



Above: "Ride Out Morning," watercolor, 9" × 12"
Opposite: "Where the Road Flattens Out," watercolor, 12" × 9"

THE ARTS

"WHAT'S THIS GUY'S STORY AND WHY'S HE LOOK SO COOL?"

Mark Kohler offers a glimpse of the character behind the cowboy.

By Gussie Fauntleroy

Point a camera at a cowboy and you might as well be throwing a bucket of cold water on him—at least, that's how it is most times, as painter Mark Kohler has found out. Working cowboys are a whole lot like you'd imagine: proud, independent, and big-hearted deep down inside. But gradual to open up to strangers, and not much in favor of being in the spotlight.

Like the kid called Jake. Kohler met him at one of the cowboy camps where the Texas-based artist spends several weeks each spring, watching, photographing, and sometimes helping out with the branding and other cattle work. Jake was 19. He was "part God-fearing, part reprobate, with a bad case of wanderlust," Kohler remembers, a skilled cowboy

with no patience for being photographed or painted. For that reason, he didn't much like Kohler.

But the artist managed to capture him anyway, aiming his camera's long lens from the shadows of a cattle pen. In a watercolor portrait titled "Cold Light Wanderer," he captures the young man's intensity and subtle reserve, hands on his horse's reins,





"Like Old Spurs," watercolor, 14" × 18"



"Shape Shifter," watercolor, 18" × 24"

ready to jump into the work the instant the other cow punchers need him. Through the grapevine some time later, Kohler heard of Jake's response when he saw the painting. "He's the only guy who could paint me like I really am," the kid said.

It's characters like aloof, gypsy-hearted young Jake that keep Kohler fascinated by his chosen subject matter. He returns year after year to many of the same cattle outfits in Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, and Montana. The more time he spends with these hard-working men and women, the more he gets to know them as friends—and learns their stories. And it's an individual cowboy's story, suggested through the subtle tilt of a hat or an easy posture astride a horse, that he loves to paint.

Kohler grew up in Austin, when it was a smaller town. Many of his hunting buddies were cowboys. After art studies at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, he headed into commercial illustration, but after a few years decided to shift to fine art. Teaching himself the complexities of portraiture and watercolor, he studied the work of painters he greatly admired, including John Singer Sargent, Andrew Wyeth, and William Matthews. And when he looked around for subjects, it seemed a natural fit to paint his cowboy friends in their working environment. His choice—and his masterful depiction of a quintessential western subject—has been enthusiastically received by viewers and collectors around the country.

Yet Kohler does not see his art fitting neatly into a western genre. With its often intimate scale and absence of background or landscape, his imagery has a distinctly contemporary feel. Strong contrasts and shadows—a natural effect in the harsh midday light when cattle work is done—provide powerful compositional elements. And rather than dramatic action on the open range, it is the quiet, strong, individual spirit of the subject that captures the eye.

"Most of the time I'm painting people I know or horses I like, so that's the focal point for me," the artist reflects. "I'll meet somebody at a cow working operation that I really want to paint, and I'll introduce myself and find out their story. At shows, and everywhere, when people see a cowboy I've painted they always want to know, 'What's this guy's story, and why's he look so cool?' A lot of people actually don't know there are real cowboys who wear spurs all day long and never take off their boots and never go to town unless they need to."

Besides traveling to cow camps around the west, Kohler has spent time on ranches in Argentina. The vaquero's clothing, tack, and type of horse may differ from those of



"These Last Days," watercolor, 20" × 19"

the American cowboy, but there is much that feels absolutely familiar, he notes. Even within the American west, varying terrain dictates the use of different types of equipment. As a result, a variety of subcultures have evolved within the cattle industry, each with its own terminology, working methods, and code of ethics. "If they need help cutting a cow, you pitch in. Some expect you to get in and do some ground work," the artist explains. "There's an etiquette: Whatever they expect of you, you do."

This first-hand knowledge of down and dusty cattle work is reflected in Kohler's art. Also clear is his affinity for people who, like himself, have deliberately chosen to



follow their life's passion. "I like their independence, their self-sufficiency, their pride," he observes. "Everything my value system believes is condensed in the cowboy lifestyle. I just try to paint the essence of the west."

Mark J. Kohler's work is on view at McLarry Fine Art, 225 Canyon Road. Hours: 10:00-5:00 Monday-Saturday, 11:00-4:00 Sunday. (505) 988-1161 or 1-877-983-2123. www.mclarryfineart.com. A beautiful book, Mark Kohler: Working Cowboys (Herring Press) is available through the gallery.