



{ ARTS & CULTURE }

## WESTERN HERSTORY, REIMAGINED

words by LUCY LEA TUCKER

PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF JENNIFER NEHRBASS

**H**ave you ever wanted to go back in time and rewrite history? Artist Jennifer Nehrbass takes her audience on a fantastical journey to a place where women were the first pioneers to settle America's West. A refreshing break from typical Western art, Nehrbass' work is idiosyncratic with a fictional narrative, exploring the West from a female perspective. The 'Pioneer Project' is a curated compilation of unframed oil on canvas works including portraiture and landscapes.

### WO-MANIFEST DESTINY

These monumental, heroic landscapes evoke a romantic notion of Western expansion and manifest destiny, but in truth, these are not real scenes—they are playfully contrived. Nehrbass creates the ultimate, idealized vistas from various inspirations—a mountain from Montana, a river from Germany, and a sky from Canada. Much like the melting pot of inspiration in her landscapes, within her portraiture series she mixes influences and ethnicities of different European immigrants. "I depict mostly white women in my paintings, though some are racially mixed with darker skin tones and undersignated ethnicities," she explains.

### FEMALE FORTITUDE—REWRITING HIS-TORY

Women and their roles in the history of Western expansion are under-represented. Nehrbass reinterprets the way females might have been portrayed in history through her art. "The more specific I am, the more universally my work comes across," she explains. The female characters in these portraits are protagonists, documentarians, leaders. "By nature, women try to work more as a team than men do. If women were the first people to travel west, maybe they would have been more compassionate? Maybe they would

ABOVE: *Blue Narrows*, oil on wood panel, 48" x 65", Her mythical majesty.



PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF JENNIFER NEHRBASS

ABOVE: In the studio with Jennifer Nehrbass: women in conversation.

not have tried to enslave people? Perhaps women would have been more conservative on resources? This is my hope for what might have been," Nehrbass states.

In this age of female empowerment, feminine-forward symbolism in art, marketing, and messaging mirrors our current sociological and political state. "It's exciting that women are starting to be a part of the solution. Though this body of work was not meant to have a political angle—but more of a mythical idea," Nehrbass says. "It's fun to rewrite history and tell the story from a female point of view."

## IN CONVERSATION

Much like Dutch portraiture, these figures are staged before a matte, black background. This dark stage creates a psychological space for the viewer to enter. With the intention of showing the works together in a gallery, Nehrbass makes the portraits similar in size—as if they are facing each other in conversation. What would their conversations be? Playfully, the artist quips, "I am a woman. This is my story." Portrait #1 'Marie' discusses with the other characters, portrait #2 'Charity' and portrait #3 'Zadie':

"Hey ladies, we've come so far. We've created homesteads. We've made sure everyone is fed. What types of communities do we want to build? What can we do next?" This fictional pioneer woman is a muse for the artist—an independent character who memorializes a male-dominated period in history.

## FREEDOM & FEAR

Nehrbass represents the discomfort of being a woman through the characters' poses, facial expressions, and gestures. Universally, people carry tensions similarly. The language of their hands shows a

sense of helplessness and frustration. There is a distinct boundary between the awe of the West versus the fear of the unknown. Wordlessly, these imaginary immigrants reveal how hard life might have been: "We are at the edge of a new civilization and there is a tension between duty and fear."

## SETTLERS WITH STYLE

The artist mixes traditional, formally posed portraiture with bold, flat, abstract geometric patterns in the figures' couture. A similar juxtaposition occurs with their hyperrealistic expressions, bright lipstick, hair color, and styles. Nehrbass admits that she has an instinctive penchant for stylized textiles stemming from her background designing sheets, towels, and fabrics by-the-yard in the home furnishings and women's wear department at Ralph Lauren. "Truthfully," she confesses, "they don't look like people from the past. They all have makeup and red lipstick." She contemporizes her characters to be a perfect representation of how she perceives they should be remembered in history. In composing fictional characters and imaginary landscapes, she works from a mix of real life and digital imagery. Friends pose for her portraits, but she also utilizes digital images for added props, like Zadie's fur hat. Photographic imagery is pieced together and abstracted for her landscapes.

Early female American novelists like Willa Cather and Laura Ingalls Wilder, who depicted frontier life on the Great Plains, are major inspirations in Nehrbass' work. Melding different places, cultures, and ideas together through her mystical landscapes and portraiture, she tells a new story. Nehrbass' imagination is contagious. What if women were the pioneers of the West? What would American icons—like cowboys—look like as females? How would history have played out differently in these dreamy, idealistic landscapes?



## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Jennifer Nehrbaas is a painter living and working in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She was born in West Bend, Wisconsin, in 1970. She received her B.S. in art and textile design from the University of Wisconsin, her M.A. in painting from New York University, and her M.F.A. in painting from the University of New Mexico. Her work is in many private collections in the United States as well as in Europe.



PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF JENNIFER NEHRBASS

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

### WHERE TO VIEW & BUY:

Jennifer Nehrbaas' 'Pioneer Project' will debut in an exhibit at the Julie Nester Gallery in Park City starting March 1, 2019.

[julienestergallery.com/contact](http://julienestergallery.com/contact)

1280 Iron Horse Drive  
Park City, Utah 84060  
info@julienestergallery.com  
435.649.7855

### PORTRAITURE:

*Willa* 48" x 30" oil on canvas 2018  
*Marie* 48" x 30" oil on canvas 2018  
*Antonia* 48" x 36" oil on canvas 2018  
Portraits range from \$6,500 to \$6,800

### LANDSCAPES:

*False Fire* 32" x 24" oil on canvas 2018  
*Green Tide* 62" x 47" oil on canvas 2018  
*Nightscape Dayscape* 30" x 39" lithograph diptych  
\*All works are sold individually, though the artist prefers the portraiture be shown together.

ABOVE (left to right): *Willa*, oil on canvas, 48" x 30", Ralph Lauren meets a stylized pioneer woman. "I am a woman. This is my story."; *Nightscape and Dayscape*, lithograph, diptych, 30" x 39", In an ideal world. Waterscape with mountain vista.