

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston

"The Old, Weird America: Folk Themes in Contemporary Art." Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, May, 2008.



Aaron Morse
Cloud World (Broncos), 2023
Acrylic on canvas
72 x 60 in
182.9 x 152.4 cm

One of Aaron Morse's strongest childhood memories is of camping under a tree on an open plain in Utah during a violent thunderstorm. He remembers being impressed by the terrific power of the storm and by the realization that nature was completely indifferent to his existence. As an artist exploring aspects of social history, he now draws inspiration from authors and filmmakers who have depicted the human struggle against those impersonal forces of nature. In this exhibition, Morse's four paintings grapple with ideas of the sublime in the early American landscape. Two works, *Magua (#2)* (2004) and *Deerslayer (#2)* (2006), were inspired by James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Deerslayer* (1841), which chronicles the adventures of Natty Bumppo, an eighteenth-century guide and frontiersman who moves between the worlds of Natives and European settlers in what is now New York State. To make his *Magua* images, which are named after a villainous Huron Indian character in Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), Morse scanned, and then digitally collaged and distorted images from a variety of sources, including a condensed, comic book-style version of *The Deerslayer* published by *Classics Illustrated*. "Even though they were written while the country was still in formation, Cooper's novels are already nostalgic for the unspoiled frontier before westward expansion," Morse says. "There is a continual recycling of the myth of virgin wilderness in our culture; I wanted to exaggerate this by starting with a version of the novel that was itself an imaginary distortion."¹ The individual images—scenes of hunting, fighting, and canoeing—are arranged as sequential panels in the painting, creating an action-packed effect that Morse likens to a movie trailer: "I wanted an all-at-once picture that combined close-ups, landscape, and action with narrative and emotional content, abstraction and stylization." Both because it is less often depicted in films and because of its epic struggles, the early American period described in *The Deerslayer* and also depicted in Currier and Ives prints and Herman Melville's novels is a fresh source of inspiration for Morse—one that feels alive and exciting in the urbanized, industrialized twenty-first century.

More contemporary visions of the American wilderness by writers like Cormac McCarthy inspired the 2006 paintings *The Good Hunt* and *The Good Hunt (#2)*. Both depict hunters standing in front of huge hauls of prey: bear, moose, elk, mountain lions, and dozens of other animals.

Philip Martin Gallery
3342 Verdugo Road, Los Angeles, CA 90065
www.philipmartingallery.com

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston

"*The Old, Weird America: Folk Themes in Contemporary Art.*" Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, May, 2008.



Aaron Morse
Cloud World (Mazeppa), 2021
Acrylic and collage on canvas
48 x 36 in
121.9 x 91.4 cm

One hunter, hefting a mountain lion and wearing a bowler hat, is clearly white; the other, standing with his long rifle next to a crouching woman, Morse says, is “ethnically indeterminate,” and based on a publicity still of the British-born actor Daniel Day-Lewis in the role of Hawkeye in the 1992 film *The Last of the Mohicans*. Morse, who admires McCarthy’s violent 1985 novel *Blood Meridian* about a scalp-hunting gang on the Texas-Mexico border, used combinations of washy opaque and translucent surfaces (incorporating glittering glass beads in the painting titled *The Good Hunt*) to create scenes of conscienceless slaughter that echo the amoral universe and stylized storytelling of McCarthy’s novel. In an age of global warming and mass extinctions, these works with their dispassionate sangfroid serve as memento mori for a vanishing natural abundance, as well as attempts to envision the legacy of destruction on which the country was settled.

1. This and all subsequent quotes by the artist are from telephone interviews with the author, February 2 and November 7, 2007.