

Luminous watercolors by Texan **J. Mark Kohler** capture the quiet nobility of real working cowboys
By Norman Kolpas



PHOTOGRAPH BY RANDY HARRIS

LOST IN THE GLORY



DOSSIER
REPRESENTATION
McLarry Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM

DEWITT'S DESERT BRONC,
WATERCOLOR, 10½ X 14.▲

IT WAS A SUNNY MID-MAY DAY on the CV Ranch, a big old spread in the Chino Valley northwest of Prescott, AZ. The cowboys broke for lunch after a grueling morning that had seen them start before dawn, bringing in, wrestling, and branding some 150 calves. That same number awaited them again in the afternoon.

One of the hands, Walter Weir, took a breather. He sat on a rickety folding chair in the middle of the encampment, dirt and dust smearing the shirt and jeans that had been sparkling clean and freshly pressed when he put them on just hours before. Weir pulled out a tobacco pouch and, head bowed and shoulders slumped, fixed to place a chaw in his mouth.

Standing a respectful distance away, artist J. Mark Kohler raised his digital camera and, in a rapid series of snaps, recorded the scene, which included a battered red pickup truck that had known its share of rocky ranch roads and a teepee where another cowboy dozed. Soon, Weir nodded off, too. "He fell asleep with the tobacco still in his mouth," Kohler recalls.

Weeks later, back at Kohler's studio in a spare room of his home in Sabinal, TX, a town on the edge of the Hill Country, he transformed that digital reference into WHIPPED SEVEN WAYS FROM SUNDAY, a luminous watercolor that quietly captures the grit and nobility of the working cowboy's life. Last year Kohler entered the piece in the Phippen Museum's Western Art Show and Sale, and it won first place in the watercolor category.

That honor was just the latest milestone in a fine-art career that could genuinely be described as meteoric, considering that Kohler, now 43, devoted himself full time to painting scarcely a dozen years ago. Yet, every twist and turn of his life led him toward his current success.

"You could not pry the pencil out of my hand when I was a kid," he recalls of his childhood in Austin, where the biggest influence on his young life was his grandfather, William "Duke" Beasley. "Both my parents worked," says Kohler, "and I would spend the whole summer with him. It was just the best time. He was a fantastic craftsman, and he had a workshop where he made fiddles and grandfather clocks and knives and

taught himself to sew and to paint in oils." Duke always bought his grandson art materials. "Whenever I was with him, we would paint or draw. There's no time I can remember not doing that."

BY THE TIME Kohler entered high school, he was primed to benefit from an extraordinary opportunity: Texas-born Hispanic/Indian artist Amado Peña, now a powerhouse among Southwestern artists, was then just beginning his career and primarily earning a living teaching art in public schools. "He had a window of time in Austin," Kohler marvels, "and I hit all four years with him."

Studies with Peña provided more than just training in drawing and painting, "though he helped us a lot with technique,

"I want to get to know these people and paint them and tell their stories."

W E S T E R N A R T

and had us do framing for him, too," says Kohler. "He was intense. He was also just beginning to break through. I learned from him that art was a very serious profession, that you had to work at a high level in order to succeed. And I thought, this could be my career, too."

After high school, he entered the art department at Southwest Texas State Teachers College in San Marcos, where he specialized in illustration. "If you wanted to study fine art, the path was really contemporary and nontraditional," he explains. "I thought of myself as a fine artist, but to do figurative work I had to go the illustration route. And once you're on that train, you can't really get off it."

After graduating, Kohler headed back home to Austin, where he earned a living as a freelance illustrator. He also developed a reputation for fine calligraphy, and mid-1980s album covers for local musicians like Texas country singer Gary P. Nunn and boogie-blues rockers Omar & the Howlers bear his handiwork. "I would write the word 'Omar' over and over again with a ruling pen until we got one that worked," he laughs.

But the constant grind of freelancing eventually caught up with him. "I got burnout and just felt I wasn't accomplishing anything meaningful," he says. Fortunately, he had a new ally and touchstone in his wife, Pam. He met Pam, a production artist, in 1982 at an agency he'd worked for, and they married four years later. With her support, he quit illustrating, and from 1992 to '95 he worked full time as an insurance adjustor while he began, in his spare time, to paint fine-art watercolors. "It's always been watercolors for me," says Kohler. "I like the airy freshness of it. And you can create so many atmospheric effects with it—dust and haze and sky."

At first he painted traditional sporting scenes. "Since I was a kid, I've always had bird dogs," he says. "So I painted a lot of field and stream landscapes with dogs and hunting." He found satisfaction in painting, but dealing with insurance claims eventually started to wear on Kohler's artistic soul. "So, at Pam's urging, I quit my job and became a full-time artist in 1995," he says.

Around that time, through friends, he began to meet working cowboys. "These people fascinated me as portrait subjects," he

says of that rare breed of honest working folk whose stories are etched by the elements and daily toils into every crease on their faces. "I got more and more into painting cowboys. Their culture is pretty small, and they all know each other. Someone would say, 'Hey, you really need to meet this guy on this ranch.' I'd go visit them, and I'd get immersed in their stories. It was fascinating to me."

In pursuit of cowboy culture wherever he might find it, Kohler took to the road with Pam, who quit her job in 2000 to



▲ HOLDING OUR GROUND, WATERCOLOR, 15 X 22.

▼ WHIPPED SEVEN WAYS FROM SUNDAY, WATERCOLOR, 18 X 13½.
FREE RANGE HEELER, WATERCOLOR, 12 X 18. ▶





manage her husband's career full time. "She's a lot smarter than me," he says with a note of fond modesty, "and she's the backbone of my business." They began a routine that keeps them on the road, off and on, for about two full months out of the year, driving country roads to remote ranches in the Texas panhandle, New Mexico, Arizona, Montana, and northern California, where ranching still happens the old-fashioned way. "The real trick is finding people who don't ride a four-wheeler to gather their horses," he says. "People who won't do the corporate ranching thing at all. And if it costs them money, well, it costs them money."

Kohler feels the same way about the expense he and Pam incur in all their travels. "I want to get to know these people and paint them and tell their stories," he explains. "If I just wanted to paint any cowboys and horses, I could sit in Texas and go to rodeos."

Back home from a trip, Kohler painstakingly sorts through the thousands of images he shoots in a week. "I'm a terrible photographer," he laughs, "but I try to pull out sixty or so good images." Using them as reference, he'll usually start work right on the watercolor paper, first drawing the composition with a draughtsman's lead holder. He uses harder leads on the smoother, machine-made papers he prefers for larger scenes that have a lot of detail. "You want a smooth surface where you can lay down 15 washes," he explains. For closer-up portrait vignettes, he might go for a more textured, handmade paper, sketching on it with a

softer lead that won't tear the rougher surface.

The drawing completed, he starts applying the watercolors. "I try to use really high-quality paints and expensive sable brushes that hold a lot of water for a long stroke," he says. He'll anchor the painting's color values by carefully laying in a few small details in the darkest darks—a horse's eye, for example, or the long, deep shadows cast by early morning sun in a work like *FRESH SHIRT AND A FAST HORSE*, which depicts Nevadan Shawn Goemmer, a cowboy Kohler has painted repeatedly for almost a decade. Then, in classic watercolor technique, he completes the bulk of the painting by working from lighter colors to darker layers. "That's the way images form in real life," he explains.

More and more collectors appreciate the glimpses Kohler offers of the real lives of cowboys, a vanishing breed for whom the artist's admiration only grows. "These are people who take real pride in the old ways," he says. "Every day, they get up and do what God made them to do. They're lost in the glory. That's how I feel now about being an artist. I've made a deal with God to get up every day and do what I was made to do, to work on being as good as I can be and not sweat all the other stuff. I'm going to go on telling the stories of these people until there's nothing left to tell." ♦

Norman Kolpas is a Los Angeles-based freelancer who writes for *Home*, *Mountain Living*, and *Colorado Homes & Lifestyles* as well as *Southwest Art*.