

Nilsen, Richard. "Re-Imagining the West' is fresh breeze at SMOCA." *The Arizona Republic*, 4 July 2010.

Sometimes the best art is not where you expect it.

Another show of Western-themed art hardly is a three-alarm don't-miss in Arizona. But "Re-Imagining the West" in Scottsdale is a surprising show and, after the Cezanne show at Phoenix Art Museum, certainly the best one currently in the Valley.

Organized by Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art curator Claire C. Carter, it is built primarily from pieces in the museum's permanent collection and arranged in such a way as to illustrate several contemporary themes in Western art.

It ranges from traditional oil-painting landscapes to scratch-your-head conceptual installations, but the best work is made fresh and compelling by the clarity of the exhibit's organization.

Still, sometimes the best art is not what you expect.

The single piece that most astonishes is a 33-minute video by Mungo Thomson called "The American Desert, for Chuck Jones," which extracts the landscapes from a score of Warner Bros.' Road Runner cartoons and presents them as stills, pans and a few action sequences, backed with ambient sound of the real desert. No Road Runner; no Wile E. Coyote; no Acme products; just buttes, mesas, balancing rocks, sunsets, vistas and a few gorgeous night skies.

In this version, those skies come in many colors, and canyons are exaggerated. Tawny becomes yellow and ruddy becomes red.

What is surprising is how well-observed those backgrounds are: They may be simplified and cartoonified, but they include many small details you wouldn't have expected, such as corrugated culverts under roadways, guard rails, high-tension lines and telephone poles. You watch the video carefully and feel, "This is the desert I know."

The installation joins the abstracted landscapes of painter Jimmy Swinnerton and the stage settings George Herriman gave his Krazy Kat newspaper strips.

The credit for those landscapes, though, probably should not go to Chuck Jones, who directed so many classic Warner Bros. cartoons, but to Philip De Guard, who was the artist who drew most of the backgrounds for the cartoons and whose work is featured here. You sense that De Guard actually knew the Sonoran Desert and the Colorado Plateau, although you do laugh when you see the saguaros among the Monument Valley buttes.

Another knockout is the selection from Michael Light's "100 Suns," which are new prints from old negatives of nuclear and thermonuclear tests. A wall of pictures of mushroom clouds and blast waves reawakens our sense of awe - in the original sense - of such destruction. They may well be meant as anti-nuclear propaganda, but their real function is to provide a modern sense of the sublime.

The show is built around themes, such as "Landscape: Imagining Eden," "Borders: Battling for

Physical and Social Territory" and "Water: Consuming the Scarce," and the art addresses these issues in ways that are not always simple and didactic.

Matthew Moore's three-screen video of the Central Arizona Project canals is both instructive and hypnotically beautiful.

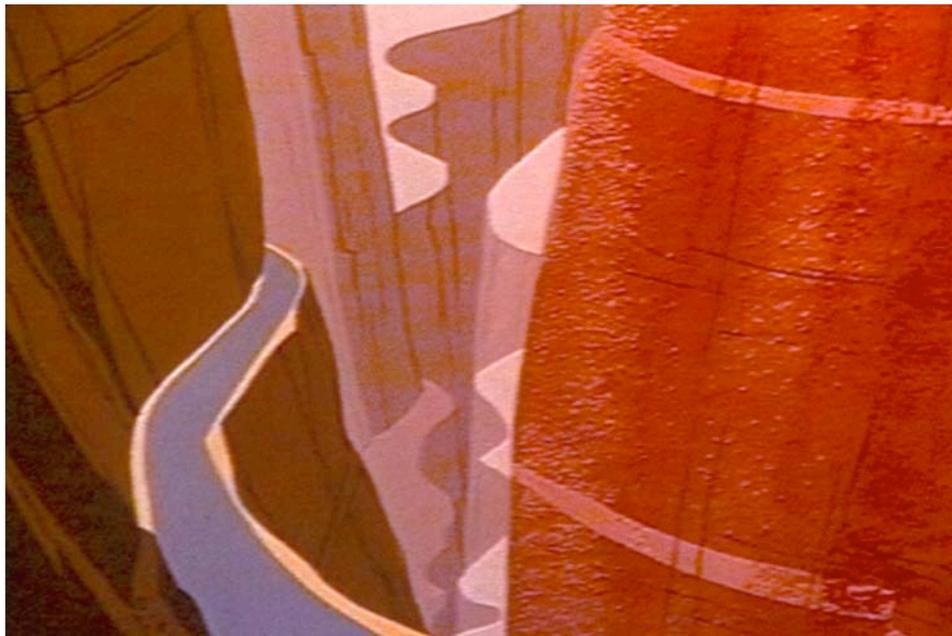
And a small collection of Hopi kachinas provides a counterweight to Edward Curtis' beautiful, if sometimes mendacious and romanticized, portraits of Indians.

One of the best things about Carter's presentation is that it isn't labeled to death. One of the problems at SMOCA in the past has been a tendency to make their shows unnecessarily academic, with wall text that read too much like doctoral theses, losing the visitor in a sargasso of jargon. Carter has given us a clear framework to see the art but has left the interpretation to us, where it should be left.

Art, after all, is about the art; it isn't about reading about the art.



Mungo Thomson's video projection "The American Desert, for Chuck Jones" includes Warner Bros. cartoon stills.



The backgrounds in "The American Desert, for Chuck Jones" are simplified, but they include unexpected small details, such as corrugated culverts under roads, guard rails, high-tension lines and telephone poles.