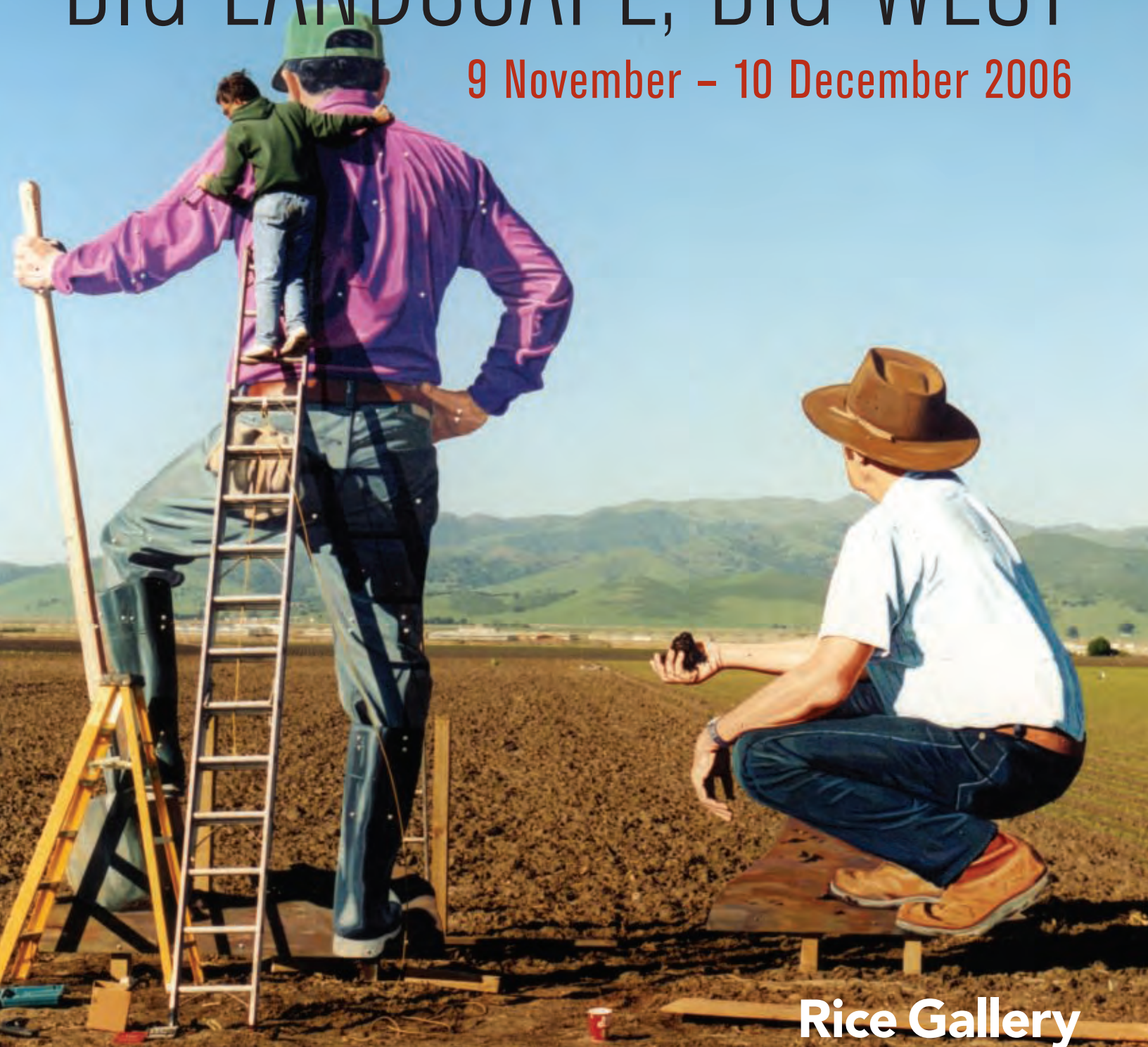


# JOHN CERNEY

## BIG LANDSCAPE, BIG WEST

9 November – 10 December 2006



Rice Gallery

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Thomas Moran, *Nearing Camp on the Upper Colorado River*, 1882

John Cerney's installation at Rice Gallery, *Big Landscape, Big West*, reinterprets the 1882 painting, *Nearing Camp on the Upper Colorado River* by artist and explorer, Thomas Moran. During the 1870s, Moran accompanied survey teams into the West and the paintings he produced fed the American public's fascination with the western landscape. Moran's paintings were so influential they even played a role in the U.S. Congress's decision to declare Yellowstone a national park.

Moran's work is the starting point for The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston exhibition, *The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890 - 1950*. The exhibition explores ways in which the American West helped shape American modern art as well as how artists helped shape our view of the West. Presented in collaboration with the MFAH, Cerney's installation at Rice Gallery seeks to recreate the sense of awe the western landscape evoked in the American public at the end of the nineteenth century. Cerney has transformed Moran's painting into a room-sized panorama and included a family admiring the painting's spectacular canyon view. An audio track with the sounds of wind and birds echoing in a canyon adds to the sense of place.

Cerney chose the Moran work for *Big Landscape, Big West* because, he says, "If I'm going to do my version of a landscape painting, I can't do better than Thomas Moran." The painting's dramatic imagery and the horizontal format were well suited to Cerney's needs. He enlarged Moran's painting to cover the back wall of the gallery and then expanded it over the two adjacent walls. In front of the scene stand cut-outs of a family of four clad in 1890s garb and rendered on sheets of paper-coated plywood. The mother is at work at an easel painting the scene, the father sits resting on a rock, and the daughter clutches a handful of wildflowers as she stares in awe at the canyon. Outside the gallery, a boy peers at the scene with binoculars.



In-process detail of *Big Landscape, Big West*, 2006  
Photo courtesy the artist

The California-based Cerney is a westerner who had established himself as a muralist and sign painter when he made the decision to excise his work from the wall and bring it out into the world. Cerney creates giant tableaux by installing huge cut-out paintings outdoors; the scale of his work seeks to vie with the expansive landscapes in which he places it. In a 1995 project for a farmer, Cerney erected towering portraits of farm workers and placed them in crop fields like toiling giants. For a 1999 work, Cerney stuck an enormous painting of a

LEFT  
Model posing for  
*Big Landscape, Big West*, 2006  
Photo courtesy the artist



RIGHT  
In-process detail of  
*Big Landscape, Big West*, 2006  
Photo courtesy the artist



*Big Baby with Tractors*, 1998  
20 feet tall, Duncan Family Farms,  
Goodyear, Arizona  
Photo courtesy the artist



smiling chunky baby in the sprawling fields of an Arizona farm. The infant was rendered so large that the life-sized tractors Cerney painted looked like toys. The artist depicted their operators running away in fright from the baby's grasping hand.

"I like the highway crowd," comments Cerney. He has said that he "never cared about galleries and square things framed on a wall." What mattered to him was "that people would see my work and that meant working outside." *Big Landscape, Big West* is Cerney's first large scale indoor work and the first time the artist has agreed to create an installation for a gallery.

The project took Cerney four months to complete. It began with a five-foot reproduction of Moran's painting. Cerney marked the photograph off into a grid and took an X-acto knife and sliced it into squares – 624 in all. He then reproduced each square on twelve-inch Masonite panels and fixed them to the walls like tiles. The grid of panels calls to mind the pixels of a digital image, the individual squares working together to create a whole.

For Cerney, breaking Moran's painting up into tiny manageable sections was a practical way to enlarge the work but it also took away the intimidation of tackling a famous painting. Cerney not only reproduced Moran's painting, he expanded upon it. He used over 400 additional panels as he extended the scene over the gallery's right and left side walls.

The figures of Cerney's nineteenth-century family are rendered more than double life-size, dwarfing the viewer as they are enveloped by the canyon's seventy-five-foot expanse. Cerney needed models in period costume for the 1890s family and, as luck would have it, there was a stage production of *Meet Me in St. Louis* at a local junior college. Cerney hired cast members to pose in costume for his figures.

Cerney is an artist used to making his work large enough to compete with the great outdoors. In *Big Landscape, Big West* he creates the feeling of an expansive landscape indoors, recapturing something of the sense of wonder the American West inspired in its nineteenth century inhabitants.



John Cerney in his studio, 2006  
Photo: Rice Gallery

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

John Cerney was born in Carmel, California in 1953. After high school, he worked in the produce industry for seven years. He received his AA in art from the College of San Mateo, California, in 1981, and his BA in art from California State University, Long Beach, in 1984. He has been commissioned to create outdoor plywood installations for companies across California and the United States. Cerney lives and works in Salinas, California.



COVER: *Farmer and Irrigator*, 1995  
18 feet tall, Highway 68, Salinas, California  
Photo: Phil Cerney

### SUPPORT AND SPONSORSHIP

*Big Landscape, Big West* is presented in collaboration with The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston exhibition, *The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890 - 1950*, on view at the MFAH, 29 October 2006 - 28 January 2007 in the Audrey Jones Beck Building.

Special funding was provided by the Dean, School of Humanities, and the President's Office, Rice University, for collaborative projects with The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

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Thomas Moran's *Nearing Camp on the Upper Colorado*, 1882 courtesy Bolton Museums, Art Gallery and Aquarium, Bolton, United Kingdom. Special thanks to Perry Bonewell, Digitization Officer, and the Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council.

### GALLERY HOURS

Tuesday - Saturday, 11:00 - 5:00 pm

Thursday, 11:00 - 7:00 pm

Sunday, Noon - 5:00 pm

Closed Mondays and university holidays

Rice Gallery will close for the Thanksgiving holiday from 23 - 27 November.

**Rice Gallery**