



Scott Eady, "The World Keeps Turning", 2006, Mary Newton Gallery, Wellington (image courtesy of the artist).



Scott Eady, from the exhibition entitled "Big Time", 2005 (image courtesy of the artist).

MAMMA DON'T LET YOUR BABIES GROW UP TO BE COWBOYS

Michele Beevors

In the beginning of the Western movie *The Searchers* (1956), John Wayne (Ethan) meanders in inimitable Wayne stagger mode towards the open doorway of the blacked-out homestead. The scene is framed by the doorway, the scene of the return to the maternal home. It is announced off screen "Ethan is home". The external world – the desert, the prairie, culture, war, the domain of men – all lie outside, in the light-filled world of technicolour, while the family and the domestic are reserved for the dark. But, not for long. The entire film revolves around the pursuit of and revenge for the kidnapping of Ethan's nieces and the murder of the rest of his family. The movie hinges on Ethan's anxiety over the girls' virginity and illustrates his relentless pursuit of a moralistic Christian revenge. In the end Ethan of course loses on all counts as one of the girls dies and the other refuses to leave her new clan.

This movie is typical of the right-wing Wayne that we all know. But there is another Wayne, and this one has a soft side. The western *Hondo* (1953) begins in the same way. Wayne (Hondo Lane) also swaggers up to the homestead. A woman and her young son await the return of her husband. Wayne the stranger is at first a threat to the young woman in the middle of the prairie (more of a threat than the renegade Indians, I would say), but he begins to win her trust by helping around the homestead with chores. Hondo knows that the Husband will not return, because he has killed him, and sets to making amends. The axe needs sharpening, the animals need to be moved to the barn, the child needs to be taught to swim. *Hondo* presents us with a softer side of Wayne as a domestic hero, instead of the regular kind that he usually plays. The domestic hero mashes the potatoes, teaches and entertains the children, and hangs out the washing. He sets things to right and admits his faults (something that *Hondo* has to do). He is honest as the day is long, and he is above all a gentleman.

In Scott Eady's recent show at the Mary Newton Gallery entitled "The World Keeps Turning" (2006), the idea of the domestic hero was explored. Eady literally casts himself as Wayne. There he is shooting down the moon, serving up mashed potatoes, and having the missus serenaded with a bagpipe: a superhero with a tea towel.

Eady and I have been having an ongoing conversation about the significance and meaning of John Wayne. This conversation includes his right-wing politics and speculations on the sort of man that he necessarily had to be in order to have been able to play the roles he had with that face and his wooden style of acting – without irony and with an utter conviction that America was the greatest

nation on earth, and that he (Wayne) could conquer the west single-handedly. It is interesting to note that of all the TV programmes that Wayne did guest slots on he always played himself. (As if there was another self that was possible.)

It turns out that – right here in Dunedin – one can buy over the counter replica Winchester rifles just like the one Wayne used in *Hondo*. This seems curious to me: who would want one and why? Eady says there are a number of gun clubs and a lot of fans, some of whom get dressed up as cowboys. “They look like inbreeds in cowboy outfits” he says. Eady’s “Cowboy” doesn’t look quite right either as he is too slight, not tall enough, although in Wayne clobber. The “Cowboy” is a combination cast from the artist’s features and from those of a shop mannequin. As a cowboy Eady seems uncomfortable in his skin, trying to fill a role that was always going to be too big. The reasons for his interest in Wayne and cowboys in general relates to his feelings about family, and attempting to answer some questions about what it means to be a man in 2006.

Before turning to the questions raised by putting oneself into the shoes of such a giant as Wayne, I want to describe some of the other elements in the show. Alongside the Eady/Wayne cowboy figure there is a vinyl moon, some digital photographs (scenes not from the movie but from real life – family snapshots in black and white – mashing the potatoes, doing the dishes, a bloody finger, a child’s grumbling tummy) and some mock paraphernalia from the movie. Eady showed me some images captured from *Hondo*. We discussed the object in one of the images and we could not decide what it was. It looked like a saw-horse, only we were convinced it wouldn’t work as such because it had no bracing. Maybe it was the post where the horses were tied, but this wouldn’t work either because – as Eady pointed out – any horse would easily pull it over. It looks like a stick drawing of a horse. It is something that looks authentic or rustic even, but has no other purpose than to add interest to the scene. If one watches the movie *Hondo* in black and white, even though it was filmed in glorious colour and on special 3D cameras, the movie becomes truly spatial, as the placement of objects such as this horse object creates the illusion of spatiality within the scenes. There is a foreground, middle-ground (this is the important part) and a background, and the stick horse is one of the devices used to allude to a three-dimensional space. It acts to separate the foreground and background and to create distance in the middle-ground, while usually the space movies inhabit is very shallow.

One starts to notice other inconsistencies. These anomalies are manifest as sculptural elements and so much so, that they become integral to an understanding of Eady’s intentions.

Another set of props or objects which Eady recreates are the cans of beans that rest on the ‘fibreglass stick horse’ object and litter the floor of the gallery. The beans reference art history in a way (Jasper Johns ale cans cast in bronze half empty and half full at the same time). But more to the point, they also reference every western from *Blazing Saddles* (1974) to *How the West was Won* (1962). Eady has the cans rolled out of sheet bronze (soldered together and all shiny) but semi-distressed as all but one is shot full of holes. The moon is slightly deflated and all but one of the cans of baked beans have been used, while only one shot remains in the gun holster. All else has been wasted on the cans.

This show and everything in it described a masculinity completely proscribed by a culture now almost solely represented through the screen. Is this so different than the weekend re-enactment brigade who meets in the fields of America to play out scenes of the Civil War; or in basements for Dungeons and Dragons; or that queue standing for miles, day after day, to ride the *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride at Disneyland?

And what could the spectre of John Wayne signify today? Right-wing politics aside and racism and sexism stripped away, what possible significance do the images and the stereotype carry? Is it simply that such stereotypes provide concrete examples of how to live one's life – provided, of course, that one is big enough, strong enough, and white enough to meet any enemy head on? Do such stereotypes enable us to see things simply as good and evil, black and white, and to be able to say that the government (and right and God) are on our side? Is it simply that we now long for a less complicated time? In the face of undeniable proof that governments lie, do these stereotypes help us to believe in a search for a time when one man could make a difference? If John Wayne signifies anything today he stands for man in control of his own destiny. In every single movie he portrayed this character, and even if that character died in the end – as in *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) – he chose that route for himself, unflinchingly and uncompromisingly and with a cigarette hanging from his lips. Whatever his decision, he stuck by it. In the face of every possible threat and behind every possible decision was self-belief. Every behaviour manifested the fact of his testosterone and its acting out. Wayne acted one line and one line only, "I am a man", again and again.

In Eady's work there is a general interest in the idea of the reconstitution and reflection of the self through the mediated art object. Guns, power tools, trucks, and now John Wayne, is added to the list of objects that make a man. If the car can be seen as the perfect extension of masculinity; my car (like my leg) by extension becomes my rifle, my bullet hole, my moon (because I cannot only see it but I can shoot it down). Such objects help to put man back in the centre of his own universe (having been knocked off his pedestal firstly by waves of feminism and then by creeping self-doubt about the worth of his testosterone fuelled escapades). Eady re-enacts these escapades of domination and self-control with more than a little irony.

This idea of control speaks most clearly through the fetishisation of finish. Since the world seems hopelessly out of control, the artist turns to the things that can be controlled: technique and finish. As if the hand of God fashioned a can of beans, every blemish on its surface is to be obliterated by the artist's hand, and then and only then will it be semi-distressed to the extent of also obliterating the final traces of the hand-made. For, in the construction of the objects the hand of the artist is nowhere to be seen. The objects are seamless, then distressed. Eady's moon has been lassoed and hauled in like the brilliant scene in *The Misfits* (1961), where Gable and Clift rope and tether the wild horses from the back of a utility after a light plane has herded them out of the valley of safety. Eady's moon seems as effortless as this, an amazing feat, made poignant because the characters find themselves redundant, a dying breed and doubly so because *The Misfits* signals the beginning of the end of Hollywood's love affair with the cowboy.

But, in this world of reflection of 'self as perfection', some of the cracks in the façade seem to show through, cracks that one cannot see on the surface. These cracks relate to my idea of the 'fallible masculine'. Eady's moon is slightly deflated, and the fake bronze bean cans are semi-distressed like the Wayne clobber. The rough and rustic construction of the post gives way to a reading of the material as veneer. Wood is a material that is readily available but is cast in fibreglass by Eady to look like wood. This object lives in the netherworld of references and is neither real nor a fake of a movie prop (where it would be made in Styrofoam and not in a more permanent material like fibreglass). It deflects or rather reflects the 'something-not-quite-rightness' about the perfect surface and suddenly – because everything is where it should be – one looks for faults and meaning then emerges from the over-all construction of the 'self as veneer'. The fallible masculine is located somewhere between the new age guy and the metrosexual. What separates Eady from them is self-doubt in the reflected image of his perfection. That doubt drives Eady to obliterate the marks of his own hand and to recreate movie props as real objects.

Eady's work constantly asks us to examine the stereotypes of masculinity and find them silly. Images of him wearing a hard hat and holding a pair of large bolt cutters and a nail gun; or dressed in chaps with a chainsaw in tow – from the exhibition "Big Time" – make a mockery of such stereotypes as his slight frame and the extreme slant of the image make him seem far from imposing, as he grins out at us and poses for the camera. This is the 'fallible masculine' and it is equally as constructed as superman, a cowboy, or an Elvis impersonator. Eady's quest is to describe masculinity at a time when the family man seems to be unfashionable in the era of the scruffy metrosexual. The highly sophisticated urban metrosexual has been even further removed from his country cousins and the gulf between the Urbanite and the Southern Man has become a chasm so deep that no four-wheel drive will cope with it. This chasm is only bridged by football, with all its rituals of mateship intact.

It seems more than likely that the objects Eady produces raise these issues only to dismiss them as little jokes. Life – like art – is much more complicated than it was for John Wayne.

FILMOGRAPHY:

Blazing Saddles (Mel Brooks, 1974) Story: Andrew Bergman, Screen: Mel Brooks, Warner Bros.

Hondo (John Farrow, 1953) Story: Louis L'Amour, Screen: James Edward Grant, Warner Vision, Dual Strip 3D.

How the West was Won (John Ford & Henry Hathaway, 1962) James R Webb, Metro Goldwyn Mayer.

The Misfits (John Houston, 1953) Screenplay: Arthur Miller.

The Sands of Iwa Jima (Allan Dwan 1949) Screenplay: Harry Brown, James Edward Grant, Republic Pictures.

The Searchers (John Ford, 1956) Story: Alan Le May, Screen: Frank S Nugent, Warner Bros.

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