

Accidental Feminists

The Booth Museum in Georgia presents an exhibition on photographer Barbara Van Cleve. *By Gina Teichert*



Mary Bailey Davis, *Spring Branding a Fine Two Legged Loop, CS Ranch, Cimarron, New Mexico, 1986*, pigment print, 13 x 18¾". Booth Western Art Museum permanent collection, Cartersville, GA. © Barbara Van Cleve.

In her decades-spanning career, Barbara Van Cleve traveled through country where feminism was and still is a dirty word. Born into ranching herself, the intrepid photographer pointed her lens toward women who weren't looking for labels. They were busy doing what needed to be done: Raising kids and cattle. Mending fence and mending clothes. Some lived hours from the supermarket. Some off grid. And not because it was cool.

For Van Cleve, photographing women ranchers was a way to add them to the historical record, to give a voice to their vital, often

unsung contributions. Opening April 15 at the Booth Western Art Museum, *Barbara Van Cleve: Women of the West* celebrates these vignettes of rarely seen ranch life.

Drawing from the Cartersville, Georgia, museum's own collection, the exhibition will feature photographs from Van Cleve's seminal 1995 book, *Hard Twist: Western Ranch Women*, as well as other works within the theme. Created between 1984 and 2014, these images introduce new audiences to Van Cleve's work and the Western way of life, Booth curator of photography Mark Medley says.

"When you look at Barbara's pictures, you understand she was literally there," says photographer Emily McCartney. "She was on her horse going down that same mountain. To meet this 88-year-old spitfire woman and to understand that she lived that life alongside those people that she photographed, it just makes her work 10 times better in my opinion."

McCartney, a young ranch photographer who connected with Van Cleve at *Art of the Cowgirl*, says, "She was so kind to me and still has such a gleam in her eye. You can tell she is full of so much spirit and life in her, and just



Early Summer Evening, 2011, pigment print, 15¾ x 23½". Booth Western Art Museum permanent collection, Cartersville, GA. © Barbara Van Cleve.



Katy Sewing in her Room, Whitlock Ranch, Wyoming, 2001, pigment print, 13½ x 20". Booth Western Art Museum permanent collection, Cartersville, GA. © Barbara Van Cleve.



Tootie Mitchell Fencing, Stake Ranch, Elko, Nevada, 1986, pigment print, 18¾ x 13¾". Booth Western Art Museum permanent collection, Cartersville, GA. © Barbara Van Cleve.

a lot of grit. It's cool to meet living legends because so often artists and photographers are not truly recognized and their work is not truly appreciated until they are gone."

"I'll put it this way, Barbara is a real cowgirl," Medley says of the Montana-born photographer and Cowgirl Hall of Fame inductee. "In my conversations with her, she's one of the most magnanimous people I've ever met."

McCarty is not only following the trail

Van Cleve blazed in art, she sees herself in Van Cleve's subjects as well. "It is her photos of ranching women that strike me the most," says McCarty. "There's an image of a lady—you can tell she rushed in the kitchen to get the food out of the oven and she still has her chaps and boots and spurs on. You know, I think many of us can relate to that."

Barbara Van Cleve: Women of the West will be on view through October 15, 2023. 🐾

Barbara Van Cleve: Women of the West

April 15–October 15, 2023

Booth Western Art Museum, 501 N. Museum Drive, Cartersville, GA 30120
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www.boothmuseum.org