

A Cowgirl On The Rise

ARTIST DONNA HOWELL-SICKLES' WORLD OF WESTERN WOMEN IS FILLED WITH SMILES, STORIES, AND INSPIRATION.

By William C. Reynolds

THIS MAGAZINE HAS THE WORD *COWBOY* IN its masthead, and the word has come to describe way more than just someone horseback, punchin' cows. It's a word that has evolved past its own genre, pulled kicking and screaming into a wider world of politics and business. Someone is a "cowboy" if they follow a different path in life or business, and in many cases it's used in a derogatory way to describe careless behavior—such as in politics. It's a very uninformed usage, as for some reason the media-at-large loves to use the word out of its natural context—probably because the civilian press really doesn't believe there are still cowboys out there, making a difference.

Well, we know that there aren't only cowboys out there, but there are cowgirls, too, working and living as well. Cowgirls, for some reason, have gotten little credit—or "ink"—as important contributors to America's West. The great photographer Barbara Van Cleve considered this in her recent book, *Hard Twist*. "The role of women in the settlement of the West has been generally ignored until the last few years," she wrote. "Women were a necessary and powerful element in the migration to and settling of the West—in the 'civilizing' of the frontier. Pioneering, like ranching, is usually viewed as the province of men, but the Western migration was definitely a family affair, as is ranching today. The women were absolutely essential, for not only did they perform traditional tasks, but they also took over the men's work when necessary."



Artist Donna Howell-Sickles at her studio in St. Jo, Texas.

The skill, capability, and confidence of the cowgirl are being celebrated more and more—such as in the mission of the National Cowgirl Museum & Hall of Fame in Fort Worth, Texas. Yet nowhere is the joy of the cowgirl and her life more boldly depicted than in the art of Donna Howell-Sickles. Internationally renowned and collected, Howell-Sickles has made a career bringing the imagery of the confident cowgirl West to life.

Teresa Jordan, author of *Cowgirls: Women of the American West*, describes Howell-Sickles' work: "Her cowgirls are the beautiful, wholesome women I dreamed of as a girl I might grow into. Confident and strong, they move without apology or the need for permission."

Howell-Sickles creates her art in her studio in the little town of St. Jo, Texas—a part of the state that has held her tight. "Well, I'm a Texan, and I was born about 30 miles from here and realized I was going to grow up and live in Texas. But I've done it by choice most of my life, there's just something about this area that captivates me," she says. "I grew up around

here in this rural environment, and I had no idea that art—or that being able to draw—was a talent you could build a life around."

Howell-Sickles attended Texas Tech in Lubbock as an elementary education major. In her junior year she took some art courses required for her major—her first experience with art and an art community. "It was the first time I felt



LEFT: *Rubie, Ruth, and Neva Jo*, 60 x 40. RIGHT: *Infinity Rope*, 44 x 30.

immersed in a group of people who were more like me," she says. "It was then, I think, I did my first cowgirl pieces, and they were not very well received as we were trying so hard to be on the cutting edge of something."

In fact, one of her teachers told her not to be a regional painter. "He said it's hard enough to make a living in the arts, but as a woman doing Western imagery, I was going to have a really hard time. But my fascination with the cowgirl image was really strong and it happened in my last year of college," she says.

What happened was that Howell-Sickles received an old postcard from a friend during a typical art student trade. He had brought over a large box of items to trade, and near the bottom were several old postcards, including one of a cowgirl ca. 1935 seated on a horse captioned "Greetings from a Real Cowgirl from the Ole Southwest."

"The image spoke to me, and I had no idea why," she says. "Although I had grown up on a farming and ranching operation in Texas, we never really thought of ourselves as Western. I simply surrendered to the attraction and used the cowgirl in my art, and she slowly filled in the blanks."

Workshop With The Artist

Strength — Through Line:
Drawing with Donna Howell-Sickles

Drama, line movement, and drawings that dance off the edge—these are the trademarks of artist Donna Howell-Sickles, who, in this workshop January 20-23, 2008, at the Caballeros Art Ranch in Wickenburg, Arizona, will focus on fundamentals. "We'll look for the strength in your piece that comes through drawing," Howell-Sickles says. "Throughout the week, you will be working with a choice of models as you strive for simplicity and casual line to capture not just your subject, but also his or her story." For more information, contact the Desert Caballeros Western Museum at www.westernmuseum.org or Rancho de los Caballeros at www.SunC.com.



On and Off Relationship, 40 x 60.

For Howell-Sickles, the imagery of a Western woman was deeply compelling. “It was something that I wanted to work with,” she says. “It just felt like I needed to make her relevant to what I was doing.”

Her initial work was nowhere as detailed or traditional as her later pieces. “It was very sketchy, very few facial features,” she says. “Maybe just the lips, and they were static rather than just moving all over the place. Static and monumental rather than actively engaged.”

But that changed, as her natural desire as a storyteller created an evolutionary path for her art that would engage the viewer more. “If it’s not the cowgirl that’s engaging the audience,” she says, “as sometimes the cowgirl is looking away—it’s one of the animals that’s engaging the audience. It has to be something that pulls you in. Frequently my work goes off the edges. It’s cropped. So that always implies that there’s more happening than you can see. I really do want to show the audience that she’s not alone in her world. It’s not a solitary life. There’re all these partnerships in life—with your friends and your neighbor, your husband, your girlfriends.”

And then there are those smiles. Those cowgirl smiles. Howell-Sickles’ work is legendary for those smiles confidently looking back at the viewer. “I realized that for me, in my life and where I am in America, the joy of my existence was a major factor,” she says. “It was a focus. And the joy of things one remembers about one’s life. They define you as clearly as your sorrows do. And it’s not ever given serious airtime, so to speak. If it’s without joy, it is just, well, a joyless life, and joy is critical to our human experience. So I decided because I was working with women—I was working with friendship, and I decided that that was going to be the focus. All of these people are living in the now, and they’re glad to be there. A joyful and competent life. That’s part of what I’m celebrating, the joy in our lives.”

This fall, Howell-Sickles will be inducted into the National Cowgirl Museum & Hall of Fame in recognition of her work with imagery celebrating the cowgirl. For more information and to find out how you can attend the event, go to www.cowgirl.net. To see more of Howell-Sickles’ work, go to www.donnahowellsickles.com.