

WORTH a Thousand WORDS

"IS THAT A PHOTOGRAPH OR A PAINTING? IT LOOKS SO ... REAL." you hear a lot of people say as they're looking at Oklahoma artist Mikel Donahue's work in colored pencil.

"Art is an emotion," Mikel said, "whether it's a painting or a sculpture or music or writing. ... And if you don't know your subject, either personally or through experience, I don't think you can quite get everything that's there. You don't get the emotion that's there."

So many of his subjects are friends he has gotten to know in years of visiting ranches and partnering on some horses. And the horses he paints or draws, well, he gets to know them, too, even the ones he's commissioned to do.

"I really hesitate to do anything unless I go and see the



Oklahoma artist Mikel Donahue's work evokes emotion and real life.

By Holly Clanahan



Tres Seis

horse," he said. If you don't, the art is "just a technicality."

Mikel's great-grandfather homesteaded near Enid, Oklahoma, in the Oklahoma land run of 1893 and worked on ranches as a chuckwagon cook. Mikel's grandparents continued to raise cattle near Enid, about 180 miles from Tulsa, where he was raised, and "That's where I'd spend my summers," he said. "It's almost more home than Tulsa."

Mikel's wife, Christie, was raised in a horse-trading family. "We always had about 200 head of horses," she said.

The two have been married nearly seven years, and it was Christie's influence that prompted Mikel to get more serious about his art.

He works full-time as a corporate art director in Tulsa, so art is a part-time, after-hours pastime for him.

When they were still dating, "I came up one day and I saw a piece of his art," Christie remembered. "I really liked it, and I said, 'Who did this?'" She was shocked to learn it was one of his pieces.

"I said, 'Well, I have to take this with me.' ... I took it home with me, and I showed it to a lot of people, and he's been busy with it ever since," she said.

His art now hangs in a number of private collections, and he has also participated in the Working Ranch Cowboys Association Cowboy Art Show and Sale, held as part of the

World Championship Ranch Rodeo in Amarillo. He was named best in show artist at the event in 2006 and 2008. In 2010, he will be part of the prestigious Prix de West show at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City.

"A cowboy's what's inside," Mikel said. "Not so much what they do, but what they are. Their personality. It draws you to them."

Mikel admitted that he has gone through phases in his art, when he was interested in one thing or another, but always centered on the cowboy and the horse. Now, "the reality of it is, the character, the people, are what's interesting."

He takes that insight, coupled with his art director's instinct for composition, and sets about telling a story with his pencils or paintbrush.

"In getting that composition put together, you hopefully have something that tells a story or makes a statement or creates that little bit of emotion," he said. And that's the idea. 🐾

Visit www.mikeldonahue.com to learn more about his art. Mikel is one of the artists participating in the America's Horse in Art: The Horse That Settled the West Show and Sale through November 14 at the American Quarter Horse Hall of Fame & Museum. You can view all of the art at www.aqhhalloffame.com. All three of Donahue's pieces in the art show have been sold.