



Mother and Child, mixed media, 24" by 12"

"A fleeting glimpse of such beauty and grace inspires me every time. Deer have such amazing lines. I find their movements, punctuated by moments of absolute stillness and then they vanish, heart-stopping and awe-inspiring."

THE JOY OF BEING ALIVE

By Vicki Stavig

Donna Howell-Sickles has been making her way as a fine artist for four decades. She's earned numerous awards for her paintings and has been inducted into the Cowgirl Hall of Fame in Fort Worth, Texas. But, if you think she's settled into a comfortable routine, you would be sadly mistaken.

While the past has been pretty darn spectacular, the future for this award-winning artist promises to be more than a little exciting. Late last summer she began to make notes and to develop an outline for a book about the early cowgirls she portrays in her paintings. She also was in the beginning stages of planning another book, this one in collaboration with a poet friend, that will focus on mythology and the common woman. "It feels like I have entered another room," Howell-Sickles says of the new ventures.

The room Howell-Sickles currently occupies, however, is one that has her continuing to focus on celebrating the life of the cowgirl, a subject that has inspired her since she was in college and traded a painting to a fellow student for a box of odds and ends that included hand-tinted postcards of cowgirls from the 1930s. So began a fascination with the women that, Howell-Sickles says, gave her a way to "tell stories about the strength of women."

The resulting paintings have



Soul Searching—The Pick of the Litter, mixed media, 36" by 36"

"You can never have too many dogs or enough protective footwear, albeit the symbolic kind, because you never know where you are going to need to walk, or what you might have to walk through to get there."

earned her a myriad of awards and a well-deserved place in the hearts—and on the walls—of an enthusiastic cadre of collectors. In what has to be some sort of record, she earned three awards on the same day—March 22—last year: Best of Show at Cowgirl Up! at the Desert Caballeros Western Museum in

Wickenburg, Arizona; the North Star Award at the Western Masters Show in Billings, Montana; and the 2014 F. M. Hemphill Distinguished Alumni Award from North Central Texas College in Gainesville, Texas.

Although today she is gregarious and talks at lightning speed in her enthusiasm about her art and her life, Howell-Sickles says she was excruciatingly shy as a young girl growing up on a ranch in north-central Texas. The daughter of parents who both were teachers, she decided to follow in their footsteps and enrolled at Texas Tech in Lubbock but, after taking an art

course, she discovered she had a talent for drawing and quickly changed her major to art.

In the early '70s, married and armed with a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Art, Howell-Sickles and her husband moved to Seattle, Washington, where the would-be artist worked at a variety of jobs, everything from driving a school bus to working in the darkroom at a printing company. "I always did part-time jobs, because I didn't want to be sucked into an accidental career," she says with a laugh. The job that most aligned with her interest in art and her plans to eventually make a



Dance With Me, mixed media, 60" by 40"

"I frequently use dance as a metaphor for the ongoing business of day-to-day life. And, in that repetitive daily dance, we can find a deep joy and love for the process and love for the spirit of the animals in our care."



And They Bless the One That Got Away With Their Laughter, mixed media, 46" by 46"

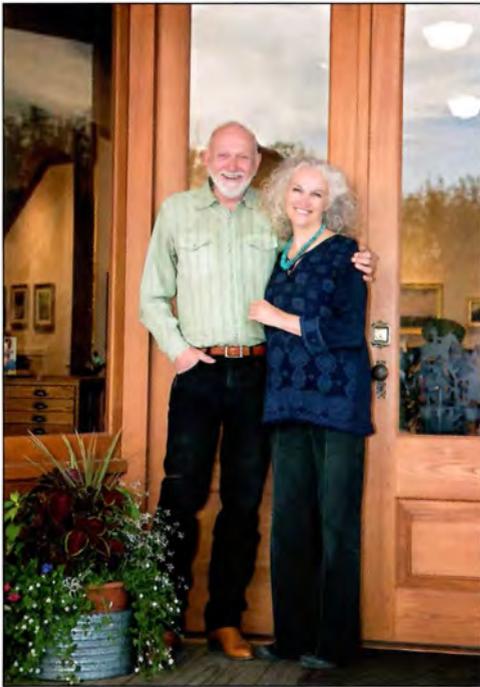
"At the end of the day, more often than not, it's the ones that got away who are the ones you remember. And they will always inspire the most entertaining stories."

living as an artist, was that of visiting artist, which involved visiting rural schools and exposing students to art.

Howell-Sickles also was painting in her spare time and was selling some of her work from an artists' co-op and from a little gallery/antique store her cousin owned in Texas, keeping alive the dream of one day being able to make her living as a professional artist. "If I got \$50 for a piece, I was very happy," she says. In 1979, following a divorce, she left Seattle and headed back to the family ranch in Texas, determined to pursue that dream. Within a couple years, a gallery in Dallas was showing Howell-Sickles' work. "Things kind of exploded from there," she says, adding that she also got into galleries in Taos, New Mexico, and Sun Valley, Idaho, at about the same time.

"I was doing cowgirls then, but they were a bit more simple," she says, adding that those depictions have evolved over the years, becoming more detailed and more personal. "You do something for a long time and just get more skillful. At the time, I was the only one doing cowgirls. It can be an imagery that could be easy to trivialize, I want it to be non-sentimental. Later, I threw in elements from





Donna and husband John

mythology; I thought they needed to be visually paired. Now, I don't specifically study mythology like I once did. Now it's like I tell the stories that are very feminine and past and focus on the joy of being alive and being who or where we are."

The joy of being alive became more personal when Howell-Sickles met John Sickles, a local engineer, and the two married a year later. Today the couple lives in Saint Jo, Texas, where they own a gallery in town and a ranch outside of town. "We have an apartment in the barn on the ranch, which is very nice, and a two-bedroom loft apartment in town above the gallery," she says, adding that she and John are working with several organizations to return the ranch to its natural state, which includes addressing erosion issues and restoring the wetland areas.

While Howell-Sickles made her name in the art world with her cowgirls, she has not limited herself to that subject. As a thank-you of sorts to the folks who run the Western Visions annual show at the Jackson Wildlife Museum and who have allowed her to show her cowgirl paintings there, Howell Sickles has been painting deer and recently started to do some large wildlife paintings.

"Until about three years ago, I



Seeking Inspiration, mixed media, 60" by 40"

"One of the best parts of any activity is the people with whom you ride. Three cowgirls are laughing, telling stories, working together, and building friendships that inspire and encourage them to be their best."



It's Written in the Stars, mixed media, 40" by 60"

"I treasure time to dream and think about all the stories we humans have told about the stars. Sharing these stories, and admiring such beauty with trusted friends, is even better."

would do a cowgirl and a little animal," she says. "Then it was just a deer with no cowgirl. I did it originally, because they were so kind to include me in their show, so I thought I would do some strictly animal paintings. The deer are a little more mysterious; it's more like you appreciate the imagery. Drawing deer has always been special; there is a little more magic to them than horses. Who knows where this will go."

Howell-Sickles paints mostly in mixed media and acrylic. "I stopped using oil paint when our daughter was crawling around my studio 32 years ago, and have since learned to love acrylics for much more than their less-toxic characteristics," she says. "They work so well with charcoal, they do dry quickly, and the surface can be drawn on again and again."

She also has sculpted a few pieces over the years and included them in a retrospective of her work in 2013. "They were well received," she says. "I'm working on a life-sized piece of a dog now. We had a dog named

Louise, and I thought it would be a good place to start." That retrospective of Howell-Sickles' work began at the National Ranching Heritage Center in Lubbock, Texas, and moved on to the Steamboat Art Museum in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, before culminating at the Booth Western Art Museum in Cartersville, Georgia.

While Howell-Sickles' work has changed over the years, so has the art market. "It has always been that you have to get yourself where you need to go," she says. "That means working inside the framework. I regret that galleries no longer have as big a role in introducing new artists, and museums and auctions have diluted access to the artist and the importance of the artist in favor of the importance of the artwork."

Asked what advice she would give to up-and-coming artists, Howell-Sickles says, "Allow yourself to ignore everybody's advice. I would never have made it, if I had listened to others. You have to believe in yourself and keep an eye on your

own quality. It's that inner magic that makes it work. It only works when it's what you think is good, but you have to have a very educated view of what's good to begin with."

When asked what makes a painting good, Howell-Sickles quickly responds, "It has to grab your attention first. It has to be well done and compositionally sound, because we're a very visually literate society. It has to instantly capture your attention and move you around the space."

Howell-Sickles' paintings do just that, not by happenstance but because she has combined dedication and determination to perfect her craft. In the process, she has been able to live a life that is immensely satisfying, personally as well as professionally. She is grateful to have the opportunity—and the skill—to use paint to share her visions and shows no signs of slowing down. 

Vicki Stavig is editor of Art of the West.

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