



A Measure of Curiosity by Donna Howell-Sickles, alkylid on canvas, 48 x 60 inches.
 Courtesy of Contemporary Southwest Galleries, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Three Women Artists of the West

by Elizabeth Clair Flood

Ask an art aficionado if they can name a renowned female Western artist and most everyone responds: “Well, there is Georgia O’Keeffe, of course, And, ah ...”

The conversation ends.

While there were other artists in the past — Mary Green Blumenschein, Edith Hamlin, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and later, Susan Hertel — few were rec-

ognized. Art wasn’t considered a suitable profession for women. They were expected to stay home, raise a family and in many cases in the early West, teach. Few women braved the western wilderness throughout the 1800s when renowned artists such as George Catlin, Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Frederick Remington and Charles Marion Russell captured the West in art.

“Art is a profession,” says Sarah Boehme, curator of the Whitney Gallery of Western Art in Cody, Wyoming, “and women didn’t have professions in the 19th century. Women were homemakers and art was only available to them as a hobby. They were not invited to go on explorations into the West — even the women who were painting.”

Today’s women artists are making



Steppin' Out by Donna Howell-Sickles, mixed media on paper, 60 x 40 inches. Courtesy of Contemporary Southwest Galleries, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

a living painting the West. And their works are causing a stir. At the vanguard of these artists are Donna Howell-Sickles, Anne Coe and Kathy Wipfler. All three paint a contemporary West, chock-full of myth, romance and rugged landscapes. While their art is distinctly regional, all three women present a new, vibrant West. They paint a West seething with life, not one that has vanished. And their images embrace larger, more global themes of independence, courage, and respect for the land and its creatures. Often, their work challenges Western stereotypes and myths we've lived with for years.

Donna Howell-Sickles of Texas, paints the 1920s cowgirl with zeal. Whether running with wild horses or wrapped around a Brahma bull, Howell-Sickles' high-spirited cowgirls explode from the canvas. Their energy, confidence, and love-of-life

personalities are an inspiration for modern-day women.

As a child, Howell-Sickles was intrigued with the cowgirl. "She was a woman of strength and courage," she says.

When the artist first started drawing figures, they were anonymous. "A few had lips," Howell-Sickles says. Gradually, however, her figures took more shape as the artist studied old-time cowgirls such as Vera McGinnis and Prairie Rose. It was their "raucous zest for life" that attracted her to the image. "To have a figure dressed in 1920s cowgirl attire tugged at me. I couldn't figure out why," she says. "It is the kind of figure that we all have in the back of our minds. We've either played cowgirl or watched Westerns."

As Howell-Sickles' unabashedly female figures emerged, she added an element of myth to her works. Her cowgirls or goddesses appeared with animals and were closely in tune with nature's cycles. "They are more one with nature than we are at the present time," she continues. "Using the cowgirl as an icon for women, there are one hundred places I could take her."

Men as well as women are drawn to Howell-Sickles' Western gals. "One guy wanted to find one of my cowgirls and marry her," she says.

Donna Howell-Sickles grew up in North Texas in the small rural community of Sivells Bend, where her parents ran a farm and cattle operation. While she liked to draw, she never dreamed she'd earn a living doing it. When she entered Texas Tech University, she chose to major in elementary education, as teaching was the only job she'd seen women do.

After an art class her junior year, however, she switched her major and graduated in 1972 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

Today, Howell-Sickles' work is seen in galleries and museums throughout the West. Last year, work was included in the "American Women Artists and the West" exhibition hosted by the Tucson Museum of Art. Also in 1993, the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, Wyoming, purchased one of her works.

For Anne Coe, being an American regional artist was the worst path an artist could take, according to the conventional wisdom she was taught in art school. "Art had to be from Europe," says Coe, who grew up in a small town in the Sonoran Desert's lower Gila Valley in Arizona. "I had to go live in Europe. I had to leave the West in order to come back." Coe — who is known for her Cadillac cowgirls and gila monsters — was thrilled to be back home and to paint what she knew and loved.

When Coe, who now resides in Apache Junction, Arizona, returned to the West to paint, she found there were very few women painting there. Today, this is changing. "There is a whole school of women, and they are dealing with art in a different manner than the male art [of the past], Coe says. "They aren't doing that old fogey stuff, where everything has to be historically correct — by the painters I call the 'hair-counters.' They are dealing with larger, global issues."

Because the West has changed, Coe wants to paint the present. In her works, she explores contemporary issues of over-development, over-population, conservation, and the changing roles of women. Coe's humor makes her pieces accessible. Her rambunctious critters frolicking in cabins, trampling down power lines, and bathing at the pool provoke laughter and thought. In her piece, *Hostel Take Over*, grizzly bears break into a cabin and feast on eggs and toast. Her creatures, cowgirls and other images of popular culture cavort in a mythical desert landscape



Snake River Sushi by Anne E. Coe, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 70 inches. Courtesy of Elaine Horwitch Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

complete with surrealistic diners and ancient trucks.

Like Howell-Sickles, Coe has also used the cowgirl as a vehicle to express larger issues. In the past, the Old West was depicted by men and art was predominately of male subjects. Coe believes the New West encompasses more feminine issues. "Comparing the two side by side, the Old West would be conservative and very masculine, and the New West would be less conservative, more feminine. And the symbol for the New West would be the cowgirl."

"When I was young," she continues, "the cowgirl was my ideal. She was strong. She didn't suffer fools. She stood up for what she was. She was kind and didn't exploit. And she may have driven a Cadillac. She was a mass of contradictions."

Artist Kathy Wipfler says that

while there were many women plein air artists at the turn of the century, there were definitely more men selling their art. "Women didn't have to sell their art for a living. They were in it for the love of painting."

Wipfler moved to Wyoming from Sonora, California, to learn to paint. "Immediately, I felt at home in Wyoming. It seemed to suit all my needs," says Wipfler. "The West has always had a 'live and let live' philosophy, as long as we don't get in people's way." For Wipfler, Wyoming provided space for her to explore her own creativity — a place far from the constraints of the New York art milieu. There were also art galleries to explore, landscapes to comb and prominent artists to learn from.

What Wipfler learned from her mentors — Bob Lougheed, John Clymer, Ned Jacob, Conrad

Schwiering and Bob Barlow — was the importance of painting directly from the source. "There is no substitute," she says. "You have to go outside to see what light does to an object or a landscape."

Wipfler paints what she sees. She has painted haystacks in the past because they were beautiful, but also because they may not be around much longer with the advent of tractors and new technology. "I do enjoy painting the way things are, but may not be forever."

While there still are more male plein air painters, Wipfler doesn't feel threatened by their presence. As has always been true of the West, people respect you for what you accomplish, regardless of gender. Whether you climb a mountain, pull a car from a ditch, or paint a painting, you are acknowledged for a job



Sheep Mountain Sundown by Kathy Wipfler, oil, 7 x 14 inches.
 Courtesy of Partners Gallery, Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

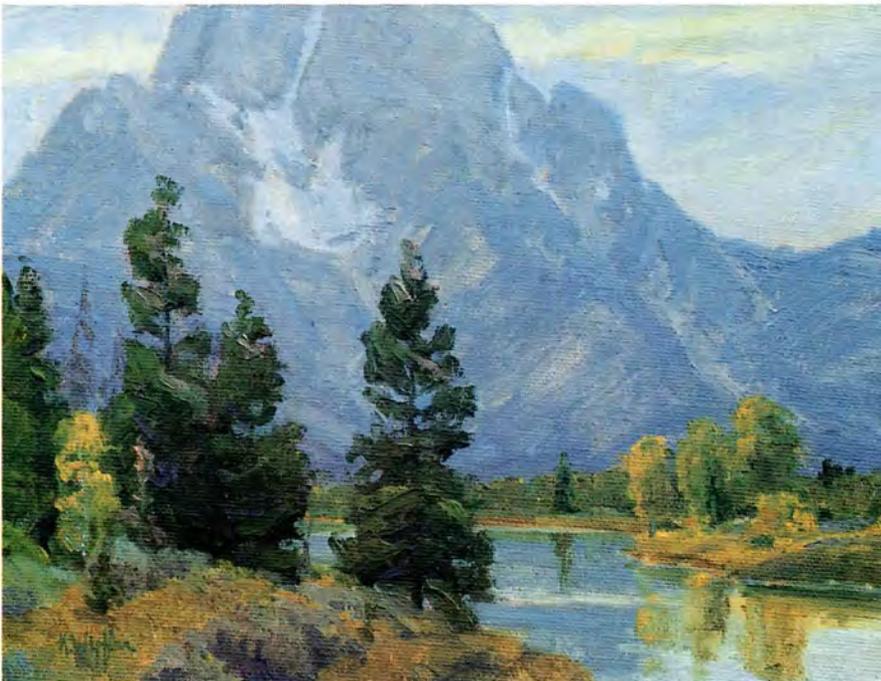
well done, she believes.

One of Wipfler's collectors purchases a painting during every visit to the West. When he looks at the

works, he is at once transported back to his vacations in the West. "If my work touches someone's heart in a faraway place, then I've done my

job," she says.

Collectors, museum curators and art critics across the nation can't help but turn their heads at the work of Western women artists. Their talent and energy is overwhelming. Today's contemporary women painters have a chance to shake up the past and seek their own tradition. And what they are turning up is not only valuable to women, but to a larger audience. Their works deal with issues of land management and wildlife preservation. They embrace individualism. In the West where there is still space and the rules haven't been fully formed, these women artists can make their way as artists and at the same time, influence the way the West is perceived. 🐾



Mt. Moran, September by Kathy Wipfler, oil, 12 x 16 inches.
 Courtesy of Partners Gallery, Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

In the fall of 1994, the Big Horn Gallery in Cody, Wyoming, will host an exhibition, "Women of the West." It will take place in late September. The Gene Autry Western Heritage Museum also has an exhibition entitled "Women Artists of the West, 1890-1945" scheduled for 1995.