



EQUINE DOG DAYS, ETCHING/AQUATINT, 8 X 10.

Leading the Life

Plying the trade of the **working cowboy** has given Wyoming's **Joel Ostlind** plenty of **inspiration** for his etchings and paintings
By **Todd Wilkinson**



UNDER THE ARBOR, OIL, 9 X 12.

ON A FRIGID WINTER AFTERNOON in Bozeman, MT, Joel Ostlind ducks into a Main Street coffee bar, carrying a cover-worn sketch pad and stack of freshly minted etchings under his arm. Although the tall, ponytailed cowboy has traveled hours from his home in remote Big Horn, WY, it doesn't take long before Ostlind is recognized by one of his faithful collectors, who proclaims on the spot that he owns three of the artist's intaglio prints.

Disarmingly modest, Ostlind obliges a shy smile. His scenes of western subject matter—cattle ranching, Native American encampments, pastoral landscapes, and back-country skiing—have attracted admirers around the world, but Ostlind is unaffected by the attention. He appears genuinely flattered that anyone would notice him.

In recent years, praise for Ostlind's work has grown by word of mouth. A major catalyst was a 2004 retrospective, *Copper & Canvas: The Prints and Paintings of Joel Ostlind*, held at the Bradford Brinton

Museum in Big Horn, which featured 59 oil paintings and 125 prints taking the form of etchings, aquatints, sugar lifts, and drypoints. It was the largest show of Ostlind's career, luring collectors from both coasts. It was also the largest one-man show staged at the museum since 1966, when it sponsored a tribute to Ostlind's kindred predecessor, the famed Wyoming artist Hans Kleiber [1887-1967].

Although much of Ostlind's recent acclaim has accrued to his maturing command of oil painting, he says that he still considers himself foremost an etcher. Some art curators compare Ostlind's devotion to printmaking with the legendary passion of Rembrandt van Rijn—yes, Rembrandt, who regarded the draftsmanship in etching a necessary companion to canvas work. Indeed, Rembrandt proudly pointed to his pencil drawing as the cornerstone of every masterpiece in color he conceived.

"Though it's a vanishing form, Joel Ostlind doesn't perceive etching as the stepchild to anything," says Kenneth Schuster, director and chief curator at the Bradford Brinton Museum. Historically, Schuster

suggests, great etchers were often directly involved in quality control of their work. Schuster says, "Joel is not detached. He pulls each and every image he sells, which is unlike so many artists who pull a proof and then send the rest of the edition off to a master printer. Each piece comes literally from his hands."

OSTLIND WAS BORN IN CASPER, WY, in 1954 and grew up the son of a dentist. Casper is the petroleum-industry capital of the Cowboy State and serves as a locus for real wranglers in the area. The open spaces that define the dry, dusty panorama shaped Ostlind's aesthetic eye. "I am a child of Natrona County, which personifies central Wyoming," he declares. "Give me a good long piece of scenery reaching out to distant blue hills, put it under a bell jar of blue sky, and I'm happy."

Ostlind and his wife, Wendy, a registered nurse and professor, met at Casper College and stayed together as Ostlind secured degrees in soil science at the University of Wyoming and ranch management at Texas Christian University. The couple married in 1978 while Ostlind was managing dogies professionally at cow camps in the Texas Panhandle.

They moved back north two years later when Ostlind took a job on the sprawling Padlock Ranch in Montana, and along the way had two children, now grown, son Jake and daughter Emilene. Ostlind's career on horseback next led the family to a smaller ranch, where he began making

LEFT: AND THAT'S NO LIE, ETCHING, 1½ X 2.
RIGHT: THE COMPLACENT CAVVY, ETCHING, 1½ X 5.



"In my art and in my life I hope that **spirituality** and **reality** are **synergistic partners**."

sketches and plein-air paintings during his downtime. "We were living on a gorgeous old ranch in Montana, and Marlboro [the tobacco brand] would come there to photograph ads," he recalls. "I showed some drawings and watercolors to the art director, and he thought that they



PADLOCK REDS, OIL, 8 X 10.

had promise. It was a seminal moment."

The rest of Ostlind's art vita, though not peppered with the names of venerable art institutions, is built upon his own study of masters who came before. Ongoing influences are Adolph von Menzel, Isaak Levitan, Nicolae Grigorescu, Sargent, Sorolla, and Zorn.

OSTLIND CONSTRUCTED HIS STUDIO out of recycled rustic materials he had salvaged over the years, having no model other than that he wanted the confines to glow with sunlight and be pleasant to occupy. The wooden plank floors often have a dusting of dirt tracked in from outdoors, and he proudly boasts that all of the furnishings are retro except for "a sweetheart of an Ettan etching press."

He loves the honesty of the printmaking process. "Etching itself can be complicated, but the concept is not," he explains. "It is a form of intaglio printmaking where a metal plate is sealed with acid-proof wax. Lines are scratched through the wax to expose the metal, and then the plate placed in a tub of acid. The acid etches little grooves into the plate where the lines were drawn. The wax is removed, ink is rubbed onto the plate, the surface is wiped off leaving ink in the lines, and the plate is run through an etching press with a piece of damp paper. The ink transfers to the paper, and a mirror image of the plate is printed."

Part of Ostlind's mystique is that he makes minor tweaks in the inking of the plate each time he pulls a proof, transforming every print into one of a kind. "He's

not churning out 18,000 reproductions to make some quick bucks," Schuster says. "By keeping his editions to a traditionally low number [typically 96 or fewer], he is committed to the highest form of artistic integrity."

Certainly, any story about etching in the Big Horn Mountains must make mention of Kleiber, whose etchings are synonymous with the Wyoming regions Ostlind calls home. Ostlind confesses that Kleiber's work had a double influence on him by giving him an early impression of what art was, and by holding up Kleiber's Wyoming surroundings as a place that had universal allure.

Echoes of Kleiber in Ostlind's work resound deeper than similarities in style and vantage points. Years ago, Kleiber's son Stuart and his wife, Kay, recognized Ostlind as an artistic apostle of Kleiber, Schuster says. The budding friendship between the couple and the artist resulted in Ostlind receiving some of Kleiber's unused copper plates.

Ostlind's study of the Asian printmaking process and corresponding design motifs is evident in his flirtation with negative space as a focal element. "He is not afraid of nothingness," observes gallery owner Susan Simpson Gallagher. When Gallagher and her husband, John, were preparing to open their namesake gallery in Cody, WY, a decade ago, they went to meet the Ostlinds at the suggestion of Montana landscape painter Bob Barlow. Shortly thereafter, the couple began carrying Ostlind's etchings. She says that sales of those works, and the excitement they generate from people walking in off the street, became the backbone of the gallery. "His work is good, affordable, and accessible," she comments. She is struck not just by the meditative quality of Ostlind's take on the West, but by his Zenlike attitude about what's important in his life—which explains why his portfolio includes pastoral ranch scenes as well as depictions of telemark skiing in the Big Horns. "Joel maintains a real balance," she points out. "He is secure in himself and does not waver on his approach to a simple life."

Consider the inspiration behind the painting *PADLOCK REDS*, a realistic yet tranquil interpretation of cowboying in the spring when cattle are turned out on the range. "I like to go back to the Padlock Ranch," Ostlind remarks. "When the crew is holding a bunch of cattle or branding, they keep getting back into pose and it's a great time to try for an 8-by-10 oil."

Dwell also in the story behind his soothing painting *UNDER THE ARBOR*. Every summer, he explains, Native



WALKING HOME, OIL, 8 X 10.

people from across the West rendezvous at the Crow Indian Reservation located just north of Big Horn for an event called the Crow Fair. Typically, Ostlind will drive up in the morning to sketch at dawn and return home in the heat of day to work on a studio painting. He loves the timeless way that the shifting sun and its shadows twist across the conical tops of teepees scattered across the landscape. "The white canvas is contemporary, but the teepee form goes way back, kind of like oil painting," he says.



LINE OF GOSSIP, OIL, 12 X 16.

Whether painting or not, Ostlind always had a spiritual connection to landscape. "In my art and in my life I hope that spirituality and reality are synergistic partners so that what makes me want to paint birds on a wire is not the birds on the wire, but if I get enough of

