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Minor Adjustments

A scene in a painting is not always what it seems. Artist Mikel Donahue leaves the door open to interpretation in the painting on this month's cover.

By JENNIFER DENISON

A PAINTING DOES NOT HAVE TO BE LARGE to make an impression. Dramatic lighting, fine detail, warm colors and balanced composition can help a small painting stand out. Such is the case of *Minor Adjustments*, painted by Oklahoma artist Mikel Donahue.

Created in 2014 for the Small Works, Great Wonders exhibit and sale held at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, the 11-by-14-inch painting may be on the smaller end of the spectrum for some artists, but it is a common size for Donahue. He also did a black-and-white pencil version of the piece for the Collectors' Reserve show at the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Donahue visits the historic LX Ranch north of Amarillo, Texas, several times a year to ride along during seasonal works and take photographs that spark ideas for paintings. The subject matter for this painting was inspired on a late July afternoon as the crew was getting ready to ride back to the trailer after a day's work. Cowboy Marty Crim was cinching up his young gelding, Nasty Gnat. The warm afternoon sunlight illuminated the scene and contributed to what appears to be a quiet, peaceful moment between the horse and horseman in the painting, and that is the mood Donahue wanted to evoke. However, he laughs as he explains an earlier incident and how the horse earned his name.

"He's not a mean horse and won't pitch with a rider, but he has a cantankerous attitude and that's why Marty calls him Nasty Gnat," Donahue says. "I saw that when we were riding. We were in rough country and started to go down a steep area, and the horse



Minor Adjustments, 11-by-14-inch mixed media

pinned his ears back, sullied up and wasn't going to go down."

Known for his detailed, highly realistic colored pencil work, Donahue has recently started doing more acrylic paintings and using colored pencil washes for highlights and to bring out detail and texture.

"Acrylic allows me to do things I couldn't with pencil, and it has a different look and feel," he says. "But I still maintain the continuity with the color and light."

Using long-bristled brushes, Donahue painted a neutral backdrop and a loose, grassy foreground that focuses viewers' attention on the subjects of the painting. With finer brushes he created detail that further draws viewers into the scene.

"With bigger brushes I can be looser and more suggestive, and it softens the painting," he explains. "This is loose for me, but it still has enough detail."

Donahue and his wife, Christie, live in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma.