



King of Diamonds

The art of perfection

By MEGAN LARSON

SHANNON LAWLOR PAINTS THE BEAUTY OF ANIMALS WITH INTRICATE DETAIL RARELY SEEN.



Spending time with horses, such as Ms Smoke N Ghost shown here, inspired artist Shannon Lawlor to pursue her passion for art.

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estled among the Porcupine Hills south of Calgary, Alberta, is a small home near Cayley where intricate Western art is produced. Its creator, Shannon Lawlor, looks out from her home at the majestic Canadian Rockies on a crisp fall morning, and later catches a threatening storm

rolling off the peaks and across the grassy plains before returning to her studio to paint.

Music plays from the stereo as she selects a brush to dab in the acrylic paint before carefully outlining a vein near the horse's eye. Her calico cat, Mouse, sleeps the afternoon away on a nearby couch, keeping warm on the buf-



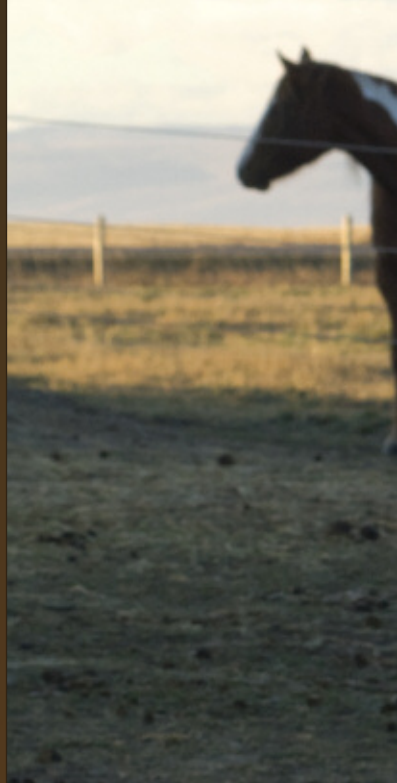
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falo hide covering it after spending a chilly morning rolling in the dirt by the pasture.

While Lawlor's painting and this month's Paint Horse Journal cover coats a 12" x 14" board, it will only take her two days to complete.

"It used to take me a week to do something," said Lawlor. "But having said that, when it used to take me a week, the quality wasn't as good. I'm growing and changing all the time as an artist. It's getting like breathing. I do it all the time—and seven years of on-and-off casual art lessons are paying off."

As with the vast majority of her paintings, "Mister Mister" is heavy on detail and color variations, yet Lawlor uses a limited color palette. She incorporates only the three primary colors—magenta, cyan and yellow—along with white, brown and paynes gray. She reasons that the colors can be mixed to make



Using reference photos helps Lawlor incorporate the intricate details of her subjects, such as Mister Mister (above), this month's Journal cover art, and Bits of Knowledge (below).



SHANNON LAWLOR



As a young child, Lawlor and her sisters showed horses at county fairs. For several years, Lawlor also worked with horses on cattle ranches, saying that this was a large piece of the education for her art.



Bits of Knowledge

any other hues, so it's unnecessary to purchase hundreds of shades.

A fresh canvas

While the quality of her paintings has improved over time, Lawlor says it comes from hard work and not natural talent, as she began drawing while she was a young girl.

Born in Kenton, Manitoba, in 1965, Lawlor arrived seven years after her three older sisters—Marcia, Sally and Theresa. Their father, Jack, was a garage proprietor and owned the Case & Chrysler dealership in the small town, while Doreen, their mother, worked in the town's grocery store.

"My mother and father always provided horses for us kids, and we always had a barn on the outskirts of town," said Lawlor. "I've never known life without horses, even though I grew up in town. We always had access to them.

"My mother raised Welsh ponies when I was a little girl, so I grew up on [them], along with a part-Arabian."



COURTESY SHANNON LAWLOR

Lawlor's experiences with horses from such a young age influenced her paintings throughout her life. But her passion for art came from following her sisters.

"Two of [my sisters] drew a lot when I was a little girl, and I was quite enamored with them, of course," she said. "Whatever they did, I mimicked. My sisters would draw a lot, and of course they drew horses, so I ended up drawing because they drew.

"When they moved on and carried on with their life, they quit drawing. I still remember it being a pivotal point in my life, where it both-

"I've never known life without horses."

ered me so much I told myself, even at the age of 7, that I was never going to quit drawing. I never went to art college or anything, but I kept drawing and it was always a hobby of mine. That's really how I got started."

Lawlor began showing horses at the age of 8, and continued for the next 17 years competing at small fairs and events. She fell in love with Western riding, Western pleasure and showmanship.

Lawlor also worked with horses on cattle ranches, with cutting and reining trainers and at an equine veterinary clinic. For several years, she bred, raised and trained her own horses.

"I love detail. That's my favorite part."

"It's almost like that was my education for my art, because I'm adamant about having my pieces look accurate and that the animals are anatomically correct," she explained. "It's a bit of an inspiration, but it makes me very confident in what I'm doing, because I absolutely know them so well."

"I've owned Paint Horses. I've raised a few and started lots of Paint colts, and I've ridden a lot of Paint Horses."

In February, Lawlor finally sold her last two horses—8-year-old Maggie and a 2-year-old filly, Enya—because her art was becoming too demanding.

Prep work

As the wind whips through the tall grass again, Lawlor is grateful she spent the earlier part of the week, while the weather was nice, preparing boards for future paintings.

"You never know when we're going to get crazy weather here," she said. "I've been outside a lot this week because I prepare all my own boards. I buy a 4' x 8' sheet of board from the hardware store. I cut them whatever size I want, and then I airbrush outside at least six coats of acrylic primer. It's

Each of her paintings—including Ultimate View, below left; A Cat Called Mouse, below right; and Pinto Bean, far right—shows Lawlor's remarkable talent for detail.



Lawlor always sketches before starting a new painting.





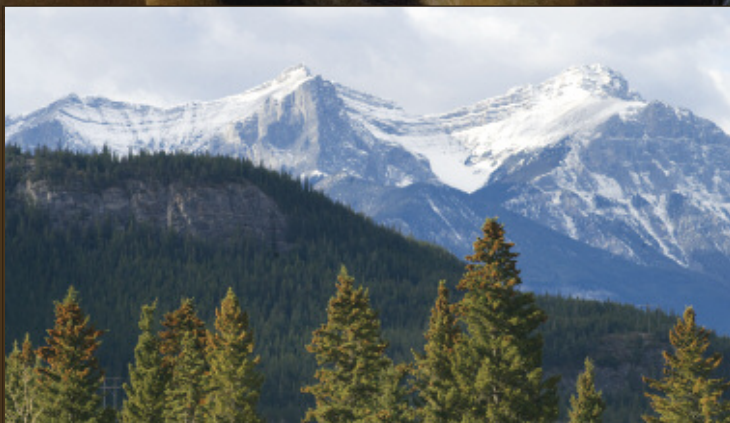
Pinto Bean

smooth—that's what I like about it. The smoothness never interferes with my brushstrokes and the thin acrylic paint."

Before starting a painting, Lawlor takes thousands of reference photos on her digital camera to capture the perfect moment. She browses through them, blowing up her final selection to at least an 8" x 10" image in order to see the detail.

"I have reference photos to guide me," Lawlor explained. "And having been there and seen it, and remembering what the lighting was like and what it smelled like and felt like that day is part of that, too. And that's really important to me."

Once the photos have been snapped and developed, the Canadian native sits down for a preliminary sketch, which can sometimes take longer than the actual painting. "Bits of Knowledge," for example, took a couple of days to draw, in order to make sure the horses' proportions were correct, the heads and necks



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were level and turned the right way, and their ears were properly cocked.

Details, details

Lawlor's attention to the intricate details of her subjects, whether it be the veins on a horse's neck or the way its mane falls, is what sets her paintings apart from other artists and makes her artwork so fascinating. She focuses on getting

The Canadian Rockies offer Lawlor a peaceful setting near her home in the Porcupine Hills.

the detail correct in her paintings because it matters to her, and she knows that others in the horse world will notice if it's not correct.

"I love detail," she said. "That's my favorite part. I'm consciously drawn to intense parts, or pieces, or whatever's going on. I've enjoyed learning and experimenting with cropping an image like that, like not telling the whole story, not exposing the whole face. When I'm starting a painting, it's like watching paint dry. I really like doing tack, but I love doing the veins and the way the hair is on a horse's face or how his mane falls. That just rocks my world."

Lawlor draws these details from inspiring maneuvers in events at various horse shows she attends.

"When I see a horse executing a maneuver, perhaps on his own or when he's being ridden, and it doesn't matter what the discipline—a

"My hobby turned into my life and into my business."

really exceptional rope horse or a ranch horse that's in full bridle—and when the reins are never touched and that horse is just right on with his rider, and they're so in-time and in-tune with each other—those things really move me."

Other inspiration comes from her mentors, especially art teacher David Kittler, who taught her the nuts and bolts of painting. Lawlor also draws a lot of influence from a variety of artists and types of art, as well as the history of the states to which she's traveled.

"It might be that I learn from them sub-consciously, little bits of theory about color, what they're trying to say in a painting or tell a story with strategically placed objects in a landscape or a scene or something," she said. "I take bits and pieces from everything that comes my way."

Complete satisfaction

Out of all the awards Lawlor has won, the one bestowed upon her earlier this year at the Phippen Museum Western Art Show in Prescott, Arizona, has meant the most.

"I had never been to that show, and that was the first time I applied to the show," she said. "I probably was the only Canadian artist there, and I won the Best of Show—Acrylic with one of my favorite paintings, 'Cholo.'"

Shortly before Lawlor's father passed away two years ago after battling cancer, he made a comment on her chosen career that sticks with her to this day.

"He said, 'You just keep painting and do what you're doing,'" she said. "It was really kind of cool that he said that, because he was always a bit removed from my art. He endorsed that right at the end, and it was really special."

With the final approval from her father, Lawlor is even more satisfied with her career.

"I'm grateful to be doing this full-time, that I can actually make my living doing this," she said. "I'm so engrossed in my life that I love every minute of it, and it's so fulfilling that I don't feel the need to go downhill skiing or look for another hobby, because my hobby turned into my life and my business, and this is it." **PHJ**

Lawlor and her ever-present companion, her cat named Mouse.



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Lawlor uses a limited color palette, incorporating only the three primary colors, white, brown and paynes gray.



Cholo

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