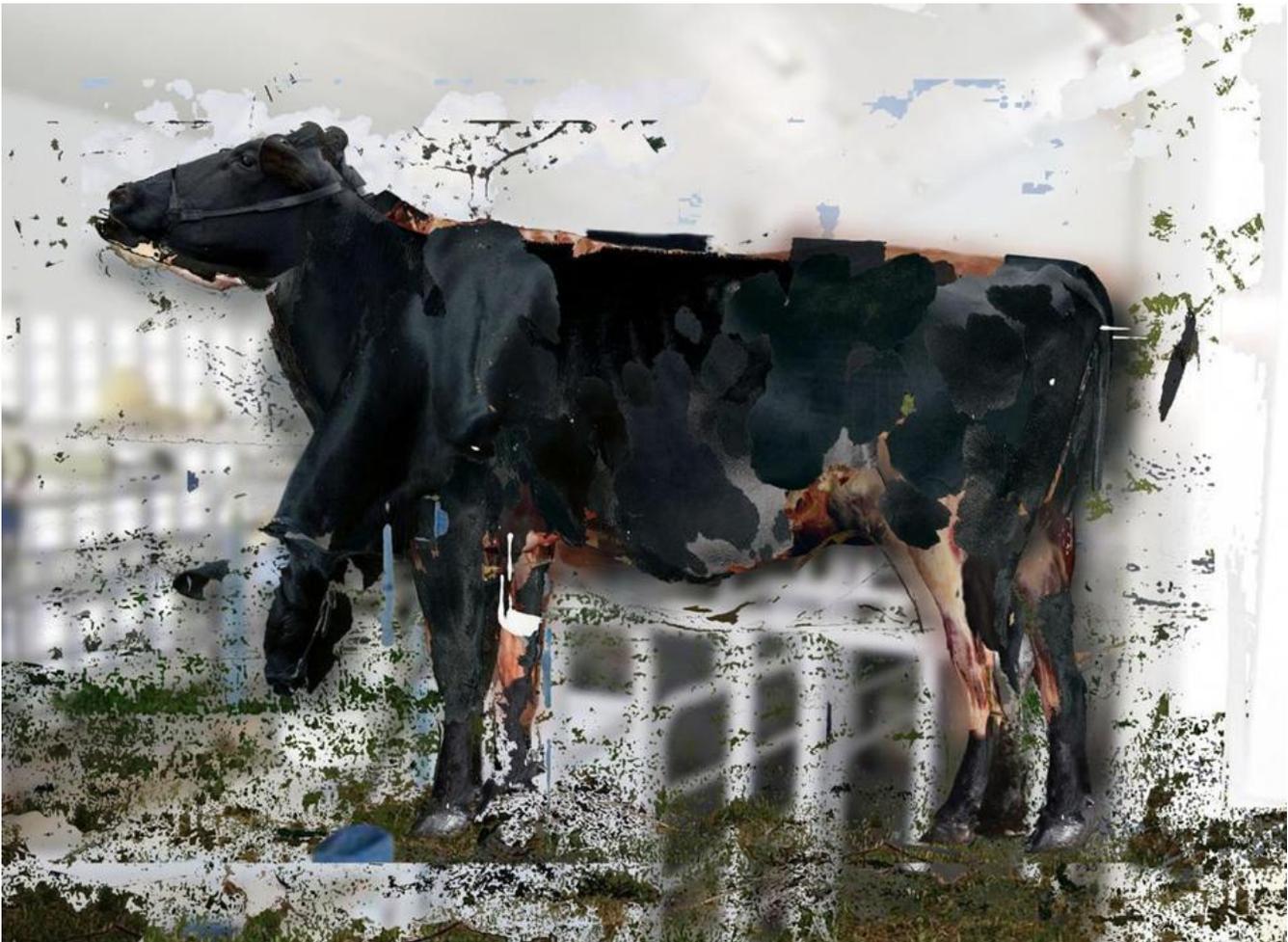


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The myth of the Wild West, and its murky construction

By Cate McQuaid

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History is what we make of it, malleable and suitable to our own needs. “Wild and Woolly” at the New Art Center examines our romance with the American West.

The mythologizing of the West began with westward expansion in the 19th century. Manifest destiny sounded God-given, but it was an empire-building political platform aiming to conquer the continent, by force if

necessary. Still, it had a terrific catchphrase. Curator Ryan Arthurs has pulled together a smart show, with trap doors that drop us from the gleaming myth into its murky construction.

The stark, gorgeous, painterly works by Deborah Oropallo involve photography, digital manipulation, and airbrushed paint. For “Kernel,” she photographed Holstein cows, digitally erased their spots, and layered them into one jarring bovine. It’s smeary and blocky; in places, it looks flayed. Cattle are a central motif of the West, and this one, overblown and tattered, suggests a dream turned to a nightmare.

Olivier Laude’s elaborately staged color photographs play on our willingness to read photos as documents of reality. In “Holzfallers,” from the “Lifestyles” series, an older man with wild hair and a beard wears garb fashioned from burlap and twine. He stands beside a dying pine tree, with a stack of cut wood fastened to his back and a skull at his feet. He’s a caricature of an old settler, tenacious and grizzled, the type who might appear in an old tintype, but he’s blown up in startling color here, almost Disneyfied, except that he’s a tad creepy to land in a theme park.

Wild and Woolly

New Art Center, 61 Washington Park, Newtonville 617-964-3424. <http://www.newartcenter.org>

Closing date: Feb. 21.