

Kristi Ryba

Artist Statement 2025

Growing up in the 1950s exposed me to many of the themes that appear in my work. I am drawn to the figurines, both souvenirs and decorative objects from the 1950s that I observed on the shelves and tabletops of my middle-class home. As a child they fascinated me. Now I understand them to be objects that illustrate cultural messages about gender roles and the value of certain types of people.

Recently I focused on objects that depict Indians, cowboys and horses, as well as images of Western romantic sepia landscapes - and how they influence American culture. In her February 22, 2025, *Letters from an American*, historian Heather Cox Richardson speaks about that time in our country and how in reaction to the liberal consensus of government regulation, a social safety net, promotion of infrastructure, and protection of civil rights, which were portrayed as “socialism,” Conservatives reacted and:

“...took as their symbol the mythologized version of the western American cowboy... In the mid-1950s, Americans tuned in to *Gunsmoke*, *Rawhide*, *Bonanza*, *Wagon Train*, and *The Lone Ranger* to see hardworking white men fighting off evil, seemingly without help from the government.”

This image of the cowboy was always a myth. Life was hard, the work paid low wage, and one third of the cowboys were men of color.

In this new work I emphasize the cliched relationship between Indians, cowboys, guns and the violence towards these and other marginalized people. Considering our governments focus on Manifest Destiny and our recent lurch toward fascism and dictatorship, this work seems timely.

I use egg tempera and gold leaf on panel, and the patterns and motifs of Native American pottery designs inspire my decorative borders.