

Who Says You Can't Paint Horses?



By Dani Moritz

*"Four Horse Rush," oil on canvas 21 x 48.
All photos courtesy of Susan Sheets*

When Texas-native Susan Sheets took her work to an art gallery in Houston, she was told her piece probably would never sell. Reluctantly, the man at the gallery agreed to display the piece – but not before informing her that people “don’t buy that kind of stuff.” Why? Because he didn’t think horses would sell.

The obviously horse-deprived man nearly had Susan convinced. As three months slowly trudged on with no word of an offer, she drove to the gallery to pick up her painting – head hung low. When she arrived, however, she was struck with utter surprise and delight.

That same day, three different people tried to buy that painting. So much for people not being interested in horses.

For Susan, her passion for painting started when she was young. Her parents always encouraged her to do art, ensuring she always had supplies available and sending her to museum schools over the summer to practice.

As a high school student, she remembers purchasing her first bit of oil paint. “I bought a little set of paint for myself that I could afford and it was so small and it cost so much that I was afraid to
Continued on page 62





Texas artist Susan Sheets.



"Spring Awakening," oil on canvas 29 x 44.

put it on the canvas," she recollected. "I was afraid to use it up."

She continued her passion for painting throughout college. Although she started her collegiate career at Baylor, thinking she wanted to be a nurse, she soon discovered that there was only one suitable career path for her – art.

She transferred from school to school until finally settling down with an interior design degree. Although all she really wanted to do was paint, her advisors kept warning her that there was no money in studio artwork. So, for several years she utilized her passion for studio art to inspire her interior design, which in return continues to inspire her paintings today.

Still convinced she could make a living out of painting, Susan dedicated herself to teaching so that she could support herself while developing her painting skills. She taught for 23 years and enjoyed every second, but found it difficult to find time for her own paintings.

"I worked all the time [on my paintings] at night and I worked on weekends. My big plan was that I woke up at 4 a.m. on Sundays so I could do art work all by myself and that's what I did every Sunday for 23 years. I had to work at odd hours and then I retired."

Along the way she earned a grant to go to Gatlinburg, Tennessee's Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts. There, she learned about something that captivated her – residency programs.

A woman there told her how she had spent three months on a national park residency. She had a cabin and a studio. She was delivered three meals a day and enjoyed complete solitude.

Susan knew that was what she needed to become an even better artist.

She applied for a residency in Sheridan, Wyoming called the Jentel Artist Residency. Of course, she was accepted, and was launched into a journey that would propel her even further.

Susan laughed as she recalled a conversation she had with a fellow artist in the program. "When you came here you were kind of an average artist," the lady told her. "Now you're leaving a kickass artist!"

While some may have viewed the comment as left-handed, Susan completely agreed with the outspoken woman. "I was just kind of dabbling in it, working hard on it, but not getting too far," Susan said. "But in Wyoming, everything changed."

She then completed another residency in Saratoga, Wyoming, where she drew inspiration from the landscape around her and from the beautiful horses she, and the other artists (which included writers, painters, composers and the like), were able to ride.

She also drew inspiration from attending a 1,000-acre ranch in New Mexico with her husband for his Boy Scout trips. There, she took thousands of photos and enjoyed the land from horseback.

From her trips to these ranches and from her days of childhood riding lessons, she developed a passion for painting equines. "All artists start off drawing human figures and thinking the balance of the human figure is perfection and that's what you have to paint, but then you see an animal like a horse in performance and in action. It's fantastic to see them carry themselves with such power and energy... in every aspect, the animals are handsome. Horses – their nostrils are beautiful, their ears are beautiful, the hooves and they way they balance their legs, and they have beautiful legs!"

She continued, "Every aspect of a horse is awesome. In my composition, they are really up close so we press the edges

Continued on page 66