

KNOW YOUR ART

**PAINTER:
JILL SOUKUP**

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Rows of toy horses line the shelves in artist Jill Soukup's bright home studio in Lakewood, like thoroughbreds in the starting gate at the Kentucky Derby. Many of them have been with her since childhood, when her obsession with all things equine first took shape. With the Western afternoon light pouring into the downstairs studio, a tidy vegetable garden sprouting just outside the back door and Red Rocks' twin escarpments jutting up on the horizon, Soukup offers a tour of the space where she works most mornings and into the afternoon: a sketchbook filled with her pencil drawings lying on a table; large colorful doodles by her 10-year-old son pinned to the wall; tiny painted studies resting against a wall surrounded by finished and half-finished oil works of bison, horses and city scenes; art frames stacked up and waiting to be filled; and a paint-smudged TV screen where Soukup can study large versions of photos she has taken as reference.

Soukup, who earned a BFA from Colorado State before embarking on a career as a graphic artist (including work for the Denver Museum of Nature and Science), always knew she wanted to be a fine artist; as a teen, she even had a business doing pet portraits. After selling several pieces from an Art Students League class with Quang Ho at a local gallery, she left the museum, ▶



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▶ giving herself three years to make it as a full-time painter, including time spent working on her craft at Chico Basin Ranch. Today, Soukup shows her work in three galleries (Denver's Sakks Galleries, the Eisenhower Gallery on Martha's Vineyard and Astoria Fine Art in Jackson, Wyoming), as well as at the Coors Western Art Exhibit & Sale.
jillsoukup.com

Were you always artistic? Yes, I drew a lot as a child, and from the time I was probably 6, I knew I wanted to be an artist when I grew up. I was just really obsessed with horses. I never had one of my own, but I wanted to draw and paint them.

The horses in your paintings have so much personality. For me, they are God's idea of balance and perfection. If you look at a cow and then look at a horse, there is such a difference. Cows are dumpy, whereas the way a horse's legs bend and move—the proportions—is just aesthetic perfection. At the ranch, watching the wranglers with the animals, it's hard to put into words, but that feeling is a part of my paintings.

What is your process? I shoot a lot of images. So, for example, one day when I was shooting the cowboys branding cows, I probably shot 3,000-7,000 images. Then I'll go through them and pull out the ones I gravitate to and set them aside. I'll forget about them and come back later and see which ones I'm still drawn to. It's a laborious process, and very intuitive. If I return to the same images over and over, then I know there's something there. And sometimes I will do some Photoshop manipulation to create the image I want. Then I start working out the overall value structure of the painting, sometimes by sketching and sometimes by doing little painted studies.

You also do cityscapes. What's the difference between painting a building and painting a horse? Technically, they are the same thing. It all comes down to abstract shapes and values. But when I took up painting city pieces again recently, I couldn't figure out why it was such a huge struggle. Now I think it's because I'd built up a big emotional connection with the Chico ranch and the people there.

There's a wonderful abstract quality to your paintings. Right. One of the pitfalls if you work from photo references is to want to put everything in there that you see in the photo. So I try to simplify it and be really tuned in to where I want to put in detail and where I don't need it. My goal is to always have a good structure to my paintings, so if you are across the room you are drawn to them but when you get up close, the shapes are still interesting and you see things you never saw before. **DLM**