



BONNIE CONRAD

A Double Dose of Magic

By Sara Gilbert Frederick



Waitin' on the Kids, oil, 9" by 12"

"This gal has seen a few moons. She patiently awaits the arrival of her humans, who may give her an apple or two from a nearby tree of which she has stripped the branches within reach. Since white reflects color, I can note colors of the surrounding environment in her coat to liven things up a bit."

For four and a half years, Bonnie Conrad had to take a break from painting. She was recovering from an illness that sapped her of her strength and then, as she felt better, she and her husband were building a new home in Mendon, Utah. She painted whenever she could and whenever she was preparing for a show.

By January 2020, Conrad was

feeling more like herself again, so she started painting more often. And that's when something magical happened.

Conrad found herself plucking paintings from her pile of canvases, pieces that she hadn't considered good enough to send to galleries or to take to shows. Each time she placed one of them on her easel, she suddenly knew exactly what she needed to do to fix it.

"I would put it on the easel, look at it for three or four seconds, and then it was like a light would go on," she says. "Within 15 or 20 minutes, I would have finished a painting that I absolutely loved. And that just kept happening, over and over."

Conrad has been an artist long enough to know that it often helps

to step away from a painting and come back to it later with a fresh eye. "When you're in the middle of a painting, it's like you can't see the forest for the trees," she says. "If you put it away for a while and then come back to it, you can see what needs to be done."

She recognizes that's part of what's at play with her recent spate of success with those old canvases. "But it's more than that," she says. "I can't really say what it is, but I feel like it's a gift."

It's a gift that has also had an effect on her new works. Conrad is more confident with her decisions and more bold with her brushes. "I'm able to complete my paintings faster—everything is coming together quicker," she says. "On some

(Left) Purple on a Paint, oil, 16" by 12"

"I hope I captured the look of content on my model's face. She seemed to be perfectly at one with the sunlit morning astride her friend the paint in her regal purple dress. It said, 'All is right with the world this morning.'"



Son Kissed, oil, 24" by 30"

"This work is about the light that is in, around, and through all things and that makes possible all of creation. Visibly here, it has the back of this mother and daughter, though they remain oblivious in their sunlit garden walk."

paintings, it feels like I can't do anything wrong. I feel inspired. I feel like I have a new, heightened awareness. I'm in territory I haven't been in before, and it is just so satisfying. I'm having so much fun with it."

When she was young, Conrad thought that art was the work of otherworldly geniuses—not something that an average human like herself could create. Her family wasn't artistically inclined, and she was rarely exposed to fine art. She had no sense that it was something she could do.

During her senior year in high school, however, Conrad ran into a friend who was walking out of the art classroom carrying a stack of

drawings. "I gasped," Conrad remembers. "There was a very nice drawing on top, and here she was, just a normal person with two arms and two legs, just like me. A light went on; I thought maybe I could do something that accomplished, too."

Although she quickly went home and started to copy the pictures she found in the encyclopedia, Conrad didn't officially take an art class until much later. By then, she had three children—and would eventually have three more. But after that first class, she was hooked.

"I wanted to paint so badly," she says. "I started buying books and going to galleries and museums whenever I could. I would reflect on my

favorite paintings and try to determine what process the artist used to arrive at a masterpiece. I yearned to be able to paint."

Finally, when Conrad's youngest child started school, she decided it was time. "I made a declaration," she says. "I said, 'I'm going to be a professional artist.' Of course, I had no idea what that entailed, but I made the decision."

She called her friend Jim Wilcox, a landscape painter who had been a bellhop at the Jackson Lake Lodge in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where Conrad had once been a waitress, and asked for advice. His suggestions: Paint small, so you can solve any problems faster, and keep paint-



The Loose Bunch, oil, 20" by 30"

"Fascinating were the patterns of light formed by the whites of the blazes and markings on the horses as they splashed through the water. They combine with the other lights to form an interesting juxtaposition of light and dark laced with some smashing color notes. All is movement here except the land in the background."

ing. "After 200 paintings," he told her, "you'll start to feel at home."

So Conrad started painting in an 8' by 8' "cubby" off the family garage at her home in Cody, Wyoming. She'd paint while the kids were at school, then return to mom duties as soon as they got home. She entered a few contests, won a few awards, and sold a few pieces to friends and neighbors.

And then she saw that the Cody County Art League National Invitational was requesting submissions from both amateur and professional artists. As she prepared her submission, she hesitated over which box to check for herself. For the first time, she marked professional—and she won the Best of Show award. "That gave me the confidence to go

on, to keep after it," she says.

From the early days of her career, color was Conrad's calling card. She remembers an instructor in a landscape painting class commenting on the colors she was using. "He would say, 'Bonnie, that color isn't really there.' It really bothered him," she says. "But I would just say, 'Well, I know that, but isn't it much more fun and interesting with that color there?'"

Color still drives Conrad's work—and she's still inserting colors that aren't really there. But lately, she's become more fascinated with texture and how she can make the most of it in her oil paintings. She's been experimenting with how she can juxtapose a palette knife with her already loose brush strokes.

"The direction and thickness of brush strokes, as well as the viscosity of the paint, are elements that can add much interest and character to a painting," Conrad says. "With a higher viscosity paint, we can preserve the individual bristle strokes of a brush—and with a palette knife we can get many varied textures and often 'happy accidents,' too."

Conrad notes that she's often felt like she might be going against the grain as an artist, particularly as a Western artist. Between her experimentations with color and texture and her preference for a looser, more painterly style, she sometimes feels like she doesn't quite fit in. "Many of the people who buy Western art like photographic realism," she says. "So as a painterly painter,



Pair and a Spare, oil, 17" by 23"

"This painting is more subdued in color than I usually paint, but I love the more quiet color as it portrays a winter scene and the way the snow on the mountain leads to the cowboy whose gaze leads to the cattle. A dash of violet above the cowboy adds a little zest, and it all speaks of a peaceful day on the range."

I feel like I'm swimming upstream in the Western art world."

Despite that concern, Conrad can't imagine working any other way. "I love the looseness," she says. "I love letting the supporting part of the painting be looser and more nebulous, because it creates a foil between it and the details at the center of interest. I love the possibilities of painting looser; it really leaves some facets of the piece up to the imagination of the viewer."

Much of Conrad's early work was inspired by the ranches that she and her husband Roger, a ranch manager, lived on. They moved to a

new ranch every four years or so and lived in six different Western states: Washington, Oregon, Nevada, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming. "Cowboys and cowgirls, horses, cows, and dogs were the life we were involved in," she says. "So I had plenty of fodder for the canvas."

Now they are rooted in Utah. They have a home in St. George, in southern Utah, and a summer place up north in Mendon. They no longer raise horses, and there aren't any cows on their property. "Now we have a yard," Conrad says with a laugh. "So we can't have cows anymore."

That doesn't mean she won't paint them, however. But Conrad does predict a bit of a change in her subject matter. "I'll never stop painting horses," she says. "But I may move away from the hardcore cowboy paintings. I may do more cowgirls, more rural Western scenes. My paintings preserve our disappearing rural roots. I mourn the treasures of nature, the beautiful land and the simpler life lost to the hectic life of skyscrapers and cement."

From her idyllic new home nestled at the foot of the mountains, Conrad is savoring every minute of



Treasure, oil, 11" by 14"

"This little Lakota girl is cute as a bug's ear. She seeks a treasure in her leather pouch, but I find treasure in discovering her presence here on a red blanket amidst the green prairie grass. Notice that I acknowledge the presence of blue summer sky, though it isn't a physical part of the painting, by blue notes of color bouncing off her dress shoulder, cheekbone, hair, and forehead."

being in nature—and of being an artist. She's more excited than ever to get to work each day.

"I've always been excited about painting and being an artist," she says. "But at this time it's even more so. I am constantly amazed at what's happening. I keep saying, 'Wow—my life is magical right now!'" 

Sara Gilbert Frederick lives in Mankato, Minnesota.

