

This art is full of character –
whether it's a racehorse's
or a cowboy's.

By Holly Clanahan

Personality

Plus

McLanahan '02

THERE'S THE SWEET INNOCENCE OF A HORSE-LOVING YOUNG girl. Cowboys who've weathered years in the saddle and have the wisdom to show for it. And on-the-muscle racehorses, bright-eyed and exuberant.

To browse through Mikel Donahue's art is to get to know these people and horses, to see sparks of their personalities shining through the paper. And that's the idea.

"To me, art is an emotion," Mikel says, "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 with the Hatbrand Ranch in Inola, Oklahoma, 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 horse," he says. If you don't, the art is "just a technicality."

He refers to an aging gray mare in the backyard of his Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, home: "Like with 'Missy,' there's so much personality there. If you don't see that and witness it first-hand, you can't grasp that."

And there is a lot to Missy Mit Go that might not be evident at first glance. She's a 23-year-old with arthritic knees and a notched ear – the quintessential old, gray mare. But she carries some pretty impressive old-time racing blood, tracing back to the Thoroughbreds Mito Paint, Rocket Bar and Three Bars and Quarter Horses Mito Wise Dancer and Alamitos Bar.

"She's kind of a 10 in my book as far as the breeding goes," Mikel says. And she passes those speedy genes on to her foals.

Mr Chivato To You is her 2002 foal, by Dash To Chivato, and he has made quite a name for himself on the racetrack, earning more than \$478,000 and winning two Grade 1 races.



In December, he raced in the prestigious invitational Champion of Champions race at Los Alamitos Race Course in California, where he had the opportunity to earn thousands more. (Check www.aqharacing.com for the results of that Dec. 15 race.)

"She has had a few runners before 'Mr Chivato' and has produced several winners and done well, but he is by far her best runner," Mikel says.

But Missy's owners, John and Sylvia Crain, decided in 2004 that she needed to go to a home with fewer horses and more personal attention. They were referred to the Donahues.

Mikel's wife, Christie, takes the story from there: "We said 'Yes,' and here we are. (The Crains) have turned out to be absolutely wonderful people. They are just very close friends, and we see them all the time. (Missy has) not only given us great horses, but she's given us wonderful friends, too. ... It's just amazing what one horse has done for our lives."

The Donahues have a 2-year-old out of Missy – Mai Mr Mito, by Mai Kai, a Coup De Kas (TB) stallion owned by their friend Joleta Ingersoll of the Hatbrand Ranch.

They hope to put this youngster in race training, but right now, he's living with Joleta.

"She has helped us tremendously with the storage of these babies," Mikel says. "Obviously, we don't have the facilities here" on their small acreage outside of town.

This year, Mikel and Christie are awaiting the birth of two of Missy's babies – one by Fishers Dash (in partnership with Joleta and the Crains) and the other by Dash To Chivato. Recipient mares are carrying the babies, to make life easier on Missy's knees.

The Donahues also own another broodmare, Original Intent, who is by On A High, by Dash For Cash, and is closely related to the 1989 world champion racing American Quarter Horse, See Me Do It. Mikel and Christie are keeping hopeful watch on Original Intent's yearling filly by Southern Cartel.

"It'll be fun," Mikel says of their racing future. "We're looking forward to it."

So it's no surprise to see colored-pencil drawings Mikel has done of Mr Chivato To You and Southern Cartel.

His racing interests dovetail nicely with his love of ranching, something that works quite well with his involvement at the Hatbrand Ranch, a working cattle ranch where racehorses and ranch horses co-exist.

"You kind of get the best of both worlds," Mikel says. "You go to the races and root them on, and then I go out and help them gather cattle or work cattle, and that gives me reference (material). It has been good."

He comes by the interest naturally. His great-grandfather homesteaded near Enid, Oklahoma, in the Oklahoma land run of 1893 and worked on ranches as a chuck wagon cook. His 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. ... It's almost more home than Tulsa."

For her part, Christie was raised in a horse-trading family. "We always had about 200 head of horses," she says, and she has an adult son who's in the rodeo world as a bull fighter.

The two have been married nearly five 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 remembers. "I really liked it, and

Mr. Chivato To You



About the Artist

MIKEL DONAHUE, A NATIVE OKLAHOMAN, HAS LIVED IN THE Tulsa area all his life. He has worked in the advertising and marketing industry for more than 29 years since graduating from the University of Tulsa.

He had been interested in art from childhood, and his grandfather, who also painted, took him to see art at the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City (now called the National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Museum).

"I liked horses, and I liked being able to draw things from time to time," he says.

"In college, I took some art classes and decided that being an artist didn't pay anything, so I had to figure out what to do that was close to it. That's when I got into commercial design and advertising."

He works as art director for the corporate offices of Dollar Thrifty Automotive Group.

His wife, Christie, is an

office general manager, "So I, too, have the 8-to-5, Monday-to-Friday job and love it. ... When we're home, it's our time to do things with the horses or whatever we want to do. It's nice for both of us."

Mikel, who works in colored pencil, watercolor, acrylic and oils, has donated works to benefit AQHA's scholarship and equine research funds. He also has helped a therapeutic riding center and the Alzheimer's Association of Eastern Oklahoma.

Other shows Mikel has been a part of include the Nita

Stewart Haley Memorial Library 29th Annual Invitational Art Show and Sale in Midland, Texas; a special exhibition titled "Braided Paths: The Weaving of Cultures" at the 2007 Oklahoma Festival of the Arts; the Collectors' Classic Sale and Show at the Museum of Western Art in Kerrville, Texas; and the Gallery at Rusty Gables in Oklahoma City.





I said, ‘Who did this?’ ” She was shocked to learn it was one of his own 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 says.

His art now hangs in a number of private collections, including that of AQHA President Frank Merrill. And for the past three years, he has been invited to participate in the Working Ranch Cowboys Association Cowboy Art Show and Sale, held as part of the World Championship Ranch Rodeo in Amarillo in November. In 2006, he was named best in show artist there.

At the time, he explained why portraits appeal to him. “A cowboy’s what’s inside. Not so much what they do, but what they are. Their personality. It draws you to them. ... To me, it’s just more interesting.”

One of the portraits hanging at that 2006 show was of an unidentified little boy he and Christie had seen at a previous year’s championship ranch rodeo.

“We were hoping someone would recognize it, or at least be able to help us out” with identifying the young cowhand, but apparently he was from a ranch that wasn’t in attendance that year.

The boy had caught Mikel’s eye outside the arena. “We saw him getting on his dad’s horse, and he just kind of took charge of the situation. He was the statement,” Mikel remembers. “He was quite a little kid.”

The colored-pencil drawing is titled “Attitude Is Everything.”

Other drawings incorporate disparate elements – a rock barn from Joleta’s place, a cowboy from southern Oklahoma.

“I start taking bits and pieces of things and creating an image that works,” Mikel says. He takes lots of photographs

for reference, but they are rarely composed just the way he’d like them – and they may not convey the piece of personality he’s looking for.

“You can go out and take a picture, but if you don’t interact with that situation, it doesn’t mean anything,” he says. “It’s just a photograph.”

The interacting is rarely a problem for him, though. Christie explains: “His problem is, he goes out (to ranches) to help on brandings or gathering the cattle, and he gets so involved in helping and jumping off his horse and grabbing the cows, he completely forgets about the pictures. He went once for a four-day branding ... and he probably didn’t come home with 40 pictures. Tired and hungry and dirty – he had worked so hard, but he had forgotten about picture taking.”

Mikel chuckles at the memory and explains that he loves going out for a good branding, or a gather – but what he really enjoys is simply spending time on a ranch.

“I want to just spend time at a place, from morning to night, and get a feel for the people and what’s going on. It’s that day-to-day life that makes it what it is.”

He has gone through phases in his art, when he was interested in one thing or another. Now, he says, “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 says. And that’s the idea. 🐾

Visit www.mikeldonahue.com to learn more.