

DONNA HOWELL-SICKLES



THERE IS A PLACE WHERE cowgirls still run wild. Like Indian spirits emerging through the cracks of canyon walls, these cowgirls laugh and cavort on canvas in a sunny studio just off Highway 289 north of Dallas. There, in a small town called Frisco, TX, Donna Howell-Sickles opens her own inner door to the world of the western American woman.

Six easels, each with a work in progress, confront the visitor to Howell-Sickles' studio. A flatbed press for

monotypes and a sculpting table and modeling stand are in view of a 6-by-5-foot painting called ASCENSION OF THE COWGIRL. It was my first indication of the artist's delightful habit of mixing media, metier and metaphor. Against a cathedral-like background, a vivacious cowgirl flirts with a winged-cowboy who is about to lift her heavenward. Like many of

Above: OUR LADY AND THE BLACKBIRDS II, oil, 48 x 48. Inside: EVE AND THE RED PICKET FENCE, oil, 48 x 36.

BY ANNIE OSBURN



Howell-Sickles' works, it draws inspiration from ancient Greek mythology and world religions.

Other cowgirls were ensconced in a variety of environments. One walked through a majestic corn field with stalks bending in Byzantine curves while red dogs stood guard. Another floated in a tank of dark water watched over by three horses, while a third airily rode a prancing pony as an adoring man looked up from below.

In joyous, frenetic celebration of Woman—the Woman inside all women—this high-spirited, fun-loving enraptured cowgirl seemed, for one instant in time, to know the meaning of being truly alive: She could see, feel and touch her fragile existence. In mixed-media paintings on paper and oils on canvas, Howell-Sickles makes this sacred moment tangible in shades of blue, white and gray with brilliant accents of red, black and turquoise. These cowgirls are so shamelessly happy that I walked away from my visit

genuinely proud to be a woman!

"What I'm dealing with is confidence," the artist explains. "A feeling of self-power and the joy of realizing that where you are at any moment is wonderful. The women in my paintings have taken the time to realize that they are happy."

There is also an eerie feeling of familiarity with these cowgirls, most likely because they bear a striking resemblance to their creator. More than mere appearance, Howell-Sickles' cowgirls bear a likeness to her own pioneer



spirit. Beneath her petite frame and attractive femininity lurks a woman strong enough to run a chuck wagon, stop a wild horse or shoot a mountain lion.

"I identify strongly with my work," the 41-year-old artist says. "But the cowgirl is not intended to be me."

Howell-Sickles' subject dates back to 1972 when she stumbled across a 1950s hand-tinted postcard. Pictured was a waving cowgirl and under it was the inscription: "Greetings from a Real Cowgirl from the Ole Southwest."

The notion of a woman sitting atop her horse in period costume appealed to the artist. "But back then I didn't think there were real cowgirls," says Howell-Sickles. "At least none who might look like the one on my postcard."

"The real/unreal aspect is what I liked. When I started I never gave the women faces. They had mouths, bright red mouths that were a touch off to the side. I liked the fakery of it; the stillness. It was as if you

had caught a glimpse of something frozen in time. My intent was to create a generalized western persona, rather than a specific personality."

The character type, Howell-Sickles learned, was real back in the 1910s and 1920s and is readily described: A woman who'd traveled with the Wild West show and ridden bulls in front of crowds filling the likes of Madison Square Garden. A woman unafraid of a challenge and perhaps more at home with her animals than with a man.

"The idea of Woman surrounded by Nature is common in the histories and mythologies of many cultures," adds Howell-Sickles. "Dogs, for instance, are the familiars (or attendant spirits) of the moon goddess."

Within a stone's throw of Howell-Sickles' studio, across an expanse of vibrant green grass dappled by sunlight, is the renovated 1890s farmhouse which the artist shares with her craftsman/inventor hus-

band, John, and their ten-year-old daughter Katie. The daughter reminds Howell-Sickles of her own childhood—a time in Sivells Bend, TX, when the cowgirl was her powerful, fully-actualized heroine.

"I lived in a world of my own," she says of those early years growing up along the Red River. "I hiked and found caves where I painted on the walls using mashed poke berries."

It was common to find Howell-Sickles cooking fried chicken and okra for nearly a dozen mouths on her family's 850-acre cow/calf operation. Except for a few years working as a visiting artist for the Washington State Arts Commission (1977–1979), Howell-Sickles has spent most of her adult life in north Texas, studying at Texas Tech, Lubbock (where she received a bachelor of fine arts degree in 1972), and pursuing her professional career.

Working with charcoal, prisma colors, oil pastels, acrylics and oils, Howell-Sickles hangs her hat on bold, graphic fields of color with drawing showing through, defining edges and shapes or suggesting

volume through shading. There is a spontaneity to the drawing that challenges the stasis of the color fields, giving vitality to the figures whose Cheshire grins fade in and out like shades in a dream fantasy. Unconventional compositions, cropped animals, smeared and erased lines, and a collage-like appearance give the images a sense of process. Indeed, they seem as if they are being worked on before your very eyes.

"I tend to emphasize negative space, always making sure that my characters move playfully," says Howell-Sickles who stresses that the best part of each painting is the drawing. "If there was one material that I couldn't live without, it would be charcoal."

She also works with certain colors,

Below: ALLEGORICALLY SPEAKING: KIP, DUTCH, PETE, SLATS & SHORTY, mixed media, 40 x 60. **Left:** RING TOSS, oil, 60 x 60. **Below Left:** The artist photographed by Annie Osburn.



Below: *THE GROVE*, mixed media, 60 x 40. **Right:** *THE BULL RIDER'S DOGS*, bronze, h 8, edition 5.



especially red which shows up as an accent in nearly every painting. Seen as a triangle or as diamonds dancing across a horizon or in the form of a horse, the color red tends to float, as if semi-transparent, allowing light from the paper underneath to shine through it. She also works in elements of three, explaining, "In mythology the number three symbolizes many things, from the Trinity to the three phases of the moon. It's also a number of completion, symbolizing the beginning, middle and end, not to mention a number of good luck."

Since the mid-1980s, Howell-Sickles has heavily laced her paintings with tongue-in-cheek references to Greek and Roman mythology. A Zeus and Europa series really satisfied her "quirky sense of humor," she says, wryly adding,

"There was something about putting a 1920s cowgirl on the back of a bull and naming it after the Minotaur's mother that cracked me up. I worried about whether the rest of the world would understand that Pasiphe is the mother of the Minotaur."

The Way of the Animal Powers and *The Mythic Image* by American philosopher Joseph Campbell have supplied many of the nuggets for Howell-Sickles' mythological references. Scattered throughout her studio are other books on mythology, religion, art and the ways of man from *The Complete Paintings of Botticelli*, to *The American Cowboy*, *The Monastic Realm* and *A Field Guide to Texas Snakes*. Such literature feeds her painted fantasies of goddesses and roebucks, cranes, blackbirds, lions, and Celtic she-bears.

The cowgirl in *THE GROVE*, for example, steals her pose from an ancient East Indian sculpture. Instead of the "Great Stupa" goddess locking her arm around a fruit-bearing tree, the artist places the cowgirl with her arm draped across a hefty horn of a potent symbol of virility. Howell-Sickles also borrows from a frieze titled *VISHNU DREAMING THE UNIVERSE*, in which five Pandava brothers, heroes of the epic "Mahabharata," appear with Draupadi, their wife, symbolizing the mind and the five senses. Howell-Sickles' version is a rib-tickler titled *ALLEGORICALLY SPEAKING: KIP, DUTCH, PETE, SLATS & SHORTY* in which she uses several of her father's ranch buddies, thereby mixing Eastern and Western; yesterday and today; real and ideal.

Researching in the library, rifling





Above: *THIRD TRIAD OF THE MOON*, oil, 60 x 72.

through her clip files and reading books are an important part of her creative process. "If I don't take the time to read every day, my images suffer," she says. "But, sometimes it's the things people say that spark the picture in my mind."

Be it in pictures or words, the images sparked in Howell-Sickles' mind are always in movement: As in life, her faces are animated as the story unfolds, and no body is ever so relaxed that we don't eagerly anticipate its next move.

Moving in that direction, Howell-Sickles has added a third dimension to her cowgirls and their animal friends. Her recent fleet of bronze sculptures stand anywhere from 5 to 8 inches high. "The sculptures represent a gestural quality of my work that enables me to be even more of a storyteller," she says. Inspired by Melissa Zink's work [SWA Jan 89], Howell-

Sickles' bronzes explore intricate relationships, like that seen in *THE BULL RIDER'S DOGS*.

"The structure surrounds the image like the image itself is surrounded by a long history of allegorical meaning," Howell-Sickles writes about the piece. "From the Bull Dancers of Crete to the modern American rodeo bull riders, these athletes-cum-show people are surrounded by myth. There has always been some magic attached to the combined strength and virility of the bull and the grace and resilience of the human female. On one level the cowgirl is an accomplished and gutsy rider balanced on potential danger. On another level, she's every woman constantly re-adjusting the balance of her own circumstance. As an archetype, she is a blend of past memories, present joys and future dreams."

Showing her work clear across the country, from New York, NY, to Houston, TX, to Taos, NM, and Sun Valley, ID, Howell-Sickles is reaping the rewards that all committed professional artists seek. "The response to my work makes me know that what I'm doing is worthwhile," she says. "As a communicator, I'm good at showing emotion and enthusiasm—essentially because I'm a very happy person. I enjoy being alive and I like sharing my outlook."

Like the artist herself, these amiable cowgirls quickly become your best friends. "The cowgirl has become my icon for women in general," says Donna Howell-Sickles. "She gives us someone of warmth and humor and with whom we can share a good laugh." **SWA**