

Cowboy Culture

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A Feel for Real Cowboys

WHEN YOU FIRST GLANCE at a piece of artwork by Oklahoma artist Mikel Donahue, you may find yourself wondering if it's a painting or a photograph. Regardless of the medium in which he works, Donahue's unmistakable artistic style renders every aspect of his subjects in impeccable detail. His tight treatment captures the essence of a cowboy's character, as well as the rugged beauty of his horse and environment, so vividly that you feel as though you know the people, places and horses portrayed. Because the artist works from photographs he takes on ranches in Oklahoma and Texas, it's possible the viewer might recognize the subjects.

"I don't believe an artist can accurately convey a scene's emotion if you haven't lived it or been there," Donahue says. "If you don't know the people you're painting, you can't truly capture their characters."

In this colored-pencil drawing, titled "An Understanding," Donahue depicts the obvious connection between cowboy Larry Spurlock of the Hatbrand Ranch in Inola, Oklahoma, and his horse.

"I was inspired by the way this cowboy was standing there, quietly talking to his horse," Donahue explains. "It really showed their partnership with each other."

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A Feel for Real Cowboys

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To Greener Pastures, colored pencil



Deep in December, colored pencil



This piece, titled *Haythorn Hand*, was purchased by the Nita Stewart Haley Memorial Library & Museum in Midland, Texas, during its annual invitational art show and sale. The artwork will hang in their permanent collection, which includes works by Wayne Baize, Joe Beeler, Charlie Dye and Tom Ryan.

Donahue's images have become so symbolic of ranch life, and so masterly is the style and authenticity in which they're created, that he's twice won the best of show buckle at the Working Ranch Cowboys Association Cowboy Art Show & Sale, held during the World Championship Ranch Rodeo in Amarillo, Texas. At the show, Donahue has been joined by other influential cowboy artists such as Wayne Baize, Steve Devenyns, Earl Kuhn, Gary Morton and Jason Scull.

"Selling artwork is great, but being recognized in that company means more than anything," Donahue says. "It's also important to me that cowboys approve of my work. As an artist, I'm judged not only by my peers, but also the individuals I depict."

Further validating his artwork, the artist was invited to be part of the "Horses in Art" exhibit at the American Quarter Horse Association Heritage Center & Museum. A breeder of AQHA racehorses, Donahue was a natural fit.

About three years ago, Donahue and his wife, Christie, provided a home for an old broodmare and bred her to a racehorse sire. They currently have a 2-year-old starting on the track, and one of their yearlings, sired by Dash To Chivato, is a full brother to a racehorse who has won more than \$500,000.

► **ADVISORS FOR COWBOY CULTURE:** Don Edwards, Kathy Edwards, Bruce Greene, Scott Hardy, Thea Marx, Lisa Norman, Tom Perini, Dave Weaver, Gwynn Turnbull Weaver

Despite his interest in the race-horse business, Donahue has a strong connection to ranching. A native Oklahoman, Donahue is proud of his family's pioneer heritage. His great-grandfather participated in the Cherokee Strip Land Run of 1893, and his grandfather, Harry Donahue, was a rancher in the Oklahoma Sandhills.

"He was orphaned as a teenager and went to work cowboying on several outfits," Donahue explains. "He told me stories about moving cattle across the plains in a summer storm and hiding under his horse's neck in a burst of hail. It blows me away how tough he was for someone so young."

The romance of his paternal grandfather's stories, as well as his maternal grandfather's interest in painting Western art, inspired Donahue's first pieces of artwork. He also studied the impressionistic styles of Bill Owen, James Reynolds and Gordon Snidow.

"I've always admired the realism of their paintings, and wish I could paint as loosely as they do," Donahue says. "Once I start painting, things become structured. One time, an artist advised me to paint with a bigger brush. I just laughed, because by the time I finished the painting there would just be one bristle left. I'd wear out the brush trying to get every detail."

A versatile artist, Donahue works in nearly every medium but sculpture. He also works as a graphic designer. Horses are a continual source of inspiration for Donahue, whether he's watching them run on the track or work cattle.

"A cowboy can't do much without a horse," he says. "To me, the West is all about the horse."

Donahue's work hangs in Altermann Galleries in Santa Fe, New Mexico. His work will also be on display at the Buffalo Bill Western Art Show, held at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, September 25-26. For more information on Donahue's work, visit mikeldonahue.com.

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