

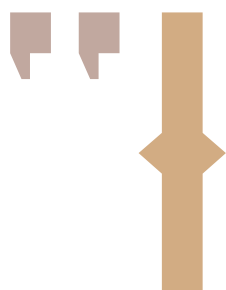


JENNA JOHNSON, 2006, ACRYLIC

TOUGH BY NATURE

EUGENE ARTIST **LYNDA LANKER** PORTRAYS
THE WOMEN OF THE WEST

by Camilla Mortensen



try not to paint eyelashes, unless they are really important,” says artist Lynda Lanker, whose portraits of women of the West are as intimate and forthright as the flesh-and-blood women they depict. Though some of Lanker’s work is so detailed that for a moment the portraits appear to be photographs, even her more abstract pieces capture a sense, a feeling, of these generations of ranch women and cowgirls.

“Tough by Nature” represents almost 20 years’ worth of painting, sketching and interviewing 49 women in 13 western states. It captures not just a moment in time, but also a spirit. The exhibit, which is accompanied by a book featuring the portraits and interviews with the women, presents Lanker’s work in pencil and charcoal, oil pastel, egg tempera, plate and stone lithography, engraving and drypoint. “Tough by Nature” opens at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art (JSMA) at the University of Oregon on July 1.

“Tough by Nature: Portraits of Cowgirls and Ranch Women”

goes on display at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art from July 1 to September 9, 2012

FREE OPENING RECEPTION, 6 PM SATURDAY, JUNE 30.

Lanker explains what she means when she says her work seeks to evoke the feeling of these women and their lives: “They can have their head turned just so you can see the tip of their nose and the edge of their face, but you can evoke that person.”

She asks, “Have you ever had a dream where on the outside someone looks like your neighbor, but you think ‘Oh no, that’s my sister?’” You sense who that person is.

Lanker has a long history of creating portraits and evoking a sense of the people in them. In the course of her career she has painted five commissioned portraits of UO presidents — all male, all dressed formally.

In contrast, the women of “Tough by Nature” are for the most part in their everyday ranch wear. “Most of us aren’t at our most authentic, dressed up for the camera,” she says. “That’s a mask.” Though, Lanker muses, perhaps those UO presidents, who spent so much of their time in suit and tie, felt most themselves when dressed that way.

Unlike many of her portraits, the artwork of “Tough by Nature” wasn’t commissioned, which gave Lanker more freedom. And as for the women: “They didn’t have a façade, which made them so delightful to work with,” Lanker says. “They were just who they were, right from the beginning.”

In his introduction to the exhibit’s book, also titled *Tough by Nature*, James McMurtry, author of novels of the American West such as *Lonesome Dove*, writes: “... you can tell a ranch woman by the wrinkles — shallow at first but deepening into arroyos, gullies, little canyons as the wind and sun work on them. And it’s not just their cheeks that are tanned: the depths of the wrinkles are tanned too.”

Lanker uses the tiniest of paintbrushes, a 00000 (five aught), for her detailed, intimate egg tempera works such as the rug that hangs behind Elladean Hayes Bittner of the “Quien Sabe” Outfit ranch. And Bittner, who died in 2008 in her late 80s, bears those classic wrinkles proudly as she stands holding a lasso and wearing a belt buckle that reads “BOSS.”

That painting took Lanker two years to complete. “I’m kind of an obsessive painter, you might say,” she laughs.