



Cowgirl Up!

Combining both traditional and contemporary imagery, this annual exhibition at the Desert Caballeros Western Museum adds new dimension to Western art

The way in which Western art is considered and defined has expanded significantly since the introduction of Cowgirl Up! Art from the Other Half of the West, a tantalizing annual art show and sale showcasing paintings, drawings and sculpture by a cadre of the nation's finest women artists.

When the Desert Caballeros Western Museum in Wickenburg, Arizona, first offered to host Cowgirl Up! in April of 2006, the concept of a major, all-women's exhibition was considered something of a

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Lisa Danielle, *Cowgirl Up!*
Acrylic on Board | 36 x 30 inches | 2014

Cinderella story. A decade later, however, Cowgirl Up! has become an increasingly important event. Attendance for the 2014 exhibition topped 3,000 and sales totaled more than \$500,000, proving that bringing together 58 exceptional female artists at a single venue is a winning concept.

The show radiates a decidedly personal atmosphere that appeals to a breadth of collectors. The opening event on Friday evening is a miniatures sale whose smaller, more affordable works encourage novice buyers to find and fall in love with their first piece of original art, and Saturday morning's Cowgirls and Camaraderie is a friendly exchange between a panel of artists and their audience as they discuss the world of Western art. The much-anticipated Saturday night Bash and Bid gala is set on the museum grounds where Western music and warm evening breezes complement the congenial atmosphere. A Sunday morning chuckwagon breakfast and quick draw competition bring the weekend to a festive close.

Sedona, Arizona-based artist **Lisa Danielle** has participated as a Cowgirl Up! artist since 2008. For her, the opportunity to connect with her collectors is meaningful. She tells the story of a 94-year-old woman who sat next to the artist, entranced, during last year's quick draw event. "She watched the entire process, although her family was strongly encouraging her to leave in order to join them for lunch. She shooed them away with her cane, telling them she was

determined not only to see the painting finished but to bid on it. In other words she 'cowgirked up,'" Danielle recalls with a smile. When sale time came, hers was the winning bid. "I was so honored by what she had done that tears ... filled my eyes."

Naturally, the town of Wickenburg avidly supports the exhibition. Not only do its residents turn out in great numbers to view the exhibition and purchase art, but a number of supporters also open their homes to host the artists over the four-day event. Longtime participant Shawn Cameron explains that staying with patrons not only allows these women and their collectors to become better acquainted, but an added benefit is that the artists often have a firsthand look at the way their art works in the home.

The list of those invited for the 10th annual event, March 20 to 22, consists largely of returning artists, including more than a dozen who have participated each year since the exhibit's inception in 2006. Although the names are familiar, the artwork itself represents a stunning kaleidoscope of imagery ranging from traditional to contemporary. The show is a vivid portrayal of Western art's changing definition.

Painter **Shawn Cameron** and sculptors **Cynthia Rigden** and **Deborah Copenhaver Fellows** are artists whose ranching heritage dates back generations. The women frequently imbue their work with the traditional Western lifestyle they hold dear. "Artists are always advised to do what they know best," says Cameron. For her, that means painting the ranching life she experiences on a daily basis. "Love of the land just becomes part of you. What I do is multigenerational, so it represents not just my life but the lives of all those who came before."

Fellows was raised on a ranch in northern Idaho and has built a life with her husband, Cowboy Artists of America (CAA) sculptor Fred Fellows, in Sonoita, Arizona. Although she often depicts her family heritage in her sculpture, Fellows says that the piece she is working on for this year's event will have a more contemporary focus. "I believe this may be the direction that Western art is going. Good art is good art, and traditional Western art will always have its place. But as an artist it's nice to keep all options open," she says. "The wonderful thing about Cowgirl Up! is that you are free to follow your own style, whether that is traditional or contemporary. Some may still think of Western art as being only traditional, but with this show we are free to push the envelope."



Rebecca Tobey, *Year of the Horse*
Bronze, Edition of 30 | 17 x 19 x 12 inches

Cowgirl Up!



Shawn Cameron, *No Escape*
Mixed Media on Paper | 16 x 12 inches

Conversely, other artists find their focus by expanding the parameters of traditional imagery, relying on a banquet of color, a sense of energy and even a touch of humor to convey their message. Deep red, dusty blues and luminous greens have become trademark colors for **Donna Howell-Sickles**, whose images of Western women and their companions create a powerful cowgirl mythology that speaks to faithfulness and friendship.

Three-dimensional artists **Rebecca Tobey** and **Star Liana York** interpret their subject matter through contemporary mediums and techniques. Viewers look forward

Deborah Copenhaver Fellows, *She Rode Good Horses*
Bronze | 31 x 23 x 14 inches

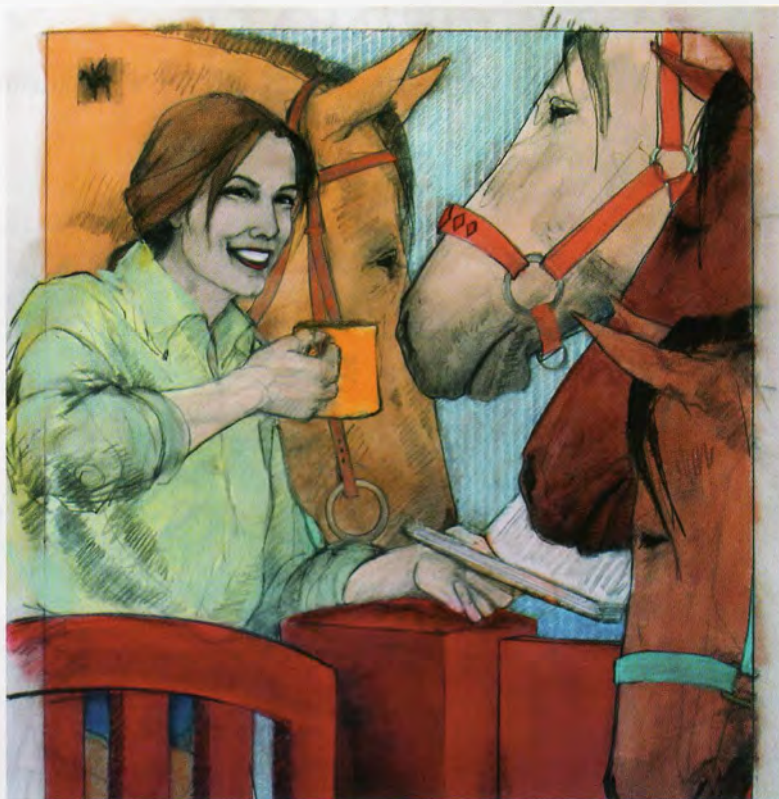


to the diversity of York's subjects, which have ranged from prehistoric horses to last year's bold, sunglasses-clad bull rider. Symbolism and color remain key factors, drawing all eyes to Tobey's irresistible clay figures. In the 2014 Cowgirl Up! catalog, the artist explained that the medium of ceramics provides her with a "sculptural canvas" on which she can exercise her love of painting to tell an additional story.

By moving through the series of events during the Cowgirl Up! weekend, visitors come to appreciate the full range of art and history currently offered at Desert Caballeros Western Museum, thanks in part to a remarkable capital expansion program, much of which was completed during the four-year tenure of former director James Burns.

A journey through the museum's three Western art galleries on the upper floor allows visitors to experience the entire landscape of Western art, including work by early explorer artists, monumental landscape painters, Taos Society artists, traditional sculptures and paintings by founders of the CAA. Spanning more than 150 years of Western American art, the works in this collection provide a new perspective on the West using styles that run the gamut from Impressionism to Abstract and Pop art.

As it prepares to enter its second decade, there is little doubt that Cowgirl Up! will continue to play a role in shaping the future of Western Art. "Western art is always going to have both traditional and contemporary interpretations. The viewer's reaction to art is very personal. For this reason, whatever touches a viewer is going to have infinite variations. Thus, the more variations that are out there, the more likely Western art will remain meaningful," says Cowgirl Up! artist Star Liana York.



Donna Howell Sickles, *Garden Gate Poetry Club*
Mixed Media on Paper | 34 x 30 inches | 2014

The truism in this context is that while Western art has the ability to preserve the roots of its heritage, the younger generation of visitors to museums and galleries can find relevancy in the art which inspires them to explore how and where those roots originated. ■

Having written about Western art for more than 25 years, **Myrna Zanetell** finds that one of the best perks of being a writer is the opportunity to develop friendships with many of the artists about whom she writes.



Star Liana York, *Like Father Like Son*
Bronze, Edition of 35 | 11 x 38 x 18 inches