

★ WESTERN ICONS



the COWGIRL WAY

Donna Howell-Sickles paints modern cowgirls who embody the joyous spirit of the West By Norman Kolpas

THE BIG RED-LIPSTICK SMILE all but leapt off the postcard, which featured a 1930s black-and-white photo of a woman in full cowgirl regalia, garishly colorized and printed slightly off-register. “She appealed to me completely, taking me back to my childhood,” recalls Donna Howell-Sickles of that image she found more than 30 years ago in “a boxful of goodies” that a potter friend offered her in trade for one of her canvases. “I grew up on a ranch with horses and cows, and every Sunday after church, playing with my friends, I had pretended to be this red-lipped cowgirl heroine who saved the world.”

Count that postcard moment as a key turning point in the career of a woman who has become one of the most popular western artists living today, known for mixed-media contemporary figurative paintings that define the modern, strong, confident, independent, sometimes brash, and always femininely appealing American cowgirl in all her red-lipped glory.

Indeed, so iconic have her images become, and so masterly is the style and spirit in which they are created, that two years ago Howell-Sickles was inducted into the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame in Fort Worth, TX, joining 189 other illustrious western women, living and deceased. Her fellow inductees include artists Glenna Goodacre and Pamela Harr Rattey; Pueblo potter Maria Martinez; authors Willa Cather and Laura Ingalls Wilder; rodeo riders and Wild West performers Mildred Douglas Chrisman, Prairie Rose Henderson, and Lulu Bell Parr; singer Patsy Cline; TV and movie star Dale Evans; Cherokee Chief Wilma Mankiller; and even Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, who grew up on a cattle ranch in Arizona and learned to shoot and ride by the time she was 8 years old.

DOSSIER REPRESENTATION

McLarry Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM; Legacy Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ, and Jackson, WY; Big Horn Galleries, Cody, WY, and Tubac, AZ; Telluride Gallery of Fine Art, Telluride, CO; Texas Art Gallery, Dallas, TX; www.donnahowellsickles.com.

UPCOMING SHOWS

Cowgirl Up!, Desert Caballeros Western Museum, Wickenburg, AZ, through May 3.
Western Visions, National Museum of Wildlife Art, Jackson, WY, September 14-18.
Buffalo Bill Art Show & Sale, Cody, WY, September 25-26.
Solo show, McLarry Fine Art, September 25-October 16.
Two-person show, Legacy Gallery, Jackson, WY, September.

Howell-Sickles’ unique contribution, the Hall of Fame notes, is the way in which she creates “images of women that are both real and myth” in artwork that “encapsulates the camaraderie and the timelessness of the cowgirl spirit.” Such heady recognition, Howell-Sickles reflects, was “probably the most validating thing that has ever happened about my artwork.” She speaks those words with the unforced modesty of someone who “could always draw, but didn’t ever realize it was a talent you could build a life around. I always thought it was just a bonus.”

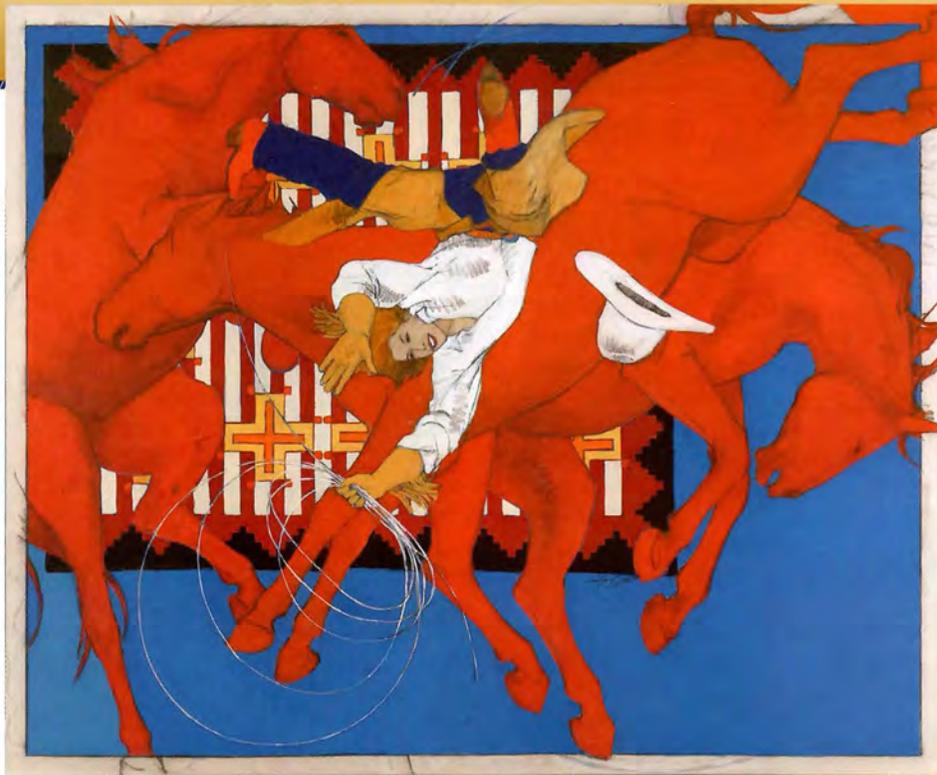
Born in 1949 and raised on a ranch in the small rural community of Sivells Bend, TX, about 90 miles north of Dallas, young Donna Howell began her education in a small two-room schoolhouse that had two teachers and about 30 students. Back then her talent expressed itself mostly in such tasks as illustrating fellow students’ book reports. The family later moved to Lovington, NM, where she attended junior and senior high school and continued to keep her artistic light under a bushel. She went on to enter Texas Tech University in Lubbock as an education major, planning to become a teacher.

But her plans were dramatically altered during her junior year by the most mundane of things: an academic course requirement. “I had to take an art class,” she says, “and suddenly I found myself around people who were more like me than anyone I had ever met before. It was a huge discovery. Everybody was so supportive of how well I drew.” By the end of the semester, she had decided to change her major to art.

AS THE STORY GROWS, MIXED MEDIA, 50 X 40.

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Howell-Sickles' women are both real and myth.

She couldn't bring herself, however, to tell her parents. "I waited until after the drop/add date for classes," she says. "When I finally did tell them, they were worried that I was headed for a life of poverty." But, Howell-Sickles quickly adds, "I proved them wrong by persevering."

She kept doing precisely that after college, continuing to paint while supporting herself with everyday jobs like cashiering in a diner. The subjects of her artwork at the time tended toward the working people who surrounded her. "I did some sketches of the restaurant's short-order cooks with tongs and steaks and big aprons," she offers by way of example, going on to note that one of those sketches grew into "a loosely painted image of a guy at the stove"—the very canvas she traded one fateful day for the boxful of goodies that contained the postcard of the red-lipped cowgirl.

In such early paintings, you can see her strong use of charcoal lines amid bold fields of red and blue, which is still typical of her style today. "My work is pretty energetic," she says, "and though I haven't really analyzed my color choices, I like the energy between the red and the blue. I like my figures best when it feels like they're about to move, and red and blue seem to accentuate that feeling."

They also, it bears pointing out, just happen to be iconic western hues, common to denim jeans and jackets, cotton bandanas, flannel shirts, Indian blankets, finely tooled and dyed boots, and, yes, painted mouths. In that regard, the colors form a tonal foundation that Howell-Sickles has evolved over the course of more than three decades—a personal palette that has come to endow her body of work with an almost mythic quality.

Her signature cowgirls "are the costumed figures that take the story being told half a step away from reality," she observes. "The beauty of imagery in paintings is that it speaks a very vague language, and people can fill in the blanks," she continues. "Yet all of my cowgirls reflect the strengths and goals we all share and the joys that life can provide: Run! Laugh! Jump! Ride!"

One can also see such joyous emotion in the animals she loves to add to her works. Horses, the indispensable working animal of the West, she deems "beautiful and elegant." Dogs "are loved ones and companions. I can't even imagine life without them," she notes, speaking with special fondness of Sweet Lillie, her Australian shepherd, and Shiner Bark, her mixed-breed "big black happy dog." Bulls also sometimes appear, not just embodying the very essence of ranching but also because "there's nothing like an unbelievably muscled bull to speak of the masculine, and I sometimes like to include that to show that the women in my paintings are involved in that kind of partnership."

Howell-Sickles certainly enjoys such a partnership with her husband, John Sickles, a retired creator of models and prototypes for architecture and engineering projects. She hitched his name to her own after their daughter Katie was born 28 years ago. In 2000 Donna and John moved from their home in Frisco, near Dallas, to the little town of Saint

**ROLLER COASTER:
HIGH HEELS,
ACRYLIC, 57 X 70. ▲
◀ YOU CAN LEAD
A HORSE TO LAUGHTER,
MIXED MEDIA, 60 X 40.**

“All my cowgirls reflect the joys life can provide: Run! Laugh! Jump! Ride!”

Jo in the Texas Hill Country. There, Howell-Sickles set up her dream studio one block off the town square in a 1909 brick building, a former Presbyterian church with twin steeples and big windows bordered by bands of stained glass. You’ll find her painting there most days at any of the seven easels she has set up with works in various stages of progress. “I have the attention span of a gnat, so that works well for me,” she says with mocking self-deprecation. Meanwhile, John “works physically harder than ever before,” restoring and reclaiming a ranch just outside of town where the couple is moving soon.

Today Howell-Sickles finds herself more joyously at work than ever before. She’s looking forward confidently to her 60th birthday in September. And she’s adding more and more women of her own generation to her paintings. “I think my cowgirls have aged as I have,” she says. “I still do all ages, but I consistently do better at drawing whatever age I am.” The crinkles around the eyes and smiles in recent works like FANCY FRIENDS seem only to enhance the mythic quality of the tales they tell. At the same time, she’s enjoying including more of her personal friends in her paintings, rather than working with models. What you won’t see much of, however, is the artist herself, at least intentionally. “Though I don’t set out to depict myself,” she admits with a laugh, “it’s sometimes hard not to, especially around the eyes. I have been accused before of having an entire show of self-portraits!”

Though they may not be true self-portraits, every one of Howell-Sickles’ paintings nonetheless can be described as an inner portrait of an artist who has found the stories she was meant to tell. “Any story that touches on who we are expresses the boundless potential we have as humans. The bottom line I always get to,” she says, “is that these stories tell a big enough piece of who we are as women that they’re worth telling again and again.” ❖

Norman Kolpas is a Los Angeles-based freelancer who writes for *Mountain Living* and *Colorado Homes & Lifestyles* as well as *Southwest Art*.

RAVENS OF THE FIVE PATHS, ACRYLIC, 12 X 12. ▶ OPPOSITE PAGE: FANCY FRIENDS, MIXED MEDIA, 50 X 40.

