

Donna Howell-Sickles, Artist

Vivacious Cowgirls Frolic Across Her Canvases

Story, Jann Arrington Wolcott

Postcard Cowgirl #7 ©1991

mixed media/paper

60"x40"



Do cowgirls have more fun? The vivacious figures that frolic, flirt and dance across the canvases of Texas artist Donna Howell-Sickles could convince any city slicker that they do.

"I happen to believe that joy is largely a matter of choice," Donna said. "I choose to enjoy life as much as possible. Obviously, my art reflects that personal choice."

The reflection goes even deeper. One can't help but notice that the figures in her mixed-media paintings bear a striking resemblance to their creator — the same wide smile, the same open responsiveness. "I have a mirror in my studio to check out body angles," Donna said. "I've discovered that if the body language is like mine, no matter whose face I put on it, people are going to say, 'Oh, that's you.'"

"I can't separate my work from my inner self. Like all artists, my work mirrors who I am. I've never really thought of myself as a cowgirl. But I'm very much a woman of the West. That independent, self-reliant, go-for-it attitude that typifies the Western spirit is an integral part of my psyche."

How did these cowgirl/goddess figures evolve? "It was during the early 1980s that my work sort of kicked over the edge into joyous exuberance," Donna explained. "I was in New York, visiting museums and art galleries. Suddenly, I was struck by the quantity of work dealing with anger, angst and the sorrow of the human experience. I said to myself, 'Joy seems to be an underrated quality in art. That's too bad. I think it deserves a little air time.'"

As far as Donna was concerned, an obvious vehicle to provide that air time was the indomitable American Western woman. "Years ago, I saw a '40s era hand-tinted postcard of a cowgirl on horseback," she said. "She was decked out in Western attire and waving happily at the camera. The postcard said, 'Greetings from a Real Cowgirl from the Ole Southwest.' The colors were painted over the black and white image, which gave it a marvelous

real/unreal quality. That postcard fascinated me.”

Donna began to research real life cowgirls of the 1920s and 1930s. “I had the good fortune to meet a few of them,” she said, “like Tad Lucas, a rodeo star who traveled with the rodeo circuit back in the 1920s. She was telling me how grueling their training and show schedule had been. Then she added that the rodeo performers always danced at night. When I asked if she was ever too tired, Tad just laughed. ‘Honey,’ she said, ‘we were NEVER too tired to dance!’ That conversation was the inspiration for a painting titled *Never Too Tired to Dance*.”

The theme of strong, capable women celebrating life runs through all of Donna’s work. “I enjoy enhancing womanhood,” she said. “There’s an undercurrent with women in our culture today, a need to connect with the old goddess archetypes — strong, life-affirming female images. We need heroines. I think the image of the cowgirl speaks about that need.” She grinned. “One of the things I love about the cowgirl costume is that when the figure is standing with her feet together and her chaps flaring out, she looks like one of those ancient goddess figures with the enlarged buttocks and legs.”

The conversation turned to the romantic mystique of the Old West. “There’s no doubt that it has a strong nostalgic appeal,” Donna said. “I think that’s because it represents an anonymous, elusive kind of lifestyle that isn’t really possible these days. Years ago, you could escape the constraints of family and community by heading West. There was all of this wide-open space to get lost in. You could reinvent yourself as a person, as many times as you needed to. That’s very appealing today, because we’re at a point where we have to shed some of that anonymity. We have to become involved on a community and national level in order to make the world a better place in which to live. We can no longer afford that Old West detachment.”

In addition to the American West, Donna draws on world-wide mythologies for inspiration. “I incorporate themes from Greek and Roman mythology,” she said, “as well as from other ancient cultures. Joseph Campbell’s works, such as *The Power of Myth* and *The Way of the Animal Powers*, have been a great inspiration to me. I also get ideas by just talking to people.”

When the observation was made that the figures in her work exude vitality and appear only momentarily paused in motion, Donna agreed. “My work is about life,” she said. “And life is fluidity and joyous interaction. I try to get that energy into my art.”

Donna went on to say that her favorite part of her work is the first sketch. “The most fun by far is getting the idea and sketching it out in charcoal. Nothing counts at that point. Everything can be changed and moved around. Because it’s not yet



***Readjusting the Balance of Circumstance* ©1992**

**alkyd/canvas
48"x48"**

clearly defined, a sketch is not the final statement.” She pointed to faint lines within the horses’ flank on a painting called *Web of Life*. “See all those little lines in there? Obviously, the cowgirl who’s now standing on that side of the horse was in a different position at one time. I move these people all over the paper. If I decide that the relationship between figures isn’t working, I just move them around until they say what I want them to. I don’t mind if some of the original sketch is visible. So much of the magic shows through when you can see the structure.”

Elaborating on her themes, Donna looks as animated as one of her cowgirls. “On some level, I think of myself as a storyteller,” she said. “All of my scenes are parts of a story. For example,” she said, pointing to a painting of a smiling woman communing with black birds, “I had a four-piece series in mind when I did that piece, titled *A Little Bird Told Me*.”

“The first drawing was of a seated female figure, surrounded by a horse, a bull and three dogs. I called it *A Meeting of the Minds*. It represented the process of coming to know who you are and where you are in relation to your life. The next piece, *Into*



Donna Howell-Sickles, photo-Jann Arrington Wolcott



Three Questions ©1993

mixed media/paper

40"x60"

the Woods Alone, was of a woman standing behind a deer with three guardian dogs out in front. That represented the point in life when you've realized who you are and are now ready to go out into the world — into the woods — alone.

"*A Little Bird Told Me* was the third in that series. Once you're out in the world on your own, you have to listen to the things that come to you through your instincts and through your senses. Fourth in the series was a joyous, almost circular composition of a woman dancing with three dogs. I called it *Celebrations* because it represents the culmination of the individuation process. You figure out who you are and what you need. You go out into the world alone. Once you've gathered the necessary information and processed it, you're ready for the celebration of life. In a nutshell, that's what I do with all of my pieces. I try to express my philosophy for living."

In each of Donna's paintings, there is a splash of red — on a blackbird's wing, as an accent on a horse's saddle, or on a cowgirl's bandana. "Red is a very special and spiritual color to me," she said. "It has ancient mythological and magical connections. We find religious artifacts that had been covered with red ochre. I read somewhere that when languages are growing, black and white get a name

first. Then comes red. That's understandable because our blood is red. It's the color of life."

The artist also incorporates animals in most of her paintings. "I love drawing animals," she said. "But on a deeper level, I use them to represent other things in my work. After all, animals have been imbued with many symbolic and psychological meanings throughout our years of acquiring civilization. They fulfill all kinds of roles in mythology, from guardian to antagonist. In that way, animals can represent something you need to overcome, or they can represent an aspect of strength you incorporate to overcome some adversity."

The animals featured in Donna's work — dogs, horses, cats, birds, deer — all have a special, time-honored bond to humans. "They spark something deep within us," she said, "and touch us with a little bit of mysticism. For example, there's the connection of the deer with the goddess Diana in Greek mythology. Dogs were associated with the moon goddess in many cultures, and the lion is an ancient symbol for female fertility. So, including animals in a piece adds a dimension that the women figures alone don't have. It's also a way of honoring our interspecies connection."

Born on a farm in Gainsville, Texas Donna moved with her parents and younger brother to

**Double Deer ©1992****mixed media/paper****40"x60"**

Lovington, New Mexico when she was in the seventh grade. After high school, she returned to Texas where she earned a bachelor of fine arts degree at Texas Tech, Lubbock.

"I attended two years of college as an education major," she said. "Both of my parents are teachers, and it was just assumed that I would be too. I always knew that I could draw, but never thought of it as a possible occupation. Then, in my junior year, I took a required art course. It changed my life. You see, I'd always had a hard time following the rules because I'd get sidetracked. I'd think of another way to do something, a more creative way, and I'd get in trouble. I decided that I was just a little odd and tried to keep it under control. But here in this art class were people who thought the way I did! Suddenly, I realized I could do this. I could do this for the rest of my life! I immediately changed my major from education to art." She laughed. "I didn't dare tell my folks until it was too late for them to do anything about it."

After graduation, Donna moved to Seattle where she spent several years working as a visiting artist for the Washington State Arts Commission. "I made a lot of good friends in Washington," she said. "But I missed horizontal space. So in 1979, I packed up and headed back to Texas."

It turned out to be the right move for Donna. Soon after returning to Texas she met and married engineer/architect John Sickles. Today the couple lives in a renovated 1890s Victorian farmhouse north of Dallas with their 12-year-old daughter, Katie. "My family is my support system," the artist said. "They encourage and inspire me. Through the years, whenever I would doubt myself, John would always say, 'Come on. Keep at it. You're great.' I'm convinced that it's essential for artists to have that kind of support. In the beginning, there're so many times you get turned down. Unless you have at least one person besides yourself who believes in you, it's hard to push on."

These days, Donna gets plenty of positive feedback for her work. "It really thrills me when people say that my work makes them happy," she said. "I've sold pieces to other women artists who say they use them as a talisman for their own success. That's really flattering. A man who bought a painting recently at an opening said to me, 'I have to have it because I'm looking for a woman just like this!'"

Donna Howell-Sickles work may be seen in Santa Fe at Contemporary Southwest Galleries, 123 West Palace Avenue. 🐾