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Animals in motion, then and now, in Rhode Island artist's show

Andrew Nixon draws on both the visual and art-historical sides of Eadweard Muybridge's work.

WESTPORT, Mass. -- Besides having one of the best names of all time, the 19th-century English photographer Eadweard Muybridge is known for two things. One is a famous series of stop-motion photographs that proved, once and for all, that horses and other animals actually lift all four feet off the ground when they run. (Until then, most people believed that at least one hoof, paw or foot stayed on the ground.) Second, having invented a system capable of photographing bodies in motion, Muybridge essentially paved the way for modern-day movies and videos.

In his current show at the Dedee Shattuck Gallery, in Westport, Mass., Rhode Island artist Andrew Nixon draws on both the visual and art-historical sides of Muybridge's work. A painting called "Buck and Kick," for example, is basically a blown-up version of one of Muybridge's most famous stop-motion studies. (True to its name, it shows an agitated-looking donkey kicking in all directions. And, yes, all four of the animal's hooves do come off the ground at the same time.) Several other works also feature close copies of Muybridge works.

Why copy photographs that are now more than a century old? Well, for one thing, even today there's something at once visually appealing and more than a little mysterious about these images. Like beautiful antiques, they manage to feel simultaneously new and old. Second, while anyone with a cellphone can take a high-definition video these days, the challenges of representing bodies in motion (and in space) haven't changed much for painters, printmakers and other artists since the Renaissance. The image that takes a camera a split second to record still takes a painter or a draftsman years of practice to get right.

Finally, channeling Muybridge allows Nixon to channel the work of another animal-obsessed 19th-century artist — the great post-Impressionist painter Georges Seurat. The combination of Muybridge's scientific approach and Seurat's more intuitive touch makes for an interesting dialogue, one played out in a series of playful animal studies that range from leaping cats to running elk to a galloping bison. The shows ends Sunday at 1 Partners Lane (off Main Road) in Westport, Mass. For more, call (508) 636-4177 or visit dedeeshattuckgallery.com.

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"Elk 1-3-4," a painting by Andrew Nixon, is part of an exhibit of Nixon's work, at the Dedee Shattuck Gallery, in Westport, Mass. The show closes Sunday.

