



## Delmas Howe: Horse sweat, whiskey, tobacco – and art

BY MICHAEL WINKLER | FEBRUARY 11, 2019 |

On a bitterly cold New Mexico winter morning Delmas Howe is at his easel, painting cowboys. It is what he was doing yesterday, and what he will be doing tomorrow.

His oeuvre includes exquisite floral portraits and respectable civic murals, but he is famous for oil paintings of figures within the south-west American landscape. Almost always male, often nude.

The singularity of his vision combined with the duration over which he has pursued his chosen themes is remarkable. “When I started painting, Abstract Expressionism ruled everything and narrative figurative painting was definitely out,” Howe says. “I’ve watched the ‘isms’ come and go, but to this day narrative figurative painting is not a popular form.”

No matter. He has been capturing and celebrating the male form since the 1960s, typically with a raw palette that conjures the New Mexican light. Critical suggestions that he should ‘cook’ his colours, made in New York half a century ago, still rankle. He knows what he sees, and that is what he paints.

The 83 year old's studio/residence in Truth or Consequences was a post office, then a pool hall and gambling den. Now every wall is covered in art, most of it his own. There are brawny torsos, striated thighs and formidable penises in every line of sight.



“I am inspired by my models. That’s where a lot of it starts. That one there (he gestures towards a naked man beside Mapplethorpien flowers) is my pizza delivery guy. When he dropped off my pizza I asked if he’d like to pose. The figure in that next painting is a local guy in his forties who lives in a trailer and keeps himself in great shape. The heavily tattooed man I painted from behind originally, but he said he wanted something from the front. He had sculpted his pubic hair into a triangle. I get a lot of motorbikers who sit for me. I have people who contact me asking to pose.”

“I have met a lot of people smarter than I am and a lot of people with more talent but I have stuck with my passion and with hard work I’ve done alright for myself,” Howe says.

Critic Edward Lucie-Smith called Howe, ‘probably America’s best-known ‘gay artist’ – in the sense that he is the best-known artist who puts homosexual feeling at the very center of his work... In terms of his social significance, his career rivals that of America’s major feminist artist, Judy Chicago.’

As it happens, Chicago has lived in a nearby New Mexican town for a quarter of a century, a prophet not always honoured in her own locale. The recent

suggestion that her hamlet of Belen should open a Judy Chicago Museum had local naysayers crawling out of their hiding places.

Howe experiences similar reactions. While his polite murals for local sites are revered, there are elements in the community who cannot abide his unapologetic nudes. He is working towards a major exhibition at Rio Bravo Fine Art, but has had to agree to an Adults Only stipulation. More than a century-and-a-half after Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* the depiction of a flaccid phallus is still too much for some.



“I can show my male imagery in New York or San Francisco, they are okay with it in Europe, my paintings are in museums and major collections all around the world, but it can't be shown in this town without a disclaimer. I'm not a primitive.”

Howe is compact, twinkling, warm but self-contained, wry but never cynical. He fills his studio space with opera while he paints. Music was his first artistic outlet. Early prowess meant that when he was drafted in 1957 he was streamed into the Air Force Academy Band. Later studied bassoon under William Polisi at Carnegie Hall, and went to Yale on a music scholarship. While there he determined that academic music training was, “not about expression or originality, but teaching teachers to teach teachers.”

Drawing classes at the famed Art Students League led to a change of creative path. As a teenager discovering the piano he would practice for up to six hours a day. This dedication to craft has informed his visual arts career. Even now he hones his hand and eye with mood drawings, tonal exercises and gestural expressions in colour that clarify ideas and refine his skills. “I have met a lot of people smarter than I am and a

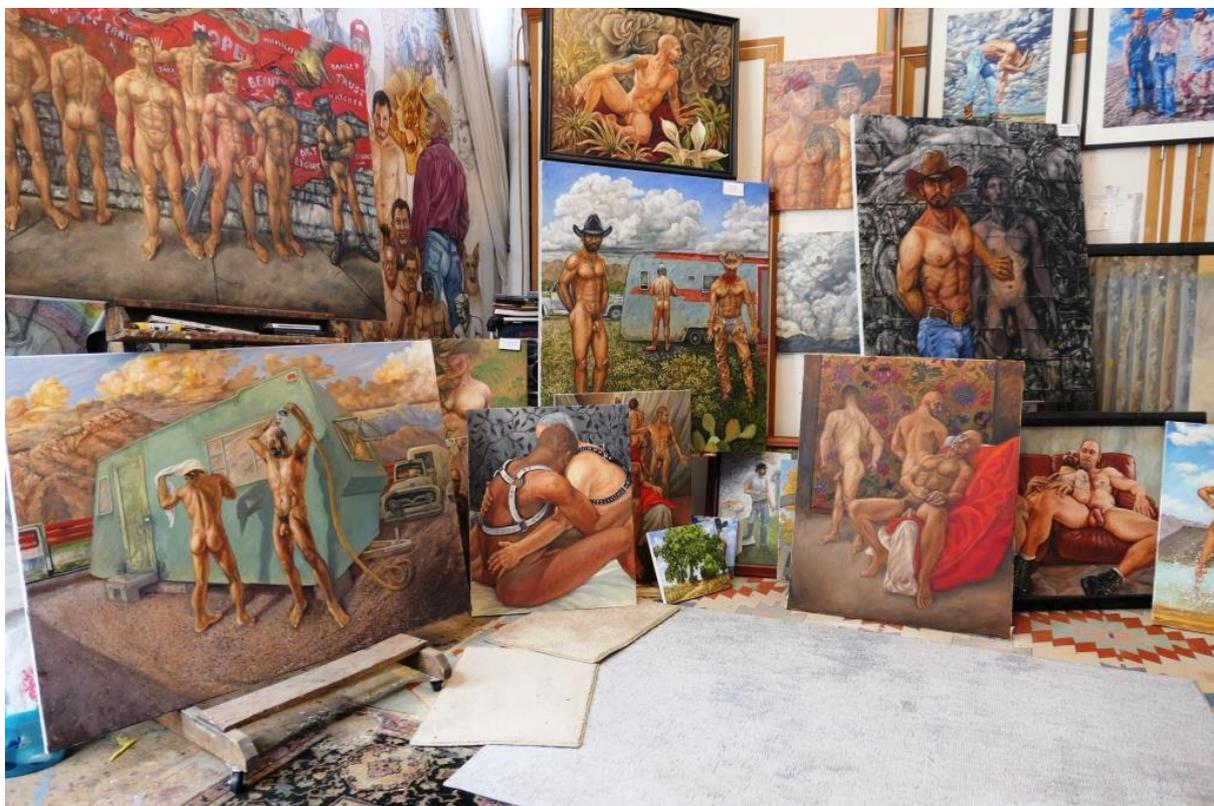
lot of people with more talent but I have stuck with my passion and with hard work I've done alright for myself," he says.

Howe's town is surrounded by mining country, and he knows how to work a rich seam of material until the possibilities are exhausted. For six straight years up to the end of 2013 he painted big men contorting and disporting in front of red rocks for his series *Guys and Canyons*.

He is still transfixed by cowboys, conceptualising them disrobed and vibrantly (homo)sexual decades before E. Annie Proulx created *Brokeback Mountain*.

For the six years prior to that he explored the possibilities of transposing the Stations of the Cross to a beat setting beneath the piers beside New York's Hudson River. *Stations: A Gay Passion* was a powerful excoriation of organised religion and its persecution of homosexuals. "I harness my creativity by selecting themes like the Stations, like the beefy guys, and I work with that for as many years as it takes until I'm finished with it," he says.

When Howe was a child – and, indeed, when he commenced his painting life – the only overt depictions of male homosexuality were in pornography, not visual art. As a boy, although unaware that he was gay, he felt a strong attraction to the male form. "The only naked male imagery I could find was photos of Greek and Roman statues in the encyclopaedia. That is how I learned so much about ancient mythology, which years later I combined with South-West iconography to make the *Rodeo Pantheon* paintings.



“When I started art, you could still be put in jail for putting your arm around another man in a public place. It was very hard. On the night of Stonewall, I was living on 8<sup>th</sup> Street (in New York) down the road from a women’s prison. When I heard the demonstrations I assumed it was a protest about Angela Davis who was incarcerated there, then I went on the street and was surprised to see drags in high heels turning over police cars. That was quite a night. It was empowering. It was the beginning of the gay liberation, saying ‘we’re not going to put up with this harassment any more’. But now – the bigotry is still very much with us, even though the laws have changed.”

He is still transfixed by cowboys, conceptualising them disrobed and vibrantly (homo)sexual decades before E. Annie Proulx created *Brokeback Mountain*. “When I was growing up in this town there were a lot more working cowboys. Oh dear me. This town was quite wild, a lot of saloons, gambling, brothels, and the cowboys would come into town on weekends and some of them would stay with us because they knew my dad, who was a hunter. As a little boy I would sit on their laps and I remember how they smelled. They smelled of horse sweat and whiskey and tobacco. So. Yes. Okay.”

It is 40 years since his breakthrough solo show at Leslie-Lohman Gallery in SoHo in New York captured the imagination of one section of the art public, yet he is still working with a great sense of urgency, painting every day. Howe says that the obsessions and iconography stay the same as he ages, it is just that the canvases are smaller and the brushes are bigger. And who knows what handsome man might knock on the door tomorrow and deliver a pizza?

“I’ve had a long life,” he says. “It’s been very interesting. I’ve gone in and out, here and there. I think what I do is unique to me. And now – well, I’ve created my own ‘ism’, I guess.”