



JOHN CERNEY

BIG LANDSCAPE, BIG WEST



JOHN CERNEY **BIG LANDSCAPE, BIG WEST**

Rice Gallery
HOUSTON, TEXAS



F O R E W O R D

Years ago, on a drive through Salinas, California, a friend and I almost ran our car off the road when we caught sight of a gigantic figure at the edge of a field, an 18-foot smiling farm worker holding a head of lettuce. Only much later did I learn that this monumental form was the work of John Cerney, an artist known primarily to the residents of Salinas Valley and to those motorists lucky enough to be passing through the area. In early 2005, a newspaper article about Cerney reminded me of the humanity as well as the sheer visual impact of his work and caused me to wonder if he would consider working indoors. I was hesitant because the article quoted John as saying, “I never cared about galleries and square things framed on a wall.” Through the efforts of Natilee Harren, our fantastic curatorial intern at the time, and with the help of Bev Meamber at the Salinas Valley Chamber of Commerce, I began an email correspondence with John, and I set out to convince him to create an installation for the Rice Gallery. This proved to be a challenge because John perceived of himself as a “combination of P.T. Barnum and Norman Rockwell,” and felt he was too “mainstream” for our gallery. When he learned, however, that his exhibition would be shown in collaboration with The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston exhibition, *The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890 – 1950*,



Dennis Caprara, 1996
16 feet tall, Highway 101, Gonzales, California

left page: *Farmer and Irrigator*, 1995
18 feet tall, Highway 68, Salinas, California



Iowa Landscape, 1997, 16 feet tall, Dunlap, Iowa

he was enticed. I am grateful to Emily Neff, curator of American painting and sculpture at the MFAH and curator of *The Modern West*, for offering us this exceptional collaborative opportunity. Emily's exhibition featured a major work by Thomas Moran, one of Cerney's favorite western landscape painters, and it was Moran's work that inspired *Big Landscape, Big West*.

Although this was the first time John sited his oversized work in an interior space, the situation was familiar. His figures would be viewed through the gallery's front glass wall, so they still had to grab the attention of passersby in the high-traffic area in front of the gallery. This they did. People who glimpsed the immense, beautifully painted characters were drawn inside and wrote in our guestbook, "majestic," "spectacular," and full of "grandeur." Many were impressed by how they themselves became part of John's family of figures and experienced the awe of the magnificent



Model posing for *Big Landscape, Big West*



In-process detail of *Big Landscape, Big West*

landscape with them. Others thanked John for the way his installation evoked powerful memories of their own experiences in the American West. "Takes me home to California, thank you," a viewer wrote.

I would like to thank John for taking the risk to work with us and for giving our audience the opportunity to experience his refreshing "take" on the art world. John's endeavor to paint all the time, to make work that is available to everyone, and to have his horizon line be the real thing, is inspiring. He is a virtuoso painter and a proud participant in this country's tradition of a love of the open road. He is an American Treasure.

Kimberly Davenport
Director



THEY MIGHT BE GIANTS



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

In their day, Thomas Moran's landscape paintings of the American West were so influential that they helped persuade the United States Congress to declare Yellowstone a national park. In fall 2006, Moran's 1882 masterwork, *Nearing Camp, Evening on the Upper Colorado River, Wyoming*, served as an inspiration for something a little different: *Big Landscape, Big West*, an installation at the Rice Gallery by California artist John Cerney.

Moran was an explorer as well as an artist, accompanying survey teams into America's West. His work was included in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) exhibition *The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890–1950*. The exhibition examined ways in which artists shaped our vision of the West as well as how the West helped shape modern art in America. Cerney's installation was presented in collaboration with the

MFAH exhibition, and in it, Cerney sought to recreate the sense of wonder western landscapes evoked in 19th-century Americans. He chose Moran's painting because, he says, "If I'm going to do my version of a landscape painting, I can't do better than Thomas Moran."

Usually, Cerney's art becomes part of the landscape rather than simply depicting it. He got his start as an artist by painting signs and advertising murals. While he was painting a scene on the side of a building – a garage with auto mechanics working inside – he decided to paint the sign that said, "We Accept Visa and MasterCard," as a separate, three-dimensional element. Cerney liked the way the dimensional element looked against the flat painting, and the idea stuck with him. When he went back to repaint the mural three years later, he added another three-dimensional element to the building, a cutout of a Corvette.

"It didn't take long," he says, "before I realized that I no longer needed the building." His paintings could be freestanding in the world, and, he says, "I could even paint my own buildings."

Since then, Cerney has been painting giant figures that are planted in the landscape. Some of his earliest free-standing works were huge cutouts of farm workers placed in fields where the workers toiled. He garnered his widest recognition – including an article in *The New York Times* – for his cutout painting of a giant baby playing with life-sized tractors.

The Rice Gallery installation was the first time Cerney has executed an indoor project. Instead of placing his painted figures in the landscape, this time, he painted the landscape as well. Declaring that he doesn't consider himself a fine artist, Cerney says taking on Moran's work was slightly intimidating. To do it, he began by breaking the project into manageable

sections, gridding off a large photograph of the work and then slicing it into more than 600 squares. Over a four-month period, he reproduced and enlarged each segment on its own 11-inch square panel of Masonite. Like the pixels of a digital image, the small paintings worked together to create a whole. In the end, there were almost 1,000 panels in the installation as Cerney expanded Moran's image of the river and cliffs into a pixilated panorama that extended across three walls of the gallery.

And then there were the figures. In front of Sewall Hall, a cutout of a young boy crouched in the courtyard, peering through the gallery windows with a pair of binoculars. Inside, 12-foot-high figures of a family, dressed in clothing of the painting's period, stood admiring the view and dwarfing visitors. The mother worked at her easel painting the same scenery, while the father perched on a rock and gestured to his awestruck daughter. High in the left corner of the room hung a cut out of a hawk. An audio track played the sound of wind and the echoing cries of birds, lending a sense of immersion to the scene.

Cerney may be an artist used to having the outdoors as his gallery, but in *Big Landscape, Big West*, he turned the tables, bringing something of the splendor and scale of the outdoors to an interior space.

Kelly Klaasmeyer

Kelly Klaasmeyer is a Houston arts writer.

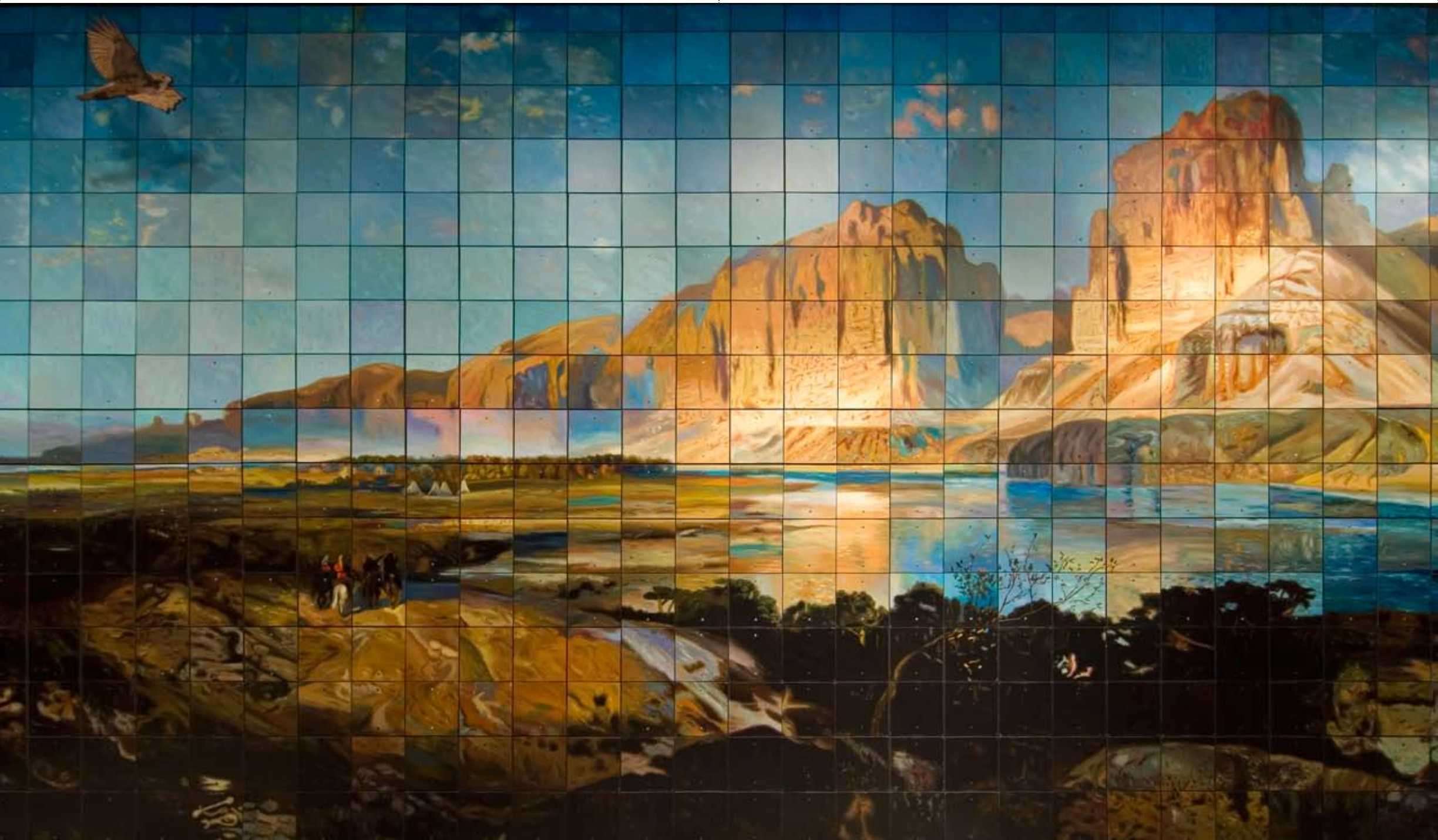
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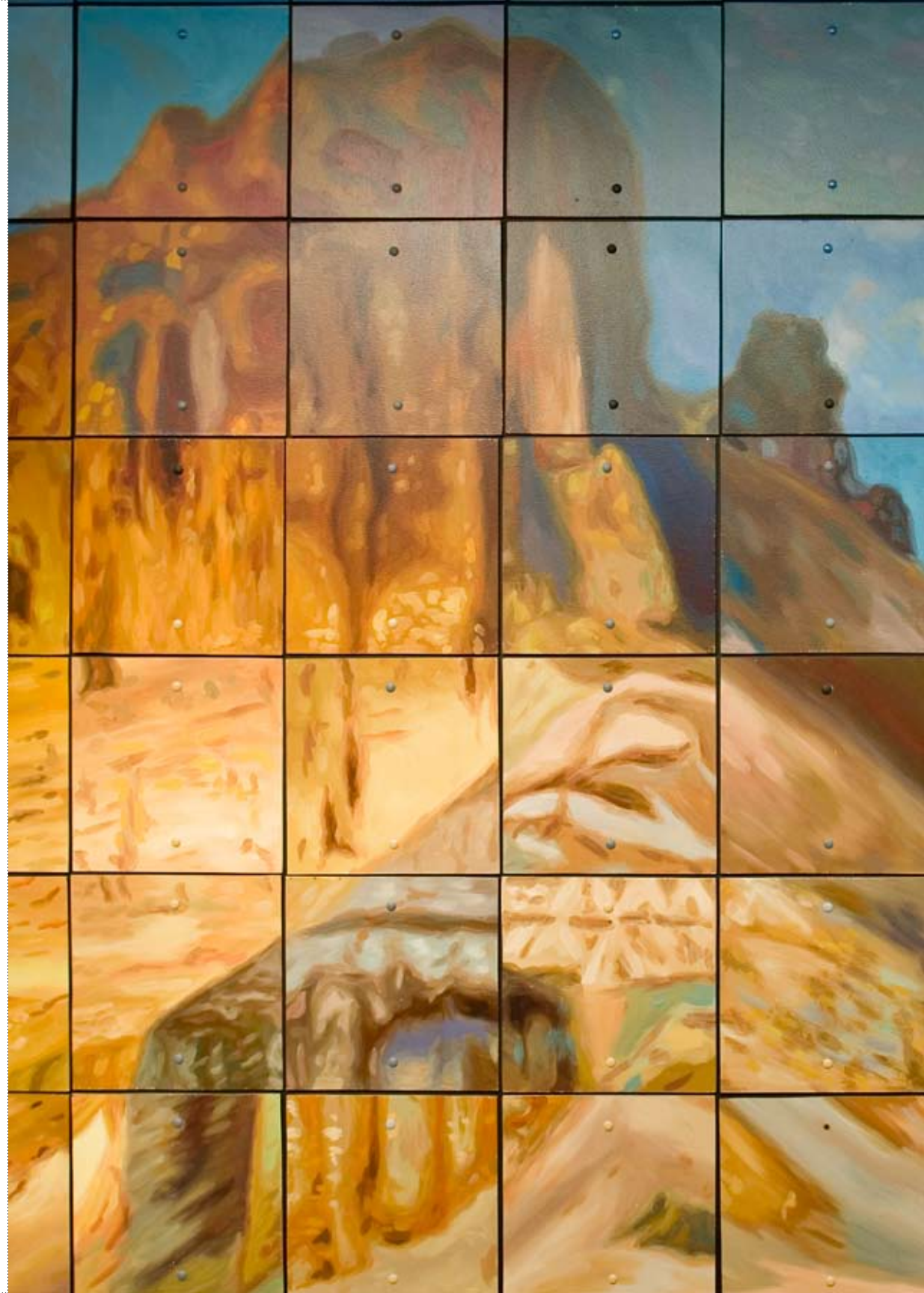
Big Baby with Tractors, 1998, 20 feet tall, Duncan Family Farms, Goodyear, Arizona

























A B O U T T H E A R T I S T

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



John Cerney, *Big Landscape, Big West*
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Rice University Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the campus
of Rice University, 6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas 77005,
and on the web at ricegallery.org.

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

oil on canvas, 26 x 63 inches

Courtesy Bolton Museums, Art Gallery and Aquarium, Bolton, United Kingdom

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**From the original
painting by
Thomas Moran**

**'Nearing Camp,
Evening on the
Upper Colorado River'**

1882



**With thanks
to the
Bolton Museum
&
Art Gallery,
Bolton, England**

Rice Gallery

