



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

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LOST IN THE GLORY



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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 chew 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

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



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*.