shows this summer, with openings on Saturdays and then all-day rodeos at the ranch on Sundays, real belt-buckle competitions. Our first exhibition artist is Jay Jusard on June 16; he'll show a portfolio of documentary photographs. He's 70 years old and with Mark produces monumental photographs from the 1980s of cowboys and cowgirls throughout the West. Our second show features Linda Ingraham, a photographer from Phoenix, and then me in August.

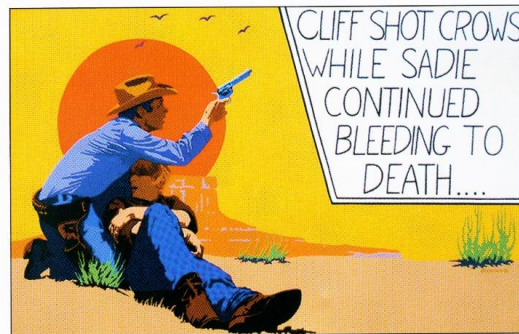
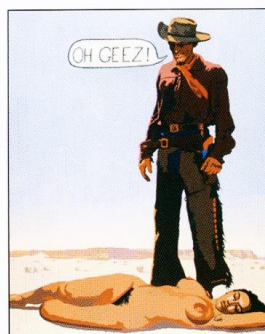
What's up with your current work?

I invented an alter-ego back in the late eighties named Cliff. He was always a little foggy as to his intentions, though they were good intentions. Then as time went by he was doing really horrible, aberrant actions. Now Cliff is suing Schenck for ruining Cliff. I invented Cliff, and now he's suing me! 

Schenck Southwest, 268 Los Pinos Road (just north of Las Golondrinas), La Cienega, 505-438-8350, schencksouthwest.com



NATALIE BRIDWELL BACA



Clockwise from top: Schenck at home, with horses Badger and Blondie; *The Cliff & Sadie Story* 1990, oil on canvas, 35 x 45"; *Oh Geez!*, 1999, oil on canvas, 65 x 54"