



Rachel Brownlee in her studio with a work on the easel.

# CHARCOAL TRUTH

Rachel Brownlee hopes to bring a new level of authenticity to ranch depictions—one drawing at a time.

By Maggie R. Cibik

**R**anch life is often romanticized by picturesque settings that tend to varnish over the gritty hard-working lifestyle. Or it is dramatized by glamorous actors in scandalous plotlines for prime-time viewing. While ranch life can be pastorally beautiful with vast open skies over grazing cattle and handsome cowboys riding off into the sunset, it is so much more, with real people living it every day.

Charcoal artist Rachel Brownlee aims to show a real perspective on ranching and the people that make up the community by chipping away at the

glossy clichés to reveal the true beauty within the reality of the lifestyle. She also aims to tell stories of perseverance and resilience, stories that are far more interesting than any television drama.

As a fifth-generation rancher, Brownlee knows a thing or two about ranch life. She grew up on a working cattle ranch near Rushville, Nebraska. Her great-great-grandfather came from Switzerland, settling in the area in 1885, and the family still owns most of his original homesteads. She lived remotely with her six siblings who all lived and worked on the ranch. She grew up on horseback, stacking hay and taking care of cattle. And even though she had



*Hope Beyond Dry Grass, charcoal on panel, 36 x 24 in.*



*Shade in the Desert*, charcoal on panel, 48 x 72 in.

always drawn pictures and was pretty good at it, the extent of her artistic aspirations were limited to being a casual artist or hobbyist.

"I always liked drawing horses and that was the only thing I really knew about," Brownlee says. "I had heard of Leonardo da Vinci and Tim Cox, because our local cow sale barn gave out Tim Cox calendars every year. Those were the only real forms of art I saw."

The reality of becoming a professional artist was never on the table for Brownlee, nor was it encouraged. In college she was advised against studying graphic design because computer science was the more practical option. "I didn't know any better. I had no idea what it was. I didn't know how much math was involved. I didn't know anything about computer programming. But I agreed to do it and pursued that degree," she says. "It was very difficult because I was so far behind every other student. Not in science or math or reading or anything like that, just [in] the idea of computer science and

programming."

Despite not knowing what she was getting herself into, she excelled after the initial plunge into that world. She even graduated at the top of her class, winning multiple awards for her work in the field. Today, she views that period the same way she looks at fine art—there is a progression that comes with experience and time. She calls it her pursuit of excellence, which is her ability to climb her way up, either through computer science or using it to come from behind in the art world.

Back in 2021, Brownlee was still working the ranch full time and did not have any aspirations to become an artist until a local librarian expressed how talented she was, and told her she should enter her drawings into art shows. She did and promptly won the top prize at the Mountain Oyster Club that year.

Even with a best of show award in her studio, Brownlee still considered her win a one-off that wasn't going to turn into anything more, or change

her life in any meaningful way. But then, other galleries started to notice her work and it became apparent that if she was going to keep up, she would need to be drawing full time. “In the last four years my work has gotten a lot better, and you could attribute that to working on drawing 40 hours a week,” she says. “When you draw 40 hours a week you will get better at it. But even still, about every six months, I just see these waves of new ideas and new abilities show [up].”

Another aspect that sets Brownlee’s work apart is her process. Because she draws her compositions on hard panels with sandpaper-like texture, she uses brushes like a painter. She even thinks of her works as paintings rather than drawings.

She always keeps a sketchbook close so she can

jot down or draw ideas as they strike, even when she is sleeping. Back in the studio, she will flip through her reference images, building the pieces together to fill out her idea. Sometimes she will think of a title or an emotion she wants to portray, and scouts out the people or animals around her that convey it, building her composition around the idea of that emotion.

Because her references are real people that she sees every day, Brownlee feels an exorbitant amount of responsibility to not disrespect their character with pieces that are not true to who they are. A stellar example of this is *Hope Beyond the Grass*. The drawing depicts a woman in a brimmed hat staring directly at the viewer. She is stoic and composed. There is something in her knowing



*Little Shepherdess*, charcoal on panel, 30 x 15 in.



*White Wranglers and Fast Hands*, charcoal and gouache on panel, 36 x 24 in.





*Fog Settles in the Cypress*, charcoal on panel, 36 x 48 in.

gaze that feels safe and reassuring but also that she won't tolerate trivial guff. She is someone who doesn't need to be told she is a "strong woman." She knows she is.

The model Brownlee chose for this piece is her sister. "And she is exactly what fits that title," she says. "She is an iron lady who has four ranches and five kids and works herself to the bone nearly every day. I've admired her since the day I was born."

She will often use her friends and neighbors as models and they take pleasure in becoming fixtures in her artwork, sometimes making sure to gallop by on their best-looking horse or show up without sunglasses, hopeful to be a source of inspiration.

"Now, nearly the whole neighborhood for a couple hundred miles knows who I am, and they even come up and introduce themselves. People I don't even know because they would like to be included,"

Brownlee says. "And they think they are celebrities now themselves because they get put in magazines, they get put on posters. They love it."

Brownlee admits she rarely features her husband or children in her work because she has prosopagnosia, a cognitive disorder that renders those afflicted unable to recognize faces. Even though she can mathematically figure out how to draw a face, she avoids drawing those who are extremely close to her because it feels too impersonal, which makes her piece *Little Shepherdess* all the more special because the model is her daughter. In Brownlee's opinion, it is the best drawing she has ever done—both compositionally and emotionally.

"My 5-year-old daughter is very, very strong and she is very confrontational in a positive way. She knows how to read, she knows that she wants to be an obstetrician, and I'm quite sure that she will be

one,” the artist says. “Most pictures of children or paintings of children are either very timid or pastoral or soft, but in this piece, she is literally staring you right in the eyeballs and she’s not threatening you in any way, but she has this stick, and she clearly knows what she’s doing.”

Brownlee feels like the drawing is a good summary of who her daughter is especially in contrast to how children are normally portrayed, creating a subtext to the imagery that challenges the viewer to see beyond the image itself.

She does this again with *White Wranglers and Fast Hands*. In this piece, Brownlee experiments with color, depicting a woman from behind in a gray and pink striped shirt. She wears a cowboy hat over a long blond braid that ends mid-back and a pistol tucked into her whitewashed jeans. Her hands are played at her sides, at the ready if need be. Brownlee was surprised by how contentious



*It's About to Get Western*, charcoal on panel, 24 x 18 in.



*Watchman*, sepia charcoal on panel, 24 x 18 in.

this piece has been for some galleries, tensed by the juxtaposition of a woman with a gun she knows how to use. But for Brownlee this piece shows how women work just as hard as the men in this lifestyle and how respected they are, too.

Even though Brownlee considers herself a newer artist, the extraordinary talent she displays in her charcoal paintings are truly parallel to none. She captures nearly a photographic realness that is provoking and evocative, bittersweet and nostalgic, wholesome and contentious. Like the practical rancher she is, every part of her work has a reason for being there with no time for feckless frivolity. Through her self-taught technique and meticulous determination, the possibilities that lie ahead for Brownlee are limitless. She has only begun to scratch the surface of what she can do. 🐾

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