

GRAY WIELEBINSKI

Evan Moffitt, Out West, the Gay Cowboy Roams Free, The New York Times, 5 September 2023

Gray Wielebinski, *Pain and Glory*, 2022, Photography by Denis Guzel.

TWO MEN, A grizzled sheriff and a gunslinging vigilante, confront each other in a dusty saloon town. It's a scene familiar from countless western films, but in Pedro Almodóvar's new short, "Strange Way of Life," in theaters next month, only a few minutes elapse before the two characters end up in bed together. When Silva (Pedro Pascal) visits his former lover Jake (Ethan Hawke), he rekindles their romance before revealing less amorous intentions. Intrigue ensues, and the shock of two gay cowboys gives way to what we might expect from a classic western: shootouts, horseback chases, fugitive justice. Almodóvar's second film in English forgoes the melodrama for which he is best known, adhering instead to genre traditions, so "the interrupted and then resumed love story between these two men will be taken more seriously," the 73-year-old Spanish director says.

In America, as Almodóvar knows, cowboys are serious business. They might be our national paragon of masculinity: Generations of American boys were taught that real men should have the swagger of the Marlboro Man and the gruff voice of John Wayne. But like so many aspects of gender, those were just performances. This is partly why over the decades many queer artists have made winking references to cowboy culture. By homing in on make-believe and dress up, they've deflated some of its

homophobia-tinged machismo — and even sometimes turned it into an object of horny fun. Campy versions of the Lone Ranger's costume appear in explicit photographs by Bob Mizer from the 1950s that were distributed in physique pictorials, a forerunner of gay porn magazines. In 1965, Andy Warhol directed some friends in a western-themed striptease for his film "Horse"; three years later, he released "Lonesome Cowboys," a drunken romp among five gay gauchos, a madam and a cross-dressing sheriff. Then there was the gay disco troupe the Village People's dime-store cowboy, Randy Jones, who was meant to be read as a tongue-in-cheek archetype (one since referenced by musicians like Lil Nas X and Orville Peck).

While such appropriations subvert the straightness of cowboy culture, they also highlight its latent homoeroticism. From cattle drives to prisons to navy ships, men will often have sex with each other when there aren't any women around. Western films in particular are spectacles of rowdy male bonding on the open range, where a lot can happen after a drink or three. There's palpable sexual tension in the 1969 buddy drama "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" and the 1959 classic "Warlock," from which Almodóvar took inspiration. In the 1970s, men in urban gay enclaves began wearing Stetsons and bandannas color-coded to indicate their

sexual proclivities. These gestures weren't entirely ironic; they also reclaimed a masculinity that gay men were told they lacked.

As lone riders in a land characterized as empty and lawless, cowboys were also a perfect symbol for queers seeking to liberate and reinvent themselves. Such is the fragile hope of "Brokeback Mountain," the 2005 blockbuster (which Almodóvar turned down an offer to direct) that was adapted into a West End play earlier this year. Its portrayal of a doomed love affair between two male shepherds was groundbreaking in many ways, but its presentation of the West as somewhere white, masculine men might be safe to explore their desires for each other without ever having to run into anyone else — including a person of color — mostly followed conventional tropes.

NEARLY 20 YEARS later, several younger artists and filmmakers are developing a more nuanced vision of queerness in the American West, with particular emphasis on the country's changing race and gender dynamics. This builds on past efforts by writers, artists and filmmakers like Kahlil Joseph and Chandra McCormick to celebrate the many nonwhite cowboys who have always been an essential part of American life.

"National Anthem," a feature film written and directed by the Los Angeles photographer Luke Gilford that premiered at South by Southwest in March, chronicles queer rodeos and ranches in the Southwest. Many of the movie's diverse characters and the actors who play them identify as trans. Notably, while the plot hinges on relatable, everyday dramas (jealousy in open relationships, the pain of a first heartbreak), homophobia and transphobia are mostly absent — a reminder that queer life needn't be defined by a culture that oppresses it.

The frontier has always been a place where people have come to live on their own terms. At the turn of the 20th century, the trans huckster Harry Allen was a notorious outlaw in the Pacific Northwest. Hundreds of newspaper reports from the era reveal that trans cowboys weren't uncommon in the West, even if they're absent from official accounts. When the 32-year-old artist Gray Wielebinski was growing up in Dallas, he saw 10-gallon hats and boots as the marks of a fantastical machismo that belonged as much to him as to cisgender men. In 2022, the trans-masc artist erected a mechanical bull at Bold Tendencies, an arts organization that stages shows on the roof of a disused South London parking structure, where visitors were invited to take a ride that, like sex, was brief but ecstatic. The bull bucked in a ring of fencing set with stained-glass panels that recalled gay bars and public cruising sites, which Wielebinski notes are at risk of disappearing because of gentrification. In his work,

the cowboy is a tragic figure professionally endangered by commercial ranching, making him an analogue to the queer establishments that have closed in recent years.

"Cowboys only live in a sense as myth," says Nora Burnett Abrams, a director at the Denver Museum of Contemporary Art, which will open the expansive exhibition "Cowboy" this month. "But you also have this lived experience of contemporary cowboy life and a culture far more diverse not just in terms of identity but also labor and function." A new installation and video by the artists Rafa Esparza, 41, and Fabian Guerrero, 35, will document the queer cowboy bars popular among Mexican and Central American immigrants throughout the Southwestern United States. Esparza's 2021 diptych "Al Tempo," painted on adobe, distills one such scene: gay Latino couples in sombreros dancing under the soft lights of Club Tempo, an East Hollywood institution. Esparza, who grew up in nearby East Pasadena, visited the venue for the first time in the late 1990s. "I remember thinking, 'My dad or my uncles could very well be here, and I wouldn't be able to set them apart from everyone else,'" he recalls. "It felt like a beautiful, queer version of what my family members have striven to preserve of their life back in Mexico."

The dreamy scenes in the Austin, Texas-based 34-year-old artist RF. Alvarez's paintings, which were on view at Alanna Miller Gallery in Manhattan through June, on the other hand, are mostly imagined. White and Latino men dine outdoors and lie naked in bed together. Cowboy hats abound: in a self-portrait of the artist wearing nothing but white briefs and in a still life hanging above a wardrobe beside a silhouetted portrait of a gay male couple. The paintings are a kind of reclamation — of history, but also of space. "There is no place for me in the West," Alvarez says. "But multitudes can exist."

OTHER ARTISTS ARE mining time instead of place, looking at the past for clues to the inner queer lives of those who have been removed from most historical accounts of the West. In the artist Kenneth Tam's 2021 film, "Silent Spikes," also included in the Denver show, Asian American men in cowboy garb pose and dance in front of a purple backdrop, intercut with footage of railroad tunnels dug by Chinese immigrant workers in the 1860s. The piece imagines what kinds of relationships might have formed among these laborers, who were treated brutally and paid poorly. "I wanted to think about how their bodies must have felt against one another's in that space, working together in close proximity," says Tam, who is straight but whose work, he adds, is concerned with homosocial dynamics. Scant evidence of the Chinese laborers' lives has survived, so Tam's vision of them as queer cowboys becomes a speculative attempt to complete the record.

Stills from the film were on display this summer in “The Range,” an exhibition at 12.26 Gallery in Dallas that likewise explored cowboy iconography. There, they hung near paintings by Oscar yi Hou, 24, a British-born, New York-based artist whose works are replete with clichéd signifiers of Asian and American identity, including cowboy hats and details from the Japanese anime series “Dragon Ball Z.” His solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, which closes later this month, includes a self-portrait of the artist as a muscled, pickax-wielding miner, his pose modeled on a 1970s flyer for the Manhattan gay bar the Mineshaft, referencing both cruising culture and those same railway workers. Another buff Chinese laborer appears in a black leather bondage mask and cowboy hat in “Coolieisms, a.k.a.: Leather Daddy’s Highbinder Odalisque” (2022) — the series’ title riffing on a slur for immigrants from Asia — holding his long braid like a whip.

The work is “about the American cult of masculinity and rugged individualism ... conquering the ‘uncivilized West’ — and how this gender ideology dovetails with American expansionism,” says yi Hou. The raw sexual power of his subjects refutes stereotypes of Asian masculinity while offering a fantasy about how the Chinese men who literally built the West might have explored their own desires. In challenging the outdated image of the cowboy as a white, cisgender macho man, clearing the land in the name of racial purity, they suggest that America’s national mythology can be made to speak for everyone in it — that the West is more expansive after all.