



Roots in the ROCKIES

Duke Beardsley's
drawings, etchings,
and paintings reflect
present-day western terrain
he knows full well
By Virginia Campbell





YOU ALMOST HAVE TO START with the name. *Duke Beardsley*? Is this a fictional character out of some tale of the Old West? It's a name that conjures up the grit of trail dust, the sting of whiskey downed by the shot, and the finesse that cowboys bring to their dealings with feisty creatures on four legs. The very idea of a Duke Beardsley who's a real person, a young one who lives in the 21st century, makes you wonder what's with the guy—how did he get this name, and how does he deal with it? And to hear that he makes pictures of cowboys for a living prompts suspicion—is this one of those people who've wandered a bit too far into the West of their own nostalgic mythology?

It's at this point when a long look at one of Duke Beardsley's paintings becomes instructive. Most of them bear long inspection quite well. There are large tonal landscapes of nearly abstract beauty, small solar etchings in which powerful drawing seems to define shape and motion from the inside out, and unusually big black-and-white paintings of compelling western scenes. But it's the large, dark, multimedia images in deep, single hues that make for the most reverberating sensation

of surprise. One in a green that reflects a probable affection for Remington's nocturnes shows the rear two-thirds of a saddled horse—the head is out of the frame to the left, and the perfectly empty right quarter of the canvas makes the decision to leave the head out of the composition a dramatic statement [see page 146]. The horse's legs are what we're meant to pay attention to—there's a darkly shadowed figure sitting cross-legged, head down on the ground, up close to the horse's front legs. The piece's title tells us what this figure is doing: *CANNON WRAPS*. Everything from the fan of the horse's tail to the lay of the saddle to the bent concentration of the cowboy holds true and solid in the off-center composition. The fast, loose drawing underneath the acrylic gray wash, black oil shadows, and effaced green oil supports the entire visual drama, making it both convincing and mysterious. The painting displays uncanny skill in execution and intimate knowledge of what is depicted.

Duke Beardsley is a 33-year-old, fifth-generation Coloradan for whom cowboys and horses are not just subject matter for art but the content of daily life. Though

OPPOSITE PAGE: HOLDING
PENS—BECKWITH
RANCH, OIL, 30 X 40.
THIS PAGE: CALM
BEFORE THE STORM,
OIL, 36 X 60.

his birth certificate says “Richard,” his parents—both descendants of mining, lumber, and ranching pioneers who came to Colorado in the 19th century—called him Duke from the day he was born. Not that many people can get away with calling a baby Duke, but the Beardsleys would qualify even if they didn’t still have a ranch in eastern Colorado where their children spent a good deal of time while growing up in Denver. Their instincts in naming their child were on the mark, too, because in addition to growing up happy to ride and throw a rope, their son had another characteristic that the name Duke conjures up: He had, by his own account, luck on his side.

Now Beardsley is a sufficiently talented, educated, and accomplished artist that any discussion of his luck has to proceed with care. You don’t produce work like his, in landscape as well as figurative pieces and in oil as well as etching and multimedia, as the result of mere luck. But it’s Beardsley himself who tends to add the phrase “I’ve been so lucky” as a postscript to almost every episode in his artistic life.

BEARDSLEY’S DESIRE and ability to draw manifested itself about as early as it could in a child’s life—he had the luck to be born with it. “From about the age of 3 or 4, I drew recognizable animals,” he recalls. “Drawing was a daily source of interest to me. I’d draw with anything that could make a mark.” It was his good fortune to have a family in which artistic talent was not unusual—his father and older sister are

“I’m still celebrating the icon of the cowboy, but what I paint is true in the present.”

both gifted—and in which paintings were collected. He grew up with plein-air canvases by artists like Edgar Payne and sketches by Maynard Dixon on the walls. His own precocious passion was for Frederic Remington, whose work he pored over with the rapt attention children usually reserve for comic books. “My family tells the story of when I asked my mom if I could meet him,” Beardsley laughs.



CANNON WRAPS, MIXED MEDIA, 48 X 30.

He also was lucky to go to a private school that encouraged him in art. “I’m the kind of person who’d have been lost in the shuffle of a big high school,” he speculates. His older sister went to Middlebury, the small, liberal arts college very far from Colorado in Vermont where he decided to go, too. “I’m not sure I’d be an artist if it weren’t for Middlebury,” he says. It wasn’t the studio-art classes that made the ultimate difference, but the art history, specifically a seminar in imperial Roman portraiture, of all things. “We were looking at a head of Augustus, I think, and the light suddenly went on for me,” Beardsley recalls. “I understood how a whole culture expresses its concerns in art. That focus made it possible for me to understand the entire timeline of art.”

Still, he didn’t immediately set out to pursue a career in art. Beardsley returned to work on the family’s Colorado ranch for a couple of years after college, then joined the ski patrol as a medical technician, which led him to think he’d like medicine. He enrolled in Claremont College’s post-baccalaureate pre-med course just outside of Los Angeles and studied for a year. “I loved it, until one morning I woke up and, clear as a bell, I knew it wasn’t for me,” he says. Luckily enough, a family friend who’d gone to the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena suggested he check the

place out and took him there. The moment Beardsley walked through the door, he knew he wanted to go there, and the highly selective school admitted him very quickly. "I appreciate whoever it was who let me in," he says. "I was lucky."

In 1998 as he was graduating from the Art Center, Beardsley sent new drawings he'd done partly under the influence of the abstract expressionist Franz Kline to an alumni show at his old high school in Denver. Elizabeth Schlosser, who owned Elizabeth Schlosser Fine Art at the time, saw them and immediately offered him a one-man show. "We sold a ton of work," he laughs. "It's so much fun to have your own hometown embrace you." As luck would have it, he'd also just fallen for a Colorado girl he would later marry. In other words, he'd almost simultaneously fitted together the major pieces of his adult life. He was going to live and work in Denver where he had deep, authentic roots.

When Schlosser closed her gallery, Beardsley's paintings were welcomed at Carson Gallery in downtown Denver. "Denver is the population center for a radius of 600 to 1,000 miles," Beardsley points out. "It has a wonderful art community and a lot of room to grow."

THE ENCOURAGEMENT Beardsley has received early in his career seems to have been fortuitously complemented by his distinctly non-abrasive brand of contrariness. "I like to do things people say I shouldn't," he says. "Someone told me once, for example, that there are no straight lines in horses. So I decided to use them." The payoff was a drawing in which the vertical power of a horse's leg meeting the ground can be felt in one's own bones. "I was told you couldn't put things in the middle of a landscape," he continues. That just upped the ante on the game he plays with his innate gift for composition. "I was told you can't use cameras," he says. So he supplements his sketching notebook with photographs and, for that matter, a video camera.

While many artists pursue more than one genre and work in a variety of media, Beardsley seems particularly neck-and-neck with himself in his various modes. If you saw only his landscapes, for example, you'd be surprised at the drawings and the close-up, large-scale paintings of cowboys. Beardsley's landscapes

are so distinctive and sound that it comes as a surprise to hear how hesitant he is about them. "Most of my paintings are experiments," he claims. If you point out a stunning piece like *YELLOWSTONE BISON*, in which the animals' curved backs rise out of horizontal bands of autumnal reds and oranges in front of a dark stand of trees across the top of the painting, he says, "That's an experiment that went very well." Perhaps because landscape doesn't lean so heavily on his passion for drawing—though you see a will to draw in the grasses,



COMING AND GOING, MIXED MEDIA, 48 X 48.

flooded tire tracks, and any number of other seized opportunities—Beardsley hasn't embraced the genre.

"Landscape came to me later," he explains. "I had to develop the interest." He had help at the Art Center from Ray Turner—"He taught me to celebrate the act of painting and to learn the difference between the precious and the essential. That rattled and interested me." In Denver, landscapist Michael Lynch strengthened his work *en plein air*. Courbet and the early Impressionists have always interested him, and among contemporary painters, he notes, "I'm a huge

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sucker for Russell Chatham.” Indeed, you can see Chatham’s influence clearly. But you see the throbbing, saturated zones of color that come from Beardsley’s love of Mark Rothko, too, juxtaposed against restless edges that bespeak a natural, tireless draftsman. The “experiments” cohere as the particular vision of an accomplished landscape artist, and they sell, too, but Beardsley says he tends to gravitate toward other things.

“I have a short attention span,” he laughs. In fact, he says that about himself almost as often as he declares himself lucky. His artistic nature does seem to share the qualities of his drawing hand—speed, strength, and restlessness. He investigates techniques with unintimidated curiosity (“I like to glaze in reverse, putting thick over thin”), exploiting accidents and upending conventions with not just playfulness but outright optimism. “You can be a good artist and have a good time,” he announces, knowing that the mythology of the artist largely argues against this. But then, the nostalgic mythology of the cowboy that can easily turn into kitsch is of no interest to Beardsley (“I’m still celebrating the icon of the cowboy, but what I paint is true in the present”), so perhaps he’s naturally disinclined to get entangled in artistic mythology. The artist he is in the present is happy—with a new daughter, his first child, and a home with his studio right next to it. Still only six years into his professional painting career, he has found a place to let his luck unfold. □

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Beardsley is represented by Piñon Fine Art, Denver, CO; Mad Creek Gallery, Steamboat Springs, CO; Mountain Trails Gallery, Jackson, WY; and Visions West Gallery, Livingston and Bozeman, MT.