



Faded Glory

ART DIALOGUE

RenegadeBus' Lucia Simek and Teresa Burkett discuss Matthew Porter's recent photography show, 'High Lonesome,' at Marty Walker Gallery.

By Teresa Burkett and Lucia Simek



"Giant" by **Matthew Porter**

Photos courtesy: **Marty Walker Gallery**

Lucia Simek: What struck me first with this work by **Matthew Porter**, "High Lonesome," was the calm and quiet of it. Nearly all of his five photos had an amber monochrome tone, and framed with matte Plexi over each, the pictures seemed to expand the walls of the tiny room in which they were hung. They were all hushy and soft. At the opening of the show, everyone entering the room did so with a sort of reverent caution, like they were trying to be as graceful as what they felt like they were about to see. I'm included in that. Especially after seeing the jarringly discordant, haunting work of Frances Bagley in the main space of the gallery, it was the silence, or near to it, that was so attention-grabbing about Porter's pictures here.

Teresa Burkett: It is interesting to hear about how people at the opening were approaching the pictures. I missed seeing anyone else's reaction to the show because it was empty when I went. Until this show I have not seen any of Matthew Porter's work outside of the internet. I had expected, or hoped rather, for giant pictures that filled the whole wall and overwhelmed you with their magnitude. When I saw the tiny room they were hung in, I was a little disappointed until I stood in front of them. The monochromatic coloring and the vast emptiness of the landscapes were quiet, but also lonesome. The two landscapes reminded me of what it felt like to be walking across the plains of Spain on El Camino de Santiago, how insignificant you begin to feel, like you are oozing out in all directions and there is nothing to contain you, and no one to stop it. It was amazing how these shots conjured up those old sensations. And the two portrait shots, a lone man, and a man in two

very isolating roles: the cowboy and the rock-star. What did you think of the last picture, *Untitled (Jon Spencer)*? How did you see it fitting in with the rest of the photos?

LS: *Untitled (Jon Spencer)* is a puzzle, but I think you are right to understand him as being in an isolating role as rock star. Under the framework of lonesomeness that Porter is setting up, though, in the naming of the show and in his subjects, I think that understanding Jon Spencer may really be a final thought. I think he comes last in the tour around the room for good reason. But wondering about him begins to get at the nature of the other iconic images Porter is using throughout — notorious blimps, cowboys, history-altering literature about history. His reference to the Western movie *High Noon* in his show's title, *High Lonesome*, seems to be alluding to the same questions tackled in the movie: primarily, the idea that it is up to one man to sustain a dying order and uphold a fading identity. Something hangs in the balance, something looms.

Thinking of this body of work in that way helps me get at why he is using the Hindenburg, the German airship that inexplicably burst into flames and ruined forever the future of airship flight. What seemed a prosperous prospect for the future of travel burnt away far sooner than could have been imagined. The use of the Hindenburg seems to be qualifying The West (the Wild one) as just such a thing, though so much bigger — an idealized far-off place of possibility, hard-wrought and won, and lost again to us in mere generations. What's left of the Wild West and all it stood for and promised seems now maintained by only a few, Porter's *Horse and Rider*, for example.

What about the books in the photo *Farewell, Promised Land*? As characters, let's say, what role do these play?

TB: I think your understanding of the Hindenburg really helps to pull the whole show together. For me, the Hindenburg floating in a haze over barely visible hills visually continued the show's theme of isolation, and through that, this quality of loneliness that is apparent in each photo. But your thoughts about the Hindenburg go deeper into the loneliness of failed prospects. The West no longer holds the same shining possibility it once had, only a few remain to confront it, and what is left to the rest of us is a romanticized memory.

I can't remember the specific titles from *Farewell, Promised Land*, but I did see them as being particularly masculine, a theme that plays out in all the photos. Some of my favorite photos of Matthew Porter's, though not included in this exhibit, are of muscle cars, another distinctly masculine subject. Perhaps these books are the formation of the type of man Matthew Porter is photographing. But who exactly is this man? What qualities does this man possess? Are the books a guide to understanding that man? In *Horse and Rider*, the light comes from behind and his face is only partly visible to us. How can we understand a man whose identity is hidden to us, and can we fully understand him if Matthew Porter is only revealing a silhouette?

LS: Interesting take on the masculine. As I recall, the books on the shelves in *Farewell, Promised Land* were nearly all history books relating to power and the founding and falling of regimes and other orders — America, Nazism, the West. There were books on the Civil War (Shelby Foote's? Not sure.) and I'm sure the World Wars. But in all of these, yes — absolutely there is a sense of the manly making of orders, or conquering. But because the piece is called *Farewell, Promised Land*, it seems he is again suggesting the passing away of all of the things catalogued there, relegating the things in these books to the shelf, as it were. That the cowboy immediately adjacent to *Farewell* is silhouetted and looking out at us is no small mark, I think, of Porter's desire to capture ghosts in these images. In *Giant*, a cowboy stands looking up at the Hindenburg as it sails over a desert that's glaring and white. Both man and blimp seem cast out and diminished by such a landscape. But everything in the photo seems qualified by the word "giant." Each thing feels like he is describing it in the way we talk about icons — giants of aviation, giants of American history, giant expanses in the landscape.

Which brings me to the photo *Untitled (Jon Spencer)*. I suppose I think of him as some new indicator of a new passing icon. Is Rock and Roll dead? Are dreams like rockstardom fading? What are we currently watching slip into history?

TB: The idea that the books on the shelf are representative of regimes that have come and gone, and that they are, as you suggested, all passed away, makes me wonder what has replaced these? Particularly the West which we have touched on, but also our current place politically. He does not offer any sense of the now or the

future, and we must come to our own conclusions as to what has replaced these. I find the question of what replaces the West the most interesting, but I'm not sure what it is.

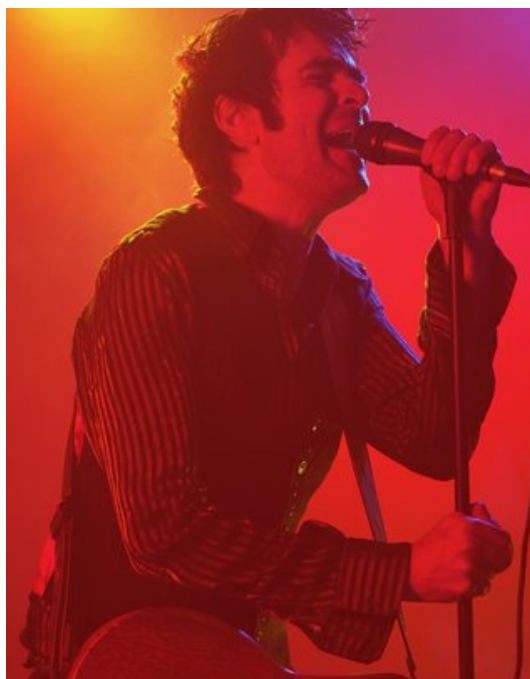
When I look at *Untitled (Jon Spencer)* I don't get the sense of something overarching, like rock and roll passing, but rather a sense of an individual man's passing. The glory and stardom of being a rock star is passing in the same way that the honor and esteem of being a cowboy is fleeting. Their lives as individual people in these roles are limited and transient as they age and become no longer relevant. Looking at it in this way provides a nice layering of faded glory.



Matthew Porter - *High Lonesome* exhibition installation, March 28 – April 25, 2009-05-01

Organ Mountains, 2008, archival pigment print, face-mounted to non-glare Plexiglas, 35 x 52 inches

Horse & Rider, 2008, archival pigment print, face-mounted to non-glare Plexiglas, 17.5 x 22.5 inches



Matthew Porter's *High Lonesome* & Frances Bagley's *Mixed Messages* exhibitions

Untitled (Jon Spencer), 2008, archival pigment print, face-mounted to non-glare Plexiglas, 30.6 x 24 inches

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