

Artist cherishes only payday

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There is the Calgary Stampede and then there is the Jody Skinner stampede.

The latter takes place every year on opening night of the Stampede's Western Art Show, an exhibit of established and emerging Canadian and American artists. Within hours of the doors opening, Skinner's paintings of horses are completely sold out, or nearly so.

"This has been happening for years. The response to her work has been amazing," says Georgia Desmarais, chair of salon sales at the art show, currently on throughout Stampede at the Roundup Centre.



CREDIT: Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald

Jody Skinner stands alongside one of her oil paintings, *Winter Pasture*, at the Roundup Centre's Western Art Show.

When this year's show opened last Wednesday night, people lined up four hours early for a chance to purchase one of Skinner's two dozen horse paintings. All but six were gone by the end of the evening.

"She knows horses, loves horses. She's a wonderful girl and she deserves the people running in because she's a good artist," Desmarais said.

Skinner's art graces corporate and private collections throughout the city. Everything she produces throughout the year, usually 24 or 25 pieces, is available exclusively at the Stampede art show. Her prices this year range from about \$3,000 to almost \$15,000.

"I've been very fortunate," Skinner says over coffee at her home studio. It is four hours before the opening night reception and Skinner is relaxed. All of her paintings have been set up at the Roundup Centre and there's nothing left to do but hope the response is as enthusiastic as in years past.

"I only get one payday a year, and that's tonight," she says.

One unfinished work sits on an easel in her studio off the kitchen, which looks out onto a private backyard.

On her living room walls hang several finished pieces, some that she will keep and a few that will go into next year's show. Her dog, Boo, eagerly looks for attention as daughter Saphron, 18, apologizes for the family pet. Son Sam, 7, is in another room.

For Skinner, it has been a year of incredible highs and incredible lows. The painter was chosen to design the Stampede poster for 2009, which will be unveiled Wednesday. But Skinner will be unable to share that honour with her husband, Bob, who died last August at the age of 43.

"They thought he had pneumonia, but they never really did determine what it was. So, it was pretty sad and pretty tragic," she says.

Family photos hang on the wall above her easel, a reminder of how fragile life can be and how unexpectedly it can be taken away. A young oil and gas marketing professional with a pretty and successful artist wife and two lovely children -- it all seems so unfair.

"It's been a tough year, there's no doubt about that," Skinner admits. "But between the kids -- they've got their whole life ahead of them, and kids are quite resilient -- and my art, it gets you focused and it gives you a direction when you don't have one. It's a really good healing thing, I think," she says of her art.

Curiously, despite the tragedy, Skinner's art this year is more colourful than in the past.

She can't explain why.

"I knew from Trail 2005 that I could still paint and cry," she says, referring to the 2005 Stampede horse drive where nine horses jumped to their deaths while crossing a bridge.

Skinner was on the horse drive, taking pictures that she would later transfer to canvas complete with detail like the numbers on the horses hind quarters.

"Every time I painted those horses, every time I saw their numbers, it made me think lots about that. So, I knew I would be fine, painting away and crying. You just carry on."

Her husband was a huge part of her business, encouraging the self-taught artist when she entered her first piece in the Stampede art auction in 1993. She was accepted as a regular exhibitor in 1998.

"It was my husband's enthusiasm that made me keep me going," she says.

He also accompanied her on photo shoots and helped her with composition.

Although Skinner has a science degree with a specialization in math, and a further two-year degree in accounting, it was Bob who did the books and paperwork.

"I wrote my CA exam but didn't pass. I was no good at it," she chuckles.

Skinner is honoured to have done the artwork for next year's poster, which is a

closely guarded secret.

"I don't even know what it is," says George Brookman, the Stampede's president and board chairman.

It was Brookman's idea three years ago to commission artists to design the Stampede poster, which previously had been designed by teams of graphic artists.

Skinner's original artwork for the 2009 poster will be auctioned off Thursday night at the Stampede's annual western art auction.

The original art for this year's poster, *A Man of His People*, designed by Doug Levitt, sold at last year's auction for \$63,000. Proceeds from the sale are divided equally among the artist, the Western Art Auction committee and the Calgary Stampede Foundation.

"I don't take many commissions, but I was thrilled to do the poster," Skinner says.

"That was one thing my husband and I always wanted to participate in. This is the only show we do. I like the Stampede and I like to support them in any way I can."

Desmarais says horse people love Skinner's work because of its passion and authenticity.

"She's got a great style. She knows the anatomy and it's all from the heart and it's painted with love."

John Scott, who supplies horses to the movie industry, says Skinner is meticulous in her detail.

"She makes her artwork so real. She is such a precise artist in everything she does. She wants everything to look right and she does make it look right. It's perfect western outdoor life art."

Does he own any?

"Not yet," Scott says. "It usually sells before I get to it."

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