

Jay McLaughlin Keeps the
Cow-Horse Connection

Options When Your
Equine Partner Dies

Horsemen Who Ride
the Sale Barn Pens

WESTERN HORSEMAN[®]


WORLD'S
LEADING
HORSE
MAGAZINE
since 1936

Comrade Cowboy

A Montana Rancher Points his Herd
to a New Frontier in Russia

John
Ensign:
4 STEPS
to a Gentler
Horse



\$4.99

JULY 2011



0 3

WESTERNHORSEMAN.COM

Some Kind a View
by Mikel Donahue



Some Kind a View, 24-by-36-inch mixed media

● CONCEPT TO COMPLETION

Some Kind a View

Using contrasts in light and shadow, and strong compositional value, Oklahoma artist Mikel Donahue creates a visual and emotional connection between his paintings and the cowboys who appreciate them.

By JENNIFER DENISON

.....

A BREAK IN AN OTHERWISE BUSY DAY, a passing moment of contemplation—such a meditative scene seems to be the exception rather than the norm in Western paintings. Instead, scenes with action and romance command the canvases. But a cowboy pausing in the middle of the day caught the attention of Oklahoma artist Mikel Donahue and became the inspiration for *Some Kind a View*.

“When I saw this guy resting his horse, everything just seemed so quiet and far away,” Donahue says. “He wasn’t waiting on anyone or anything. He was just pausing to look around. Many people look out [over the open prairie] and don’t see anything.”

Through the eyes of the artist, however, subtle components fill the frame, and a range of colors layer the landscape. Known for his detailed, photographic-like painting style, Donahue works with pinpoint precision and has a unique technique that enhances the realism of the scenes he portrays. He begins a painting with a watercolor wash to add tone to the paper. Then uses colored

pencil to create the scene and color saturation. To add texture and highlights, he paints with pastels over certain areas.

“Someone pointed out to me that I tend to add a lot of detail to one specific area of a painting,” Donahue explains. “That becomes the subject, or the focal point, of the painting.”

In this painting, Donahue devoted much detail to the foreground to draw viewers in. Reflective light and shadow draw you toward the subject. The wrinkles on his jeans and shirt, worn areas on his boots, the twists of the lariat and the color variations of the ground and horse’s coat create the tactile quality Donahue does so well. A soft, impressionistic background—intensified with pastel shades of green, blue, mauve and umber—suggests the vast open space interrupted only by a single tree in the distance.

Light and color value are critical, but Donahue believes that composition creates a connection between a person and a painting. Before becoming a full-time artist, he worked as a senior art director at a firm in Tulsa, Oklahoma. His design background has helped him

realize the importance of a painting's balance and composition to engage the viewer and even help tell a story.

"A painting with good composition will help you look at the piece by directing your eye around the painting," Donahue says.

Initially, Donahue intended for this painting to have vertical composition. Early sketches didn't have the water tank, there were more fence posts, and the horse and cowboy were centered. As he experimented with composition, however, Donahue decided to add horizontal elements to contrast the verticals. The horizon draws the eye along the landscape to the tree and then to the cowboy's vertical figure. The cowboy's position, facing to the left, directs you across the horizontal water tank, to the fence posts and then back to the land.

"The horizontal line of the water prevents your eye from dropping off the painting," Donahue explains. "The blue color is strong enough to grab your attention and contrasts the rusty tank, but it's also subtle enough that it doesn't overpower the painting."

As with most of Donahue's paintings, *Some Kind a View* emerged from multiple mental and photographic images, but each of his works is an honest, original depiction of a real place, person and ranch scenario. He observed the scene of the cowboy and horse while gathering cattle in Oklahoma.

A great painting doesn't fully reveal everything in the scene. Donahue deliberately left it up to viewers to decide what the cowboy is looking at. Perhaps it's cattle, but given the expansive background, you have a pretty good idea of what he sees all around him. To the artist, the painting depicts not only a quiet moment of appreciation, but also an unconditional partnership between a cowboy, his horse and the land.

"The horse was a fairly young horse. I had watched them work together all morning, and they understood each other very well," he says. "As they stood there, I noticed they were leaning on each other."

The theme of this painting, like so much of Donahue's work, is just as relevant today as it was 150 years ago. Its timelessness, engaging composition and authentic portrayal of a working cowboy made it an appropriate choice to unveil last October at Trailside Galleries in Scottsdale, for a show coinciding with the 45th annual Cowboy Artists of America Sale & Exhibition.

The painting sold, adding to the success Donahue had last year. In less than a decade,

the artist's art career has flourished. In 2010, he not only was invited to exhibit at the prestigious Prix de West Art Exhibition and Sale in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, but he also received the William E. Weiss Purchase Award and Premier Platinum Award at the Buffalo Bill Art Show and Sale, held in Cody, Wyoming. Those awards were for his painting *Long Days*, which appeared in the October 2010 issue of *Western Horseman*.

Having just submitted two paintings for this year's Prix de West and starting on pieces for a host of other art shows, including the Buffalo Bill show, Donahue is already thinking about how he'll build on this year's body of work. With each new painting, he feels the pressure to perform better than he did before. Always striving to take his art



Mikel Donahue paints the cowboys who work in his native Oklahoma.

to a higher level, he studies the works of master impressionists and contemporary Western artists Bill Owen, James Reynolds and Gordon Snidow.

"There's something about their use of light and color, and being able to take a small amount of color and a directive brushstroke and have them say so much," he says. "I admire how they do so much with less."

Donahue admits he will probably never paint with the loose, large brushstrokes of the artists he studies because it's just not him. His work stays true to his style and never loses the personality and distinguishing quality he paints into each piece. 🐾

FINE POINTS

Artist: Mikel Donahue

Hometown: Broken Arrow, Oklahoma

Family: Wife, Christie

Mediums: Colored pencil, watercolor, oil and acrylic

Education: University of Tulsa, Tulsa, Oklahoma

Years as a Professional Artist: 7

Proudest Moment: "Being invited to Prix de West for the first time [in 2010] was huge, but being among the great artists in the show and feeling the energy was even more of an honor," Donahue says. "Then, to follow that up by winning two awards at the Buffalo Bill Art Show and Sale was unbelievable. These were the biggest compliments I could ever receive."

Recent Accolades: William E. Weiss Purchase Award and Premier Platinum Award at the 2010 Buffalo Bill Art Show and Sale, Cody Wyoming; Artists' Choice Award at the 2009 Buffalo Bill Art Show and Sale, his first year exhibiting there; Best of Show in 2006 and 2008 at the World Championship Ranch Rodeo Art Show in Amarillo, Texas.

Upcoming Shows: Prix de West Art Show and Sale, June 10–August 7, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Cheyenne Frontier Days Western Art Show, July 21–31, Cheyenne Frontier Days Old West Museum, Cheyenne, Wyoming; Quest for the West Art Show and Sale, September 9–October 9, Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, Indianapolis, Indiana; Buffalo Bill Art Show and Sale, September 23–24, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming.

Galleries: Altermann Galleries, Santa Fe, New Mexico (altermann.com); Settlers West Galleries, Tucson, Arizona (settlerswest.com); Trailside Galleries, Scottsdale, Arizona, and Jackson Hole, Wyoming (trailsidegalleries.com).

Web site: mikeldonahue.com