

DONNA HOWELL-SICKLES

# The Studio

By Vicki Stavig



Working in a studio that overlooks the historic square in Saint Jo, Texas, Donna Howell-Sickles is surrounded by the tools and atmosphere she needs to create her award-winning paintings and drawings of women who inspire her: cowgirls. She previously worked in a studio—a former church—in the city, but left that behind in 2013, after she and her husband John opened a gallery downtown and renovated that building to include a studio on the second floor.

“It turned out to be a fabulous thing,” Howell-Sickles says. “It’s a beautiful space that is much more public than the sanctuary-like space of the old church. It has been a wonderful move; we love the town.”

Donna and John moved from

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Frisco, a 90-minute drive from Saint Jo, in 2000 and now have the best of both worlds—at home and at work. Her studio is in the heart of the city, and they live on a ranch just four miles north of it. “It’s a beautiful piece of property with plenty of room to walk,” she says.

The couple lived in a loft apartment on Saint Jo’s downtown square for several years while they built a guesthouse inside a barn on the ranch and began to renovate several buildings they had purchased in downtown Saint Jo. One of those buildings became the Davis & Blevins Gallery in 2010, and they renovated the larger building next door three years later. They later moved the gallery into the main floor of the building, which had formerly served as a doctor’s office, a post office, a restaurant, and a hard-

ware store, and converted the second story to Howell-Sickles’ studio. The gallery today features works by 20 to 30 artists, who include Steve Kestrel, Nelson Boren, Sonja Terpening, Nancy Boren, Denise LaRue Mahlke, and Liz Wolf.

“This building was built in the mid-1880s, and I moved to this studio in 2013,” she says. “It was called the Davis & Blevins building for the partners who built it, and I discovered that the Blevins were distant relatives of my family. The front is galvanized tin and has bullet holes, but I don’t know what from.” She and John restored that building, which earned them the Historical Restoration Award from Preservation Texas.



They turned the original gallery next door into a gift shop that carries Native American jewelry, clothing, tableware, giftware, books, leather purses, and silk Fringe scarves that feature images of some of Howell-Sickles’ paintings. “My daughter, Katie Sickles-Rust, is a graphic designer, and we work together to create borders for the scarves and to reduce some of my images on the purses,” Howell-Sickles says. “It’s a lot of fun and a lot of work.”

Her studio has entrances on the front and the back of the building and, other than a storeroom, is an open, 50-foot-by-70-foot space. “It has high, old-fashioned, double-hung windows that face the square,” Howell-Sickles says. “I also have a long row of spotlights that I can shine on each of my easels. I have 10 easels; two are empty right now. Boots and easels are my weaknesses; everyone has their quirks.”

The studio includes a stone fireplace and wood floors. “We saved most of the flooring that hadn’t rotted, and put linoleum over part of it to protect it,” Howell-Sickles says.



Her office area is in the front of the space, while one side of the studio is reserved for drawing, the other side for painting. The space includes a sculpting area that has three stands, a flat table, and a microwave Howell-Sickles uses to heat the clay.

“I had done some sculpting in the ‘80s, but then didn’t have time for it; now I do,” she says. “Last year, I took a workshop from John Coleman, one of my heroes. It was the first workshop I ever took; he taught

me a lot. I have two studies on the stands but haven’t completed anything yet. My subjects will be figures and animals and will have more storytelling elements because they’ll be in three dimensions.”

Howell-Sickles, who grew up on a 900-acre ranch in north-central Texas, earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in 1972 from Texas Tech in Lubbock. After graduation she moved to Seattle, Washington—working at a hunting camp in Idaho





*Waiting at the Gate, acrylic and charcoal, 36" by 60"*



*The Warning is in the Posture, mixed media, 32" by 48"*

for a few months along the way. In Seattle, Howell-Sickles drove a school bus for two years before taking a job as a visiting artist in rural schools in the western part of the state.

In 1979, Howell-Sickles returned to Texas and started to paint in earnest. She had been selling her work from an artists' co-op in Seattle and from a small gallery in Texas. After the move, she found herself with time to paint on a full-time basis, so that's what she did, focusing on cowgirls, which she continues to do today. She also met John, a local engineer, and the couple moved to Frisco just north of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex.

Initially, Howell-Sickles says, she worked almost exclusively on paper but today almost 50 percent of her artwork is on canvas. Asked about her focus on cowgirls, she says, "It matches how and where I grew up. It has given me a vehicle to tell stories about strong women that I didn't see in the art world. There are so many women of the West who had dramatic, colorful, and important roles. I've been doing cowgirls since the '80s; I got really caught up in it. I think we need stories about strong women who are happy and engaged in life. They can do pretty much whatever they need to do."

Howell-Sickles fell in love with cowgirls when she was in college and a classmate traded a box of odds and ends for one of her paintings. Within that box were hand-tinted postcards of cowgirls from the 1930s who continue to inspire her.

Working with a revolving set of models, Howell-Sickles sometimes simply uses her imagination to create an image. She estimates that, during her career, she has completed approximately 3,000 pieces of artwork. And although in the past she also did monotypes, today she works in large part in mixed media—which includes pastels and acrylics—on paper and on canvas.


Howell-Sickles will be showing her work in March at the Autry Miniature Show and at the Night of Artists at the Briscoe Museum, followed in April by a show at the Mu-



*Shall I Tell You My Story, mixed media, 33" by 40"*

seum of Western Art in Kerrville, Texas. When it comes to awards, she has won many; while she greatly appreciates the honors, she cites other events as being absolute highlights of her career. They include the Eiteljorg Museum purchasing one of her paintings for its permanent collection a few years ago, the Booth Museum featuring a retrospective of her work several years ago, induction into the National Cowgirl Hall of

Fame in 2007, and the purchase of one of her paintings by the Cowboy Hall of Fame.

"I've always felt blessed to be where I've been and doing what I've done," she says. "It's so satisfying; it's like a touchstone. I've created this beautiful body of work, and I'm proud of it." 

*Vicki Stavig is editor of Art of the West.*