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Wendy Hall



Marking the Trail, oil, 48" by 48"

"Dialogue with the uncontrollable aspects of daily life and with our friends helps us to choose our paths. We leave markers for others to follow and for ourselves to remember."

COWGIRLS AND MYTHOLOGY

By Vicki Stavig

While she was earning her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at Texas Tech in Lubbock, Texas, Donna Howell-Sickles received a cardboard box full of miscellaneous items in exchange for one of her paintings. It contained four pots, a leather jacket, books, and postcards, as well as, it turned out, Howell-Sickle's future in fine art.

One of the hand-tinted postcards, you see, was printed in the Thirties and featured a cowgirl, arm raised in

a wave. Below were the words, "Greetings from a real cowgirl from the Ole Southwest." The postcard's image was black and white with red printed on top. The registry was off slightly, making the red of the woman's mouth off-center. Both the subject and the process fascinated Howell-Sickles.

They also have fascinated art aficionados. Howell-Sickles' colorful paintings of cowgirls have been drawing an enthusiastic response ever since she began doing them in

the early Seventies. But her artistic talents were apparent long before.

Raised on a ranch in north Texas, Howell-Sickles attended a two-room school. When she was in first grade, her teacher handed out mimeographed drawings of a bird and told her young students to color them. The other children colored their birds blue. Howell-Sickles, however, used a myriad of colors to bring the bird to life. Color continues to be a driving force for her today.

Early on, Howell-Sickles' goal was



Legends, 094, oil on canvas, 60" by 72"

"I use one of the many Big Bear stories in combination with this sort of storybook image, left over from my own youth, of a young woman striding confidently into the future beside a bear. The basic story, as told by Dr. E. C. Krupp of the Griffin Observatory, comes from the Micmac Indians of Canada's Maritime Provinces. For them, the four stars in the Big Dipper's bowl were the tracks of the Great Bear as it circled the North Star in its yearly journey.

"The bear is trailed by seven hunters: the three stars we see as the Dipper's handle, plus a loose line of four additional stars. Each star represented a bird native to Canada. The first was the robin, then the chickadee, followed by the moose bird. The faint star, Alcor, visible beside the second star of handle, was the pot the chickadee carried to cook the bear. The last four hunters were the pigeon, the blue jay, the owl, and the saw-whet.

"In mid-fall, when they caught her, the robin shot an arrow and rushed the bear, only to be covered in her blood. He managed to get most of the blood off his feathers and onto the leaves of the surrounding trees, but he could never rid himself of the patch of red on his chest. The robin and the chickadee had done all the hard work and prepared the feast by the time the moose bird, whom the Indians called he-who-comes-in-at-the-last-moment, arrived. During the winter, the bear's spirit floated up over the pole star and back down to the earth in time to emerge from hibernation with the Earth-bound bears.

"The story used the bear in the sky as an allegory for renewal, a representation of the immortal life of the spirit. The bear prowls around the pole, dying, when the hard winter sets in, and returning to life in the spring.

"The dipper-like stick the young woman holds is from a Big Dipper story of ancient Egypt. It is the stylized leg of a bull that was used in a funeral ritual to restore the ka, or spirit, of the deceased, beginning again the process of reanimation."

to be a teacher. "I always could draw," she says, "but I had no idea it was a talent you could build a life on. I didn't really know what I wanted to be, but I knew what I didn't want to be: a rancher's wife, praying for rain. I decided to become a teacher and

work with children. I knew I would have great bulletin boards."

Howell-Sickles majored in education until she was a junior at Texas Tech and took an art course. She quickly discovered her real calling, which didn't set particularly well with

her parents, who by then had quit ranching and were teaching school in New Mexico. "Disappointment is a major understatement," Howell-Sickles says of her parents' reaction to her decision to major in art. "They were horrified. They were afraid for



Picutter, etching, 25½" by 19½"

me. I think they're kind of proud now, though. At a family reunion last year, I overheard my mother taking credit for my career. She said she figured that, if she hadn't fought so hard against it, I wouldn't have done it."

After earning her degree, Howell-Sickles took on a variety of jobs, as she continued to paint in her leisure time. She worked as a cook at a hunting camp in Idaho, drove a school bus in Seattle, was a film developer at a printing company. Eventually, however, she landed a job with the Washington State Arts Commission's Visiting Artists in the School program. "It was a wonderful experience, because I got to teach and was with children," she says. Howell-Sickle spent the next two years visiting rural Washington schools and exposing young students to art.

Homesick for Texas, however, she returned to the family's ranch there. "By that time, I realized I needed a horizon line that didn't have water under it," she says. "I missed Texas. When I moved back, I wanted to paint as much as possible." Howell-Sickles had been selling some of her paintings from a co-op gallery outside Seattle and began to enter art shows in Austin, Houston, and Abilene.

Visitors to those shows weren't quite sure what to make of Howell-Sickle's work. At that point, the faces of the cowgirls she painted were not well-defined and had no eyes. "I had people say, 'I will buy that painting if you will put my face in there,'" she laughs. "Other people

would say, 'Can you believe she wants \$600 for four lines?' You have to be practically impervious to criticism and just believe you are going where you have to go. It's tough, though."

Finding a gallery to carry her work also was an uphill battle. Gallery owners either said Howell-



Moon Dog: Darkmoon, etching, 4" by 4"

Sickle's work was too Western or too contemporary. When a Dallas gallery finally accepted her paintings and placed an advertisement in a national publication, two other galleries—one in Sun Valley, Idaho, and another in Taos, New Mexico—also began to represent her.

"The cowgirl image had tremendous appeal for me personally," says



One Little Dog, etching, 4" by 4"

Howell-Sickles. "It wasn't a specific person; it was a generalized feeling or persona. She didn't need an identity. I stayed away from the eyes, because they're such targets. Viewers go to the faces first, so I didn't put that starting point there."

Howell-Sickles did, however,

begin defining the faces of her cowgirls in the early Eighties, after she discovered that there were, indeed, such women in history, women who were well-known for their daring and their skills. "It was a part of history that had been lost," she says. "Women's image got sanitized a bit after the Twenties. My women evolved as I got to know the women of the early rodeos."

In 1984, Howell-Sickles made another discovery that added yet another dimension to her paintings: mythology. "I had always been interested in comparative religion and mythology and discovered it was a natural fit," she says. "When I began to do the mythology, I was experiencing a joy and excitement of being here, which required more of a face for me, although my faces still are not portraits of any specific person. The Greek's idea of God was very close to who they were. But they combined all their ideas of what was beautiful into one form, because no one person could combine all the aspects of physical beauty."

Reading is an integral part of the research for Howell-Sickles' paintings, as she continues to study the women of the West and Greek and Roman mythology. "I try to make time every day to read," she says. "If I don't, I think my work suffers. I discovered new twists."

Her life took a new twist shortly after Howell-Sickles returned to Texas, when she met John, the man who would become her husband. An engineer who constructed props and models for advertising camera



Oarswoman, etching, 25½" by 19½"



She'll Be Riding Three White Horses, acrylic, 60" by 48"

"These women are both racing and helping each other ride the white horse, traditionally the hero's mount. I think we have come again to a time where we need to help each other to ride our best ride. In the helping, we will find the thrill of the ride is doubled."





Circle of Fire, mixed media, 40" by 60"

"The crescent-shaped horns of the bulls have long been used in lunar feminine symbolism, while the strength of the bull reflects masculine aspects. This young cowgirl stands confident, surrounded by the vitality of life itself, and laughs with us about the challenges of living well."

Songs for the Pie Cutter, mixed media, 60" by 40"

"The red-checked tablecloth the cowgirl holds is used to define a meeting place or to symbolize balance or the home-centered role a woman can choose. In this woman's life, the door between the home and the outside world stands open; she has made her choices and is at ease with them. Red circle of life hangs in her doorway, and the blue birds sing their songs of joy just for her."

shoots, John today spends the bulk of his time building a new home for his family, which also includes 16-year-old daughter, Katie.

"We bought a ranch in St. Joe, north of Dallas," says Howell-Sickles. "It's almost 500 acres, and John is helping to build a house there and also is renovating a two-story hardware store in a nearby town, with a studio on the first floor and living space on the second. But it will be a few years before we move."

Meanwhile, Howell-Sickles lives and works at her home in Frisco, Texas. John's handiwork is everywhere, from the studio he built to the Victorian house he renovated. Inside the studio, which is separate from the house, Howell-Sickles works with a variety of media—acrylic, pastel, charcoal, pencil, prismacolor—to create her colorful canvases.

"Most of my people pieces are

mixed media," she says. "My canvases are oil with charcoal. I'm not sure it was ever a conscious decision. They all give different kinds of color; they're a good mix. John frequently says I practice 'pastel abuse,' because I rub it in. I'm interested in the color you get when you rub pastel into the paper. I'm not a purist; no one will ever accuse me of that. But I was very careful when I started combining things not to use any media that would fight or become unstable over time; they're all compatible."

Howell-Sickles generally works on at least six pieces at a time. "I have the attention span of a gnat," she laughs. Besides her painting, she does monotypes and in 1990 tried her hand at sculpting, which she hopes to pursue. She has since completed six sculptures. "It was wonderful fun," she says. "I had ideas I thought would work great in



Behind the White Fence, mixed media, 40" by 60"

"The white fence of antlers separates a public from a private space. It offers the woman a safe shelter and defines different stages of life. Sitting on both sides of the fence shows her comfort moving through her own life. The letter is a communication and offers knowledge; she is not alone on this journey. Her dog and guardian friend look to her to see which path to take next."



three dimension. They're all women, too. They have no color, so I have to go with the movement."

Reaction to her women, whether they be paintings, monotypes, or sculptures, has been overwhelmingly positive. "They seem to affect people on an emotional level, [evoking] a deep affinity for the women, which was never a goal but is a wonderful side effect," Howell-Sickles says. "What I try to convey is the way I feel about life. I try to portray the excitement and joy they seem to feel being right where they are, the joy of the moment and the celebration of our visual history."

In May, a book on Howell-Sickles' work hit bookstores throughout the country. Titled *Cowgirl Rising*, it features 120 of her images, along with six essays by author Peg Streep.

The future holds more excitement and more challenges for Howell-

Sickles, although she plans no major changes in her life or her art. "I'm still fascinated with the imagery I'm using," she says, "so it will be around for awhile. It's hard to say there won't be any dramatic changes, because I see small changes in my past work. I'm interested in exploring themes in more depth than I have." □

Vicki Stavig is editor of Art of the West.