

M.C. POULSEN

BY CAROLE LEGG CLOUDWALKER

BACK IN 1983 WHEN *SOUTHWEST ART* FIRST PROFILED M.C. "Mike" Poulsen [OH 1952–LIVING WY], the story led with a bang ... literally. Author Gene Ball began Poulsen's tale with the accidental death of his father, Chuck Poulsen, while deer hunting in the Absaroka Range of the Rocky Mountains. That day in 1977 was the beginning of the younger Poulsen's commitment to his art and to focusing on people "who are tested, tough, weathered."

Today, some fifteen years after Poulsen's first test of commitment, he can count himself among the tough and tested.

The toughness of a westerner like Poulsen is perhaps drawn from the land itself. It is impossible to endure the extremes of weather and the unrelenting countryside of Wyoming for very long without acquiring a ruggedness so deep that it is no longer an acquisition but an attribute. Luckily Poulsen had spent nearly a decade dealing with snowbound mountain passes and frozen creek beds when he confronted a summit that made his blood run cold. Leukemia wages a battle that few people survive. But with his sister as a donor, Mike Poulsen has fought the good fight, pulling through a 1986 bone marrow transplant in Seattle, WA. The success renewed his lease on life and cemented his desire to record contemporary western faces and lifestyles that perpetuate frontier grit and determination.

Overleaf: CANTA TINZA—
BRAVE HEART, oil,
20 x 16. Photos by Ron Maier
and courtesy the artist
and Pierce Fine Art.

Editor's Note: A one-man show of paintings by Mike Poulsen is on view in the Rotunda Gallery of the Cannon House Office Building, Washington, DC, July 14–26.

It is not very surprising then that Poulsen's homestead is "up a hill"—a western euphemism used in describing the not-ready-for-four-wheel-drive gravel track that repeatedly winds off the edge, appearing to terminate somewhere in the sky. The visitor to his studio can't help but wonder if it is folly to ask an aging auto to make the journey along a road with no signs, through a Charolais cattle maternity ward and past miles of van Gogh-yellow hay bales weathered brown on the edges. Once you reach the top, however, the view makes your weak knees even weaker.

While Poulsen checked on a favorite mare who was feeling under the weather, his wife Shauna and I sipped herbal tea and took in the couple's view of the snowcapped Carter Mountains to the south and an up-close peek at Castle Rock, a local landmark that rises above the floor of the South Fork of the Shoshone River like a ship in full sail against a sea of cirrus clouds. Here, on 111 acres at 7,000 feet elevation, Mike Poulsen paints to audio tapes of classical music or rushing creeks and chirping birds.

When I met with him in the spring of 1992, Poulsen had his studio filled with works in progress destined for several upcoming events. At the invitation of the Wyoming Congressional delegation, Poulsen is the subject of a one-man exhibition in the Rotunda Gallery of the Cannon House Office Building in Washington, DC, in July 1992. And in 1994 a similar one-man show will be hosted by the Frye Museum, Seattle, WA.

Poulsen also eagerly related the details of his May 1992 trip to Russia to negotiate an exchange exhibition of his work with the Russian Arts Council. "The Russians are very enthusiastic about the American West," says Poulsen, adding that he relishes the "chance to help break down some of the Cold War tentativeness that still lingers between the two cultures."

Six years ago, Poulsen wouldn't have been able to assure his participation. Candid about his illness and the ravages it's taken on life and limb, he refuses to be maudlin about it or to seek sympathy. Instead, a near-death experience has only driven him to paint with a greater recognition of the fleetness of all things and a determination to record a lifestyle that he sees being strangled by government regulation. Ironically, however, there is a possibility that the oil paints Poulsen uses are responsible for his leukemia. So today when he steps to the easel he wears surgical gloves and dons a full face mask for applying varnish. Such protective covering, however, cannot restrict the love and respect that Poulsen mixes in the pigments he glazes on canvas.

It was the smell of oil pigments that first attracted him to painting. Raised in Ohio, Poulsen studied art at the Akron Art Institute from age 7, not because of his talent but because his mother managed the coffee shop across the street. Drawing marble busts was, she figured, a creative way to occupy her son's time.

At the institute, Poulsen watched older art students trying their luck at copying the old masters. The smell of the paints lingered in his memory even after the family's move to Wyoming in 1962, where Chuck Poulsen realized a dream when he purchased the 15,500 acres that would become Hidden Valley guest ranch. Throughout high school Mike helped with outfitting and guiding hunters into the wilderness. When it came time to graduate, he followed family tradition and joined the Marine Corps.

Family tradition didn't mean that military life was imprinted on the DNA matrix of Mike Poulsen. He bristled against artificial hierarchies and undemocratic bureaucracies. There was one benefit, however. Stationed near Washington, DC, Poulsen spent his spare time in the museums. "I exhausted every companion



I had because I insisted on seeing as much as I could."

Since his years of hunting in Wyoming had turned him into something of a marksman, Poulsen was placed on the Marine's rifle team and transferred to Hawaii. Before making the move, however, he made the mistake of turning a fifteen-day leave into a 30-day vacation to help his father prepare for the fall hunting season. Although the military didn't see it this way, in retrospect Poulsen believes that his almost-total confinement to base may have been divine intervention.

Not a conspicuous churchgoer before being posted to Hawaii, Poulsen sought



absolution amidst the stained glass serenity of religion. The minister of the church Poulsen visited recognized his troubled soul and invited him to dinner. That evening, when Poulsen entered the parsonage, a heady smell from the past accosted him. The minister was an oil painter and through him Poulsen met the man who would become his mentor.

Larry Roberson of Honolulu was a professional oil painter and teacher. For eighteen months Poulsen studied with him and served as an apprentice, cleaning brushes and stretching canvas. Impressed with Roberson's strong sense of design, Poulsen recalls that he could paint just about anything, from abstraction to real-

ism. "Whatever his technique, Roberson orchestrated his works, finding suitable rhythms to apply to the theme, selecting details that fit and eliminating those that didn't. Everything was pointedly done in heavy, loaded strokes that said what he had to say."

Poulsen watched Roberson instruct classes where some students painted the models or still-life arrangements in the manner of Rembrandt or Renoir while Roberson attacked the subject with the *a la prima bravura*. Roberson's own preference for island subjects such as nudes or fruit arrangements was never imposed on his students, however. "He taught me to be myself," says Poulsen. Luckily he had

Above: *BENEATH THE CITADEL*, oil, 36 x 60.



Left: WINGED WARRIOR, oil, 20 x 18. **Right:** ARTIST IN HUNTING GEAR (SELF-PORTRAIT), oil, 22 x 18.

Drawing upon traditional oil glazing techniques, he begins a canvas with a rough outline of his subject that is sprayed with two or three coats of a fixative. Over the drawing he applies a wash of mars brown with dabs of black or white. He wipes off the wash using a rag so that the pigment fills the pits, leaving thick and thin areas that he takes advantage of when he begins refining the image. Using very little linseed oil, Poulsen applies translucent layers of pigment, counterbalancing warms over cools.

In works such as *BRAVE HEART*, one is automatically drawn to the sitter's eyes ... the place where Poulsen begins his painting process. From the eyes he goes to the

face, working in various other sections of the canvas while he waits for the paints to dry. "Oil paints allow you to soften edges and to bring the painting together as a whole," he says. As in *BRAVE HEART*, Poulsen usually shows his figures emerging from a background of Rembrandt brown, or his own rich concoction of Sap green and cobalt blue.

Framed in gilt, like his self-portrait in a black painters smock that hangs in the studio, Poulsen's portraits are steeped in what seems like centuries of tradition. Their "old world" feel is quite different from the "new world" freshness of the genre scenes recording untrammelled landscapes and vistas in the mountains of Wyoming.

BENEATH THE CITADEL is a good example. Commissioned by Ken Siggins as a tribute to his father, the painting shows the elder Siggins surveying the face of the Citadel Range, some 35 miles "uphill" from where Poulsen lives. Mike and Ken

hiked to this awesome promontory on the Double-L Bar Ranch just as a storm passed through the valley. "It is a spectacular, seldom-seen spot," recalls Poulsen of the gorges etched in snow year-round. Earlier, he had photographed Siggins' favorite paint horse and pack animals.

With his photos in hand, Poulsen returned to the studio and painted an archetypal rancher taking in the grandeur of his land and the beauty of nature. The knowledge with which the pack horse is "outfitted" and its apprehensive alertness to the drops of rain pelting the ground contrast with the rider who sits erect and confident atop an animal of equal stature.

One can't help but see this work as a metaphor for the survival of the artist, who learned from his own father the regimen and tenacity necessary for confronting the wilds. Poulsen paid his own form of tribute to his father's mountain wisdom when he had a limited-edition leather-bound tome called *Along the Border Trail* published in 1989. The book reproduces a diary that Chuck Poulsen kept about the area. Advice and diagrams on how to tie knots, pitch a tent and stalk and cook game are included along with stories and observations about the wild. Also included in each book is an original oil painting by Mike on the opening endpaper. Serving as a form of "closure" for Poulsen, the book has also opened doors, for it was through the book that Poulsen met up with a rare-book collector who is helping to make the show in Russia possible.

Whether he is painting a camp scene along Butte Creek after a heavy snowfall or a portrait such as *WINGED WARRIOR*, Mike Poulsen tries to convey a mood in his work that is "intimidating but not too scary; enjoyable and yet intelligent." Reconciling these opposites and turning the solution into a paradigm of survival is at the heart of Mike Poulsen's art. "I guess you always gravitate toward what life has in store for you," says Poulsen, whose life and art continue to defy gravity. **SWA**

brought his portfolio with him, so he could draw upon it and memories as the basis for painting episodes from his life in the West.

After his discharge, Poulsen studied briefly at Arizona State University, Tempe, before returning to Wyoming and ultimately moving into his current home/studio in 1982. Drawing upon his family, which includes twin daughter and son, friends and personal experiences, Poulsen's art has focused upon contemporary portraits and genre scenes of Wyoming ranch life. His technique, which started out highly detailed and hard-edged has evolved into a more painterly application of oils on textured canvas.

Still dedicated to realism, however, Poulsen's research and preparation include posing and photographing models, whether it's his own horses or Indians visiting the annual Cody powwow.