

Photography's narrative on the American West

Into the Sunset

The American West is symbolic, from cowboys to canyons, it represents an ideal and a mythologised past. Currently on at MoMA, *Into the Sunset* explores photography's ephemeral qualities from the 1850s to the present day.

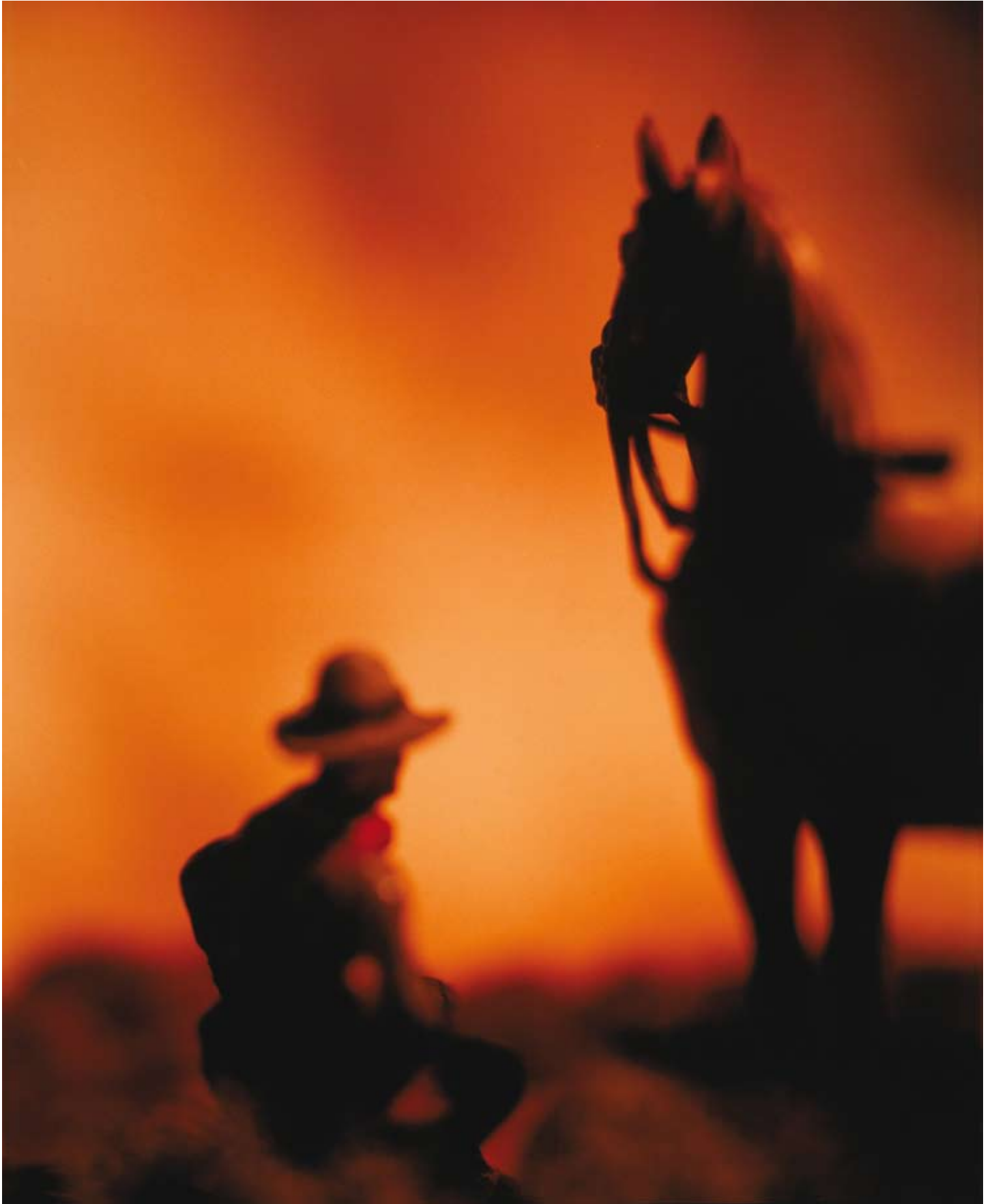
The 1969 classic film, *Paint Your Wagon*, a Clint Eastwood musical western, opens with an image of a line of caravans parading across the barren desert; travelling across rugged, unfamiliar terrain in the search for fortune and a new life. The American West, during the 19th century, represented for many immigrants, a fresh start and the opportunity to prove oneself. This idea was propagated through images and text produced and commissioned by the American government in an attempt to entice citizens and immigrants to settle in the West. A difficult task, photographers had the charge of representing an idealised version of nature, as well as a true reflection of the harsh environment into which settlers would be thrust. *Into the Sunset* administers a dose of visual reality in this regard: the upcoming MoMA exhibition delves into the history of the American West as represented through the photographic medium from the 1850s on to the present day. Curated by Eva Respini, the show examines several dichotomies intrinsic of the West: civilised versus wild; savage versus tamed; the academic versus the learned intellect; and man versus nature.

In order for America to prove itself as a new country, it needed to establish that it was cultivated and tame — the antithesis of what the West was, or was imagined to be, during the early 19th century. In many ways, America was without a past: the country was devoid of the Western European idea of a cultural history, as articulated through architecture, literature, and art. The photographic image was utilised to form a culture of sorts; to create a visual narrative of a country that had yet to be fully explored and charted. *Into the Sunset* examines the use of photographs as a method of propaganda, as well as a document of the landscape and culture of this unfamiliar topography and as its use as a tool in which to map and articulate the progress of America as a new country. "The photographs functioned as a kind of document, putting in ink so to speak, all of the fabled wonders of the West, which

had previously been reported in paintings, drawings and literature, but photography, with its relationship to the real provided really a kind of concrete idea of what the West was. In those pictures, the West was an Eden, full of bounty, full of natural resources, full of promises. Many of the pictures that were made out there depicted the West as a kind of limitless place where dreams could be realised. Land could be free for the taking, so it seemed, though that was not really the case", offers Respini. The images included in the exhibition use the landscape as substitute for the ruins and antiquities of cities such as Rome, mountains become temples and vast canyons the museums of the past.

Photographs articulate, in a way a painting cannot, the reality of vision — the layman believes, in essence, that photographs do not lie. As such they become an important medium through which to convey an idea. This exhibition encompasses many ideas as captured through photography in that regard: the sublime, Manifest Destiny, and entrepreneurship. Photographers such as Edward Muybridge, David Levinthal, Carlton Watkins and Timothy O'Sullivan, captured the landscape and imparted onto it, through their photographs, an almost Edenic and surreal quality. If the untameable, mythical West could be tamed through the photographic medium then the potential existed for it to be tamed by "civilized man." This sense of moral righteousness, ownership of the land, opposed the Native American's claims, and was intrinsic to the idea of Manifest Destiny. Respini suggests that the idea, which was a "19th century philosophy that the West was a place that was sort of destined for the European-Americans and was destined to be settled by the European-Americans. These pictures gave a concrete reason for that philosophy to be played out." Through the capturing of the land via the camera's lens, photographers captured the visual imagination and aspirations of this new influx of European-American immigrants.

These images included in the exhibition represented an ideal and a



David Levinthal (American, born 1939)
Untitled, from the series *The Wild West*, 1989.
Colour instant print, 24 x 19 1/2" (61 x 49.6 cm).
The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
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Dorothea Lange (American, 1895-1965) *The Road West, New Mexico*. 1938. Gelatin silver print, 9 5/8 x 13 1/16" (24.5 x 33.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



vision of the new America. Respini argues that they became, "A symbol of a new nation that saw itself as a nation of the future. In many ways, the West represented all that America wanted to be. Photography was the perfect medium from which to forge a national identity." The mythologising of the West was intrinsic to this newly formed identity, as the vast landscape pictured became a metaphor for freedom. Settlers believed in the land, its potential, and their own ability to forge a life in America and their freedom to do so. In many ways, photographers

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felt the same way about photography: as it developed as a medium it did so concurrently with the development of the West. *Into the Sunset* captures these two strands of development and, for Respini, shows how "The West represented what America was, a sort of freedom of spirit, independence and entrepreneurship. Photography as a fledgling medium in many ways represented a young America. It was a tool of technology; it was the tool of the future."

Respini is quick to point out that it is not just photography, which has informed our view of the West; film has played an important part in the portrayal and the mythologisation of the West. The exhibition programme thus involves a necessary film component as well, organised by Anna Morra, which includes films such as *Buffalo Bill* (1944) and *Calamity Jane* (1953). Film has been fundamental to the maintenance of the various archetypes and characters associated with the heroic American West: the savage Native American, the gun-toting cowboy, the disgruntled ranch-hand, and so forth.

Though photography has been central to the creation of this narrative of the West, Respini maintains that various mediums (such as film) have furthered our knowledge, and it is important to keep this in mind whilst viewing the exhibition. However, she further clarifies: "The underlying premise of the exhibition is how photography has influenced our collective imagination of the West. How from the very beginning photography was a tool and a way for which a larger audience could visualise the West. Certainly in the 19th century, it was a very effective

and persuasive tool for galvanising people to move out west." This propagandistic element is quite obvious in terms of its use in attracting new settlers, but the American government also used it in order to entice railroad companies to lay the foundations for the new

cross-country railroad. The American wilderness was a guarantor of prosperity and adventure. It promised untold wealth and happiness to immigrants and businessmen alike. The exhibition explores these various promises and ideas and presents us with an overview of sorts from which the viewer can visualise both the failed promises and those that came to fruition.

Into the Sunset captures the spirit of a fledgling country and how it created its own mythology, history, and its own epic adventure. The exhibition is, in many ways, staged at a point in America's own contemporary history when it may need a reminder of the strength of character of its own development, for which it is renowned. *Into the Sunset* runs from 29 March until 9 June 2009, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Please visit their website at www.moma.org for further information.

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