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Lillie and the Boys,
acrylic, 24″ by 24″

"An easy push-pull relationship the cowgirl has with her horses when they are all glad to be there enjoying the attention and the time spent together."

THE COWGIRL CONNECTION

By Vicki Stavig

If Donna Howell-Sickles hadn't made that trade, hadn't seen those postcards, who knows what she would painting today. Fortunately for her—and for art lovers throughout the country—the question is a moot one. When Howell-Sickles saw those hand-tinted postcards of cowgirls from the 1930s, she felt an immediate and profound connection to them—one that has continued for some four decades.

That connection began when Howell-Sickles was in college. "I had done some canvases and another student, who was a potter, wanted to trade for a painting," she says. His part of the trade was a box of odds and ends, including those old postcards.

"Something about her seemed so familiar," Howell-Sickles says of the cowgirl pictured on those postcards. "When I saw her with her red shirt, green kerchief, boots, and chaps, she seemed kind of monumental to me. She felt important to me. She gives me a way to tell stories about the strength of women that I might never grow tired of."

Although Howell-Sickles grew up on a ranch in north-central Texas, not far from the Red River, cowgirls were not something that was familiar to her. An excruciatingly shy girl, who read anything and everything she could get her hands on, she attended a two-room schoolhouse until she was in the sixth grade. "In first grade we had four kids in the class, and one was my cousin," she says. "There were eight grades, with a big room and a little room. It was a wonderful thing. It was life as I knew it."

Tossing Around Some Ideas, acrylic, 57" by 48"

"Two friends, surrounded by color and boots covered with symbols celebrating the natural world, sharing time, ideas, food, and laughter."

Welcome Home, mixed media, 40" by 60"

"A celebration of being exactly where you need to be and a heart-felt invitation to come join the fun."

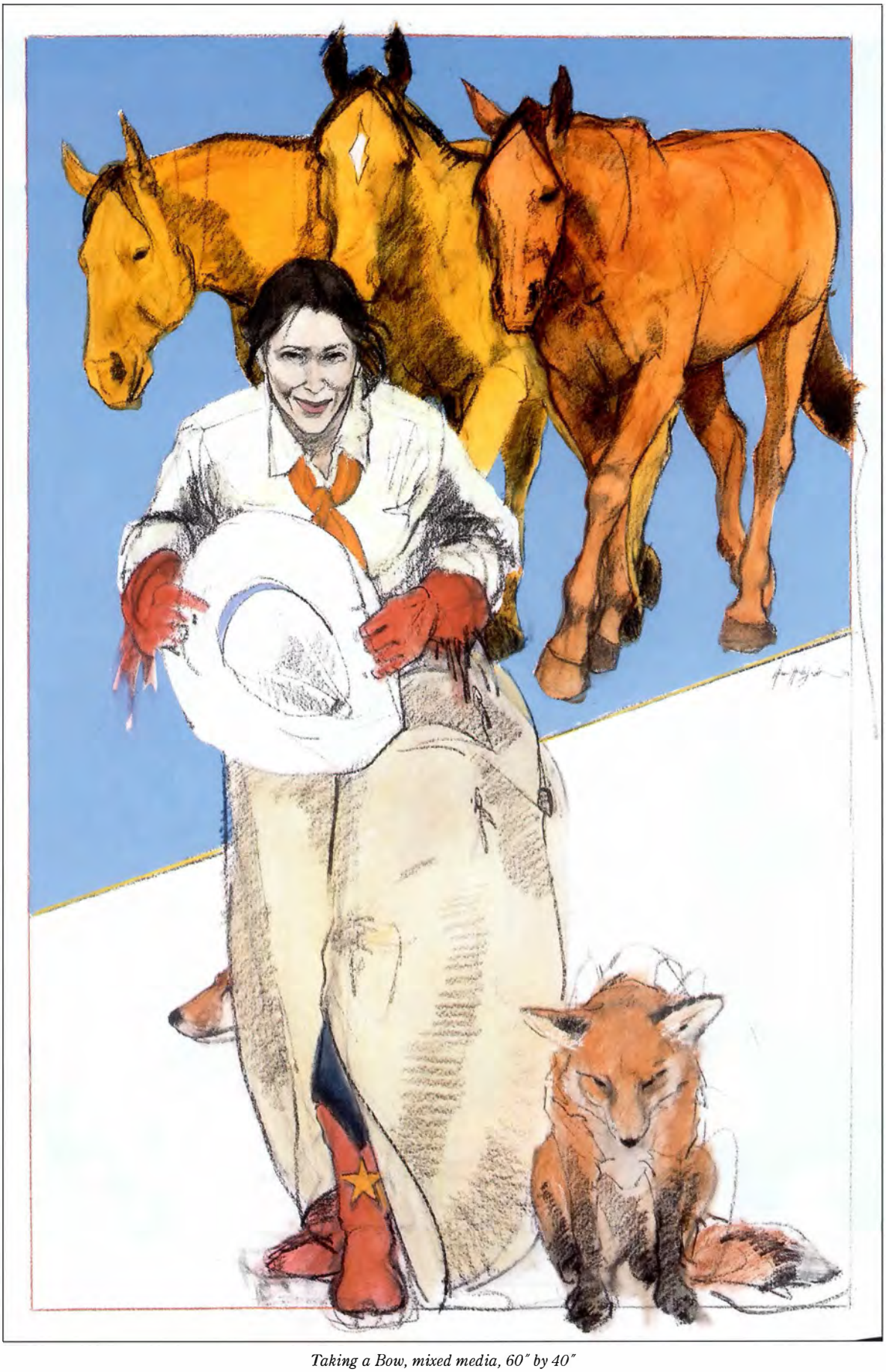
While she and her brother were attending classes in that small structure, their parents were studying to become teachers. Once they earned their degrees, they packed up the family and moved to New Mexico, where they began their teaching careers. "We moved to Lovington," Howell-Sickles says. "I don't think you could find a flatter piece of land on earth."

When it was time for her to attend college, she decided to follow in her parents' footsteps and become a teacher. While studying at Texas Tech in Lubbock, Howell-Sickles enrolled in an art course and discovered that she had a talent for drawing. "I thought I would have a great bulletin board in my classroom," she says with a laugh. As it turned out, however, Howell-Sickles had found her calling.

"I thought, 'Wow, I could do this,' she says. "I immediately changed my major to art." And so it began. Howell-Sickles started painting, doing mostly figurative work and her beloved cowgirl. But one of her

Strawberry Ice Cream, acrylic, 70" by 57"

"The fun of summer with family, dogs, horses, and ice cream."



Taking a Bow, mixed media, 60″ by 40″

"The cowgirl is acknowledging her role in her world, accepting applause for a job well done, and letting the fox peek out from behind to remind herself that many times life is unpredictable, fun, and mischievous."

Four Dog Afternoon, mixed media, 40″ by 60″

"Every cowgirl needs a rest now and then. Sitting with her four companions, reflecting and appreciating life in the West."

instructors strongly discouraged her from focusing on Western subjects, saying with a haughtiness, "Miss Howell, you don't *really* want to be a regional painter, do you?' Howell-Sickles says that instructor might have been right in his assessment of the Western art market at the time, "but I was too stubborn to admit it."

That stubbornness would pay off, but not right away. It would be a few years before Howell-Sickles' paintings would begin to garner attention from galleries and art collectors. In the meantime, she continued to paint the subjects that appealed to her. She got married and earned her Bachelor Degree in Fine Art. Then it was time to do some exploring and see what life had to offer the newlyweds.

Howell-Sickles and her husband loaded up the car and set out for Seattle, stopping for a few months in the mountains in Idaho, where they worked at a hunting camp. Then it was off to Washington State. "I wanted to live somewhere where you didn't have to pray for rain every day; I had done that all my life," she says. "I didn't know there were places where you prayed for the rain to stop!"

Once the couple set up housekeeping in Seattle, Howell-Sickles took a job driving a school bus, something she did for two years, before moving on to work in the darkroom at a printing company. Eventually, she landed a job as a visiting artist, working with students in several rural schools in western Washington and exposing them to art. Two years later, in 1979, when her marriage ended, Howell-Sickles moved back to the family ranch in Texas and began to paint on a full-time basis.

She already had been selling her paintings from an artists' co-op in Seattle and from a little gallery/antique store her cousin owned in Texas. Now she was free to paint to her heart's content and to focus on the cowgirl who had first captivated her in college. Life was good and held the promise of better things to come—and come they did—both personally and professionally.

While her cousin was out of town, Howell-Sickles agreed to watch his business. One day John, a local engineer, stopped in to pick up some furniture. As it turned out, he was the man Howell-Sickles' cousin had been trying to get her to meet. They not only met, they married a year later and had a daughter, Katie, now 25.

Today the couple lives in St. Jo, Texas, some 90 miles from Dallas. Although they own a ranch that John is returning to its natural state, they live in a remodeled loft on the second story of a building they own on the town square. They also purchased a former church that now houses Howell-Sickles' studio. Along with those changes has come a change in Howell-Sickles' art, including the way in which she portrays her cowgirls.

"She has evolved from a very static, almost generic look to a real person," Howell-Sickles says. "At first the faces were undefined. They

In Mischief's Company, mixed media, 30" by 44"

"It's the possibility of what could be, not the actuality, that reflects the unpredictable joys in life."

weren't about specific people or specific emotions. I didn't want to put a face on her to give an exact starting point. Then, as I started to use the cowgirl as a visual vehicle and convey emotions, I made her a real person. I wanted this cowgirl to be involved, which required having a face. To share friendship and joy, they needed to be specific people."

Asked to identify the most important part of the painting process, Howell-Sickles immediately responds, "The best part is the drawing. The line is my favorite part. Sometimes I get a wonderful line on a canvas but then hate it when I put the color on it. Sometimes it seems to ruin the drawing. It's fast moving; I like that. It's almost like magic, because it's appearing on this nice surface. It's a great battle, a well-fought drama, and it's so subject to change. It keeps me open to so many ideas: I could go here or do this. The further I go into each piece, my choices are more limited."

Of course, the cowgirl isn't Howell-Sickles' only subject. She also deals with mythology, which she began to incorporate into her paintings in the mid-'80s. "You can take a Roman myth that deals with fate, luck, weather, surviving—the same things you deal with when you're ranching—too much rain, too little rain, too many grasshoppers," she says. "It requires a lot of faith. There are still people who say they don't want symbolism because it makes them uncomfortable. Probably more than 50 percent of my subjects are myth, but sometimes it's only there because I know it's there. It's not overt."

Working in oil and mixed media and with subjects that were not common, Howell-Sickles did not have an easy time getting galleries to accept her work. "It took a long time for galleries to be willing to show them because they weren't Western, they weren't contemporary," she says. "Today that isn't an oxymoron. Once I got into galleries, it was kind of like reaching critical mass. Enough people saw them so it wasn't foreign anymore."

Howell-Sickles also has tried her hand at sculpting, creating six small pieces over the years, although she hasn't had them cast. Someday, she says, she will get back to that medium, but in the meantime she's more than content to portray the cowgirl who captured her heart so many years ago. "I think of my work as telling positive stories about the strengths of the Western woman—multifaceted, involved, creative, competent, and funny," she says. "All in all, a likable gal."

Vicki Stavig is editor of Art of the West.