

INSIDE John Coleman • Small Works & Miniatures • Trailside Grand Re-opening

Previews of Works For Sale at Upcoming Shows

NOVEMBER 2016

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WESTERN ART

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The Return

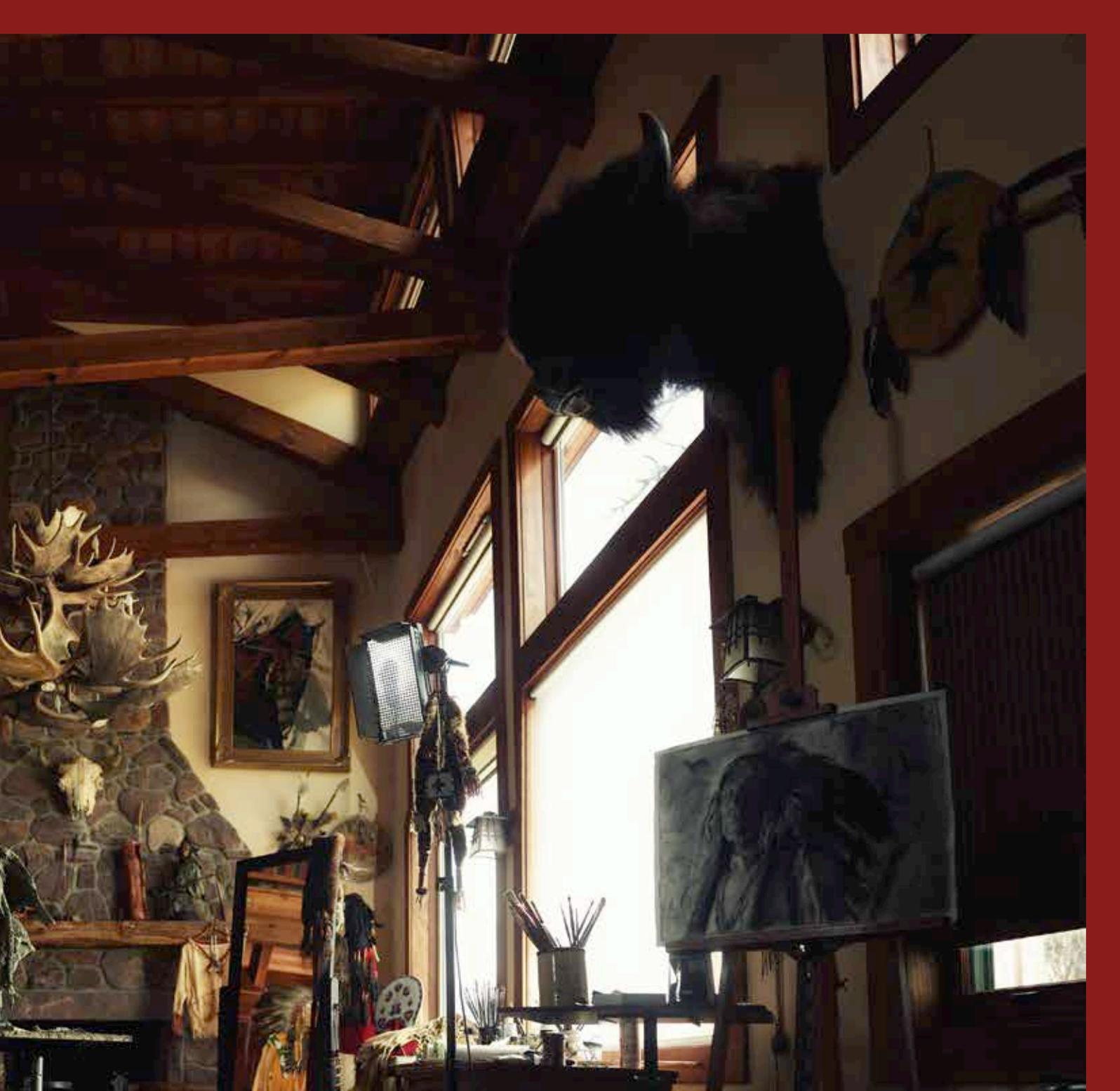
After retreating to the studio for nearly a year, John Coleman makes a bold statement as a painter at a new show at the Legacy Gallery.

By Michael Clawson

John Coleman in his studio in Prescott, Arizona. Photo by Willie Petersen.



Scan for VIDEO



In November 2015, as the Cowboy Artists of America celebrated its 50th anniversary with an exhibition in Scottsdale, Arizona, sculptor and CA member John Coleman found himself at the Scottsdale Artists' School teaching half a dozen sculptors of all ages how to find truth in clay. As the students worked—their subjects were two nude models, one male and one female—John bounced from table to table, assessing their work and offering tips.

Toward the end of the class, John started doing a demonstration of his own work. On

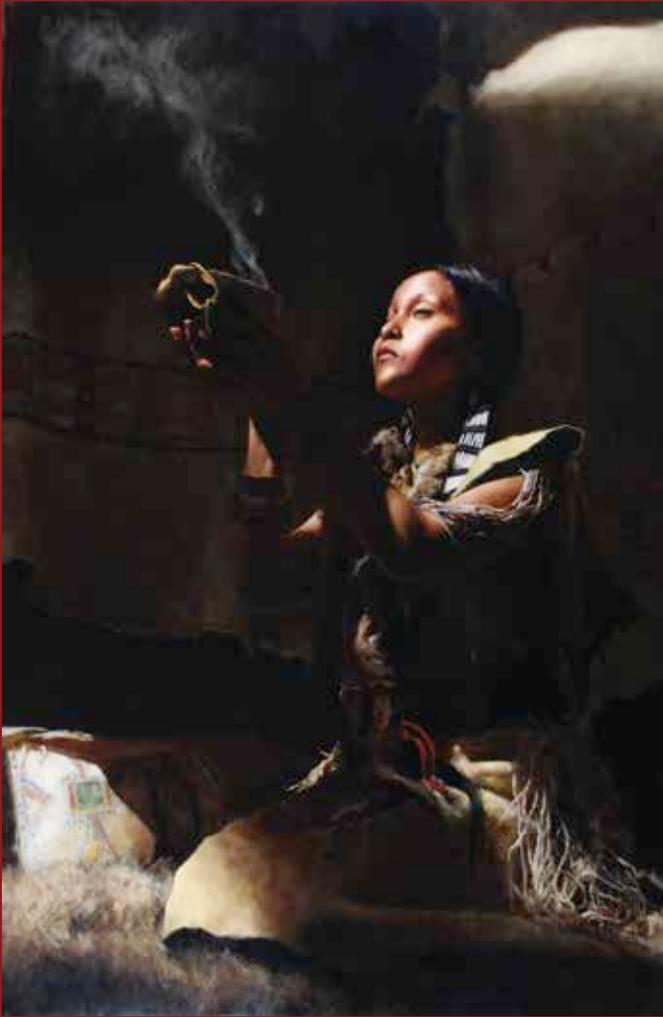
a wire armature was a wadded roll of tinfoil. From a chirping microwave—there are many kitchen items in a sculpture studio, including a nearby electric skillet filled with a soupy clay—he extracted a lump of clay that he folded down over the foil. As the clay slowly migrated south under kneading thumbs, a human head started to appear. And then cheekbones, a nose, a mound that would become lips and a chin that curved softly into a neck. The features developed quickly, magically almost, as did some clay accessories including weathered-looking eagle feathers

and a blanket that was achieved by painting heated clay over layered folds of foil.

Once the figure's shape was established, John started to soar. He moved some clay around and created male facial features. He swiped and jabbed at the bust, and a mournful expression emerged. To emphasize this emotion on the face, he manhandled the clay head with authority, pointing it down in a sorrowful and reflective pose. "Or maybe you want more of a proud expression," he said, before turning the head back up and adjusting the clay to show strength in the jawline and



Monarch of the Buffalo Nation, oil on canvas, 44½ x 27½"



Morning Prayer, oil on canvas, 64 x 42½"



Graceful Spirit, shown in clay for bronze, 29"

brow. "Or what about a female," he said as clay was mashed aside at key points to reveal a feminine face. He added the clay blanket over the head, framing a beautiful figure with a peaceful expression. Each iteration that the clay took, and there were dozens, could easily be a John Coleman original, but here he's just teaching, and he's making it all look so easy. Effortless even. "It's about stories," he told the students. "It's about connecting with your subject and finding a way to express something about them."

The students didn't know it then, but what John had done in the clay demonstration—tweaking, prodding, discovering the stories he wanted to tell—was something the artist was doing on his own time in his own studio with oil painting. And the journey would take him the better part of a year and will culminate in a career-defining solo show November 5 at the Legacy Gallery in Scottsdale, Arizona. The show, *Spirit • Lives • Legends*, is being billed as Coleman's "coming out" as a painter.

"My paintings have been something that

I started very early, but people have only started to see my paintings, I'll say up to about six years ago. I started doing drawings...more or less to get people used to the flatwork. So it's only been recently when people refer to me they don't automatically say sculptor," he says. "This show will unequivocally introduce me as a painter. I've got more paintings than I will sculpture, although one of my sculptures is 17 feet tall. This time in my life, this year in my life, has been the busiest and most difficult time of my whole career. It's been very exciting. It proves to me that I've still got it and I'm growing as an artist."

John and I talked about the show and what it meant to him in his Prescott, Arizona, studio recently. My visit came after several months of back and forth with him about some of the shows I was writing about, including the *Prix de West* and the annual CAA show, *Cowboys Crossings*. Whenever I inquired about his new work for museum shows, he—and frequently his wife, Sue, who helps him with his studio business—would politely reply back that he

was working on something big and he would be skipping shows this year. "Stay tuned," he once told me. No one skips the *Prix* lightly or, for that matter, a CAA exhibition. And yet John did. All so he could devote the proper time and care to announcing himself as a painter.

What's ironic is he's always been a painter. Even going back to when he was a kid and his mother would buy Andrew Wyeth prints to hang in the house. He was headed down an art path then as a teenager, but life sometimes interrupts in the best ways, and that's what happened to John. He married Sue, they had children and started a successful career that would eventually include mobile home awnings, contracting and land development. He only started sculpting in his early 40s, a delayed start that John doesn't regret. But even for that to happen, he needed a jumpstart. It came when his youngest daughter married, thereby eliminating any remaining excuses he had built up in his head.

"I spent 20 years not doing it, probably more for the reverence I held toward art. I didn't want



Dragonfly, oil on canvas, 18½ x 27"

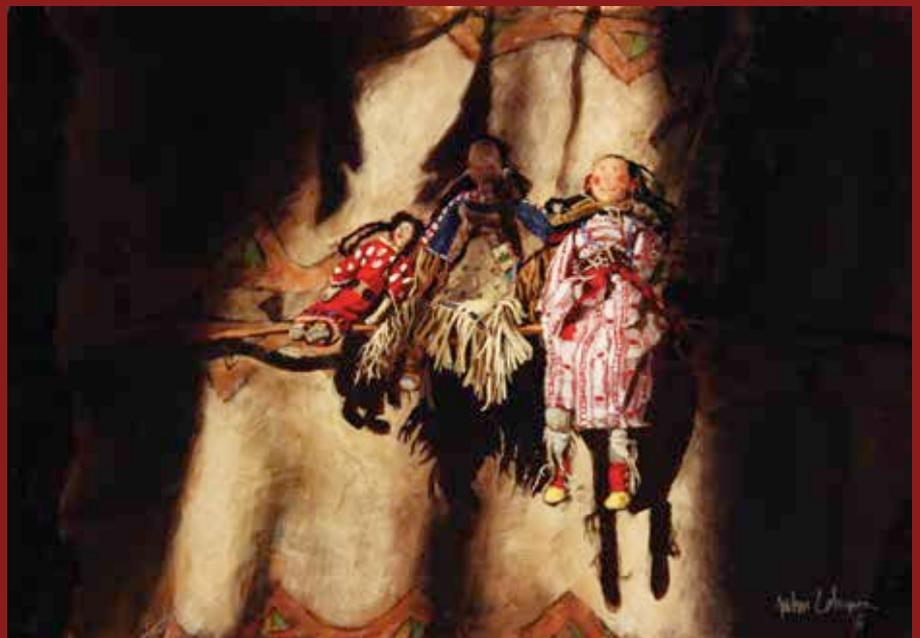
to dabble in it. I hated the idea of making it a hobby," he explains. John pauses carefully and says that, at the time, he was a recovering alcoholic—"I haven't had a drink since 1984," he proudly admits—and he was beginning to see the world through a new set of eyes after a number of tumultuous years that strained his creativity. "I had a friend who I helped sober up, and he always talked about the 'if only' disease. He would say, 'One day you're going to look back and think, if only...'. Even then this thing was welling up inside of me."

When this creative energy finally came out, via clay and bronze, John quickly rose through the ranks of Western art. He still fondly recalls the day Ray Swanson called to encourage him to apply to the CAA—he did and was accepted on his first go. Today his work is in major museums around the country and he exhibits art at most of the major museum exhibitions. And he's respected among his peers as a phenomenal teacher, a perceptive storyteller and an artist with integrity. He's also a character, which goes a long way in Western art: he's quick to laugh, first to compliment and, with his Yosemite Sam mustache, has an iconic cowboy look.

Brad Richardson, owner of the Legacy Gallery, has represented John for 18 years,

and never doubted his skill as an artist. "Right away I recognized the incredible ability to accurately portray anatomy. The hands, the faces...how it all fit together, the structure and the body and everything.

I was extremely taken with his work from the very beginning," Richardson says. "I love the fact that John saw painting and drawing as a new mountain to climb, not that he feels he's completely conquered sculpture.



BFFs, oil on board, 9½ x 13¾"



John Coleman in his studio next to the clay version of *One Who Brings Life – The Rainmaker*, a new 17-foot bronze.

JOHN COLEMAN RETROSPECTIVE NOW ON VIEW IN SCOTTSDALE

John Coleman: Past/Present/Future is now on view at Western Spirit: Scottsdale's Museum of the West in Arizona. The show draws from Coleman's entire career, including early high school works, later bronzes and it will also have a sample of new pieces that will be in the solo show at the Legacy Gallery. "John is a living treasure to Arizona, a remarkable artist," says chief curator Tricia Loscher. "He really contributes to the art of the American West by telling stories of the West by using a more universal kind of perspective in his art that includes mythologies and legends. He really touches people around the world with his work."

One highlight from the exhibition is the re-assembled clay version of *One Who Brings Life – The Rainmaker*, a 17-foot-tall sculpture. Parts of the sculpture are cut and falling off, but it shows an accurate depiction of what a clay sculpture looks like after it has been put back together after molds have been made for the final bronze piece.

The retrospective continues through May 31, 2017. For more information, visit www.scottsdalemuseumwest.org



Legacy, bronze, 20'

He just saw a new mountain to climb and he did it."

Back at the Prescott studio, a lodge-style retreat nestled on a gentle pine-topped hill behind his home, John walks me to his latest pieces, including *One Who Brings Life – The Rainmaker*, a 17-foot piece of foam and clay depicting a Native American man firing a flaming arrow into the sky. The piece sits on a rolling cart and is tied loosely to the rafters high in the studio. He says they've figured out a way to get the bronze version, now at the foundry, into Legacy's Scottsdale gallery, which is a feat of engineering all by itself. Elsewhere in the studio, with its stone fireplace and antler chandeliers, are several new paintings, including an early version of *Morning Prayer*, featuring a Native American girl making a silent offering in a beam of radiant light. Many of his new works feature women, a product of having daughters he proclaims proudly.

"I've always been about mythology. I call my work American mythology. I'm very much into history, but I also confess that if I was in Europe I would be doing Arthurian legends probably, so the Native Americans, for me, are part of the American mythology," John says. "Native American history is just incredible. I'm not a Native American—a lot of people ask me that question. I feel that being outside of a culture allows you a glimpse as an outsider to look at what is meaningful for everybody. Of course, that being said, it's paramount that I portray my subject accurately and historically correct."

John takes me over to a table between his easel and his research library to show me a small selection of his Native American artifacts, some of them from Upper Missouri tribes from 1830 to 1876, the year of Little Bighorn. Beadwork, quillwork, furs...the pieces offer a glimpse into artistry of the past. John handles each piece with a reverence, not just because they are historical artifacts or key props to some of his new paintings, but because there was a man or woman on the other end of each piece. And they, like him, have a story to tell. John's story, though, is still being written. One oil and one bronze at a time. 🍷

John Coleman: Spirit • Lives • Legends

When: November 5-13, 2016; Nov. 5, 5-7 p.m., opening reception

Where: The Legacy Gallery, 7178 E. Main Street, Scottsdale, AZ 85251

Information: (480) 945-1113, www.legacygallery.com