

Montana Artist Jennifer Lowe

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From her top floor attic/studio window Jennifer Lowe watches magpies swooping through dangled limbs, and keeps an eye on the changing seasons' set against a mountainous backdrop. Before she can start on a new painting she first moves 10-year-old Isaac's complicated drawing of a submarine from her workspace.

Taking out a rectangular piece of thick watercolor paper, Lowe tapes it down with bright blue painter's tape, carefully aligning the edges along her faint pencil marks. Her hand hovers for a moment as the image begins to form. And then, at once, as if tracing a memory, it translates from her mind to the page. Sketching out a basic mountain horizon she stands with her hip against the table and like a recurring dream, her hand flows with tender recognition.

"A raven, at night, in the full moon. And I thought of great title – Moon Walk," she smiles. It feels right. "My titles are a very important part of my work; they're always fun."

Pulling open the long flat drawer of her drafting table dozens of fat livestock markers roll around. Red, blue, white, black, phosphorescent yellow, orange, light yellow, and a neon pink, each tumble across the surface in tidy rows, each one wrapped in heavy cardboard that states the all-weather Paintstik, "Marks wet or dry hides, skins and pelts."

The markers are chunky, like sidewalk chalk, and need to be peeled before using. Lowe takes a small paring knife and begins to unsheathe the old layer, as if preparing a snack. Sometimes she applies the markers right to the paper, other times she mixes the colors and then applies them with brush. Today it's markers to paper and fingers to paint. No brushes. Finger-painting at its fluid finest.

"I started using livestock markers in a drawing class," she says, searching for her palette. "As soon as I tried them I went out to the ranch supply store and bought some."

Lowe's western art embodies a sense of play, of wonder. Her images, mostly that of the things she loves about her native Montana: Buffalo and cowgirls on bareback; bears and butterflies; blue heron; foxes and flowers. She has an outdoor awareness of nature and the appreciation of life's fleeting offerings.

At Visions West, in Bozeman, two of Lowe's paintings span the windows. Visions West is one of three galleries that represent her work. Like many of Lowe's pieces, these paintings are a reference to the

environment, the fragility of our ecosystem. Her most recent work, which will show in February at the Kneeland Gallery in Ketchum, Idaho, centers on the trip she took with her family to Antarctica and will address those animals she saw and their eventual fate in the hands of global warming.

Filling up the west wall is "Ride on the Wild Side"; the piece feels fable-like. The story unfolds as a girl rides bareback on a white stallion, accompanied by the animals of the wild – yet they seem momentarily tamed – and a white owl flies overhead. The elemental colors are there. Her dark outline, steady with a coloring book's innocence, but tentative like Van Gogh's boundaries, Lowe demarcates the lines of her structure. It is a sort of trademark, something she's come to feel finishes her paintings.

But it is her livestock markers that signal her work.

"I wanted to convey my love of Montana and the wild place we live," she says, moving her finger around the colors, mixing them with her own fingerprints. "But I wanted something new, a unique way of saying that."

Growing up and then attending the university in Missoula, Lowe later transferred to MSU-Bozeman and got her degree for teaching K-12 – something her parents told her she needed to "fall back on" in case her art career didn't pan out. But it was a worry that never materialized. Before finishing up at MSU, she'd married Alex Lowe, one of the world's highest rated climbers. By the time she graduated, in 1987, she'd already had 22 shows of her work, some of which reside in the collections of Jeff Bridges, Michael Keaton, Tom Brokaw, the owners of Patagonia, Yvon and Malinda Chouinard, as well as others from around the world.

Beverly Grundhofer, with a ranch in Southern California and one in Livingston, owns about a dozen or so of Lowe's paintings.

"She just captures the spirit of the love between horse and rider, that kind of partnership and the playfulness as well," Grundhofer says. "And her colors are marvelous."

Grundhofer owns some of the bear paintings but it is the horse paintings that she relates to the most.

"She captures the communication between horses and women, the total trust. Look at most of her work and she'll go ahead and have them standing on the horses' back. Being a horse lover myself, communication between horse and rider is vital. She picks that up in a whimsical way. It's what I find between my own horses and myself. Horses give us the power we as humans would never have. And I see that in her work. As a horse person I felt a very strong connection to her work."

Lowe in fact is a horse person herself, growing up riding. Along the banister in her home rests the saddle she had as a child in Missoula. She kept her horses at friends' ranches or her dad would trade work for the horses' upkeep.

"Painted Ladies," is one of the pieces where the rider, with utmost confidence in her stance, plants her feet astride two horses. Painted Lady butterflies flit around a girl while she practices her tricks. The girl has a sense of abandon, with one hand on her hip, the other overhead twirling a rope like a hula hoop, as the butterflies sweep across the dwindling light.

"Those are the type of butterfly that we have here, and those horses could be paints," Lowe says. "The woman is celebrating her freedom – the kind you have in your youth."

Lowe knows that freedom from when she traveled around the world climbing and exploring with Alex Lowe. But she also knows the pang of loss deeply. Not only did she lose her husband, Alex Lowe, in 1999, but also her mother died two years later and her sister died of breast cancer last year.

"Alex's death wasn't the only one that hit me hard," Lowe says, reaching for the blue marker. "Conrad and I have been through a lot."

Lowe married Conrad Anker five years ago, and Anker adopted Lowe's three sons.

"They all call him Dad now," Lowe says, beaming at her luck to find love twice in a single lifetime. "We're all pretty lucky to have each other."

Ropes and ice picks, prayer rugs and photographs, like motes, graze the house, always present but only seen in moments of revealed sunlight, reminders of a life touched and loved -- not forgotten and not martyred.

Her sons, an intricate of any mother's life, add to the quiet chaos.

Isaac, 10, is the biologist. His room is home to a tarantula named Chaco and a tank of fish. Other animal residents of the house include: Happy, a black lab, and a chocolate lab pup named Leroy Brown; Beanie, a cockatiel; two chickens; two bunnies and some tree squirrels Isaac is trying to rehabilitate and release into the "wild." He also works at the Montana Outdoor Science School, taking care of their animals after school.

Sam, 14, an award-winning filmmaker, took footage of a recent trip to Antarctica and created a ten-minute film about human's effect on that delicate part of the world. The film garnered "Best Environmental Film for Youth," at last year's Telluride Film Festival. Sam played electric guitar for the soundtrack and narrated the film as well.

Max, 18, a senior at Bozeman High School, and co-editor of the school's newspaper, plays the violin and loves to ski. Last summer he took a trip with Erik Weißenmayer (the blind climber who summited Mount Everest) with a group called Global Explorers.

"Global Explorers took a bunch of kids -- half of them were blind or sight- impaired -- and hiked the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu," Lowe says. "Erik knew Alex before he died and had been inspired by him; and now Max is inspired by Erik so that came full circle in a nice way."

When Alex died, Jenni and Conrad started The Alex Lowe Charitable Foundation (ALCF), dedicated to preserving Lowe's legacy by providing direction and financial support to sustainable, community-based humanitarian programs designed to help the people who live in remote regions of the world.

But she is also able to donate to her immediate community. For Lowe, she feels honored to be able to contribute her art in a way that benefits the community. "I feel lucky to be able to be an artist, producing art that people can enjoy. I feel in the last seven years I've achieved so much, that now I'm able to give back."

Last year Lowe participated in the Emerson Cultural Center's Celebration of the Arts "Quick Draw," where she created a painting in front of an audience.

"She made a piece of artwork come to life in just an hour," The Emerson's board president, Glenniss Indreland, says. "It's a delight to watch her."

Her piece sold for \$3,000 and the money was donated to the arts center.

"It's also a great opportunity for people to interact with the artists and Jenni is not shy, so that's truly wonderful," Indreland says. "The sharing of her time and talent are greatly appreciated and artists like her make this community a special place."

The Emerson also has an annual historic theater chair auction, where the old wood chairs from the auditorium are given to artists to decorate in their own fashion.

"Jenni's were wonderfully charming," Indreland says. "And they were auctioned off. It was another very generous and helpful fundraising effort."

Lowe donates her artwork to other charities, including the new Bozeman Library, where she gave them an original painting and they were able to make prints from it. The library will then sell those posters, the proceeds of which go directly to help the library.

Lowe uses her finger to spread the pink and blue into an indigo sky, the paint thick and oily. The smell of the markers permeates her studio with a heavy petroleum perfume. With quick strokes she slashes red in the foreground, fall-turning underbrush where the raven's shadow leans off the paper. The scritch of lead against paper, Lowe scripts in the thick viscous sky, "Moonwalk and Raven Talk... One small step." [title a good pullout]

And for Lowe it's all about the small steps, the little things that make up the big picture. In her paintings the colors breathe life, in her life her work breathes color.

"Once you've experienced great loss, I think you begin to appreciate things," Lowe says, her bright blue eyes trailing off, reaching for something, the right words, the right way to say it. "We can feed our families and give our kids so many opportunities. We are so fortunate."