

Passion for Cows
Young Artist Nicole Viste
By Heather Smith-Thomas

Growing up on a cattle ranch in southern Alberta has given Nicole Viste many subjects for her artwork and photography. The 28-year old artist has a growing number of clients who want her work, and she was recently interviewed for a future feature in a national magazine.

Her dad says she has been drawing pictures since she was a small child. "I was always painting and drawing, and I think Mom just gave me that stuff to keep me out of her hair and keep me occupied doing something!" says Nicole.

She grew up with cattle and horses and these have been her main passion, so she started drawing them. "The guy who came up here to interview me asked, 'How does it make you feel when you are doing a drawing?' I really wasn't sure how to answer his question because I'm not a 'feely' artist. I'm not a typical artist at all! How do I feel? I feel like I want to finish this drawing so I can buy another bred heifer! That would make me happy!" She uses her talent as an artist to help her achieve her goal of raising cattle.

"My childhood was a pretty normal ranch life. I was always involved with the animals, bottle-feeding calves, taking care of the cows and the horses. This is what I knew and this was always my passion. My parents always joke that my first word was 'cow' before I said 'mom'. I grew up shooting gophers, chasing cows, fixing fence, and whatever else comes along when living out in the middle of nowhere and keeping myself entertained," says Nicole.

Ranch kids can usually find things to do. "I had tree forts, and crafts. I got in trouble if I wandered too far, so I had to figure out ways to entertain myself and not worry my parents. I started drawing from the time I was old enough to hold a pencil." Her talent evolved from there, and she first started taking it seriously when she was in high school.

"I did my Country Kitten Cat Nap picture when I was in grade 10. I had an art class early on, but it wasn't all that helpful; my art teacher was really weird. I only took one year of art in grade 7 and spent most of that class in the hallway. I decided I could do better on my own," says Nicole.

She does most of her work in pencil. When she was in high school she played around with paints a little but soon went back to pencil. "Paint is just too messy and takes too much time. I have enough other stuff on the go, so pencil is my preference. Working with pencil, you can do it anywhere, and it is nice and clean. I can pack it up when I'm at a trade show and work at a drawing," she says.

There are so many things a person can do with pencil, to get the perfect shading and detail. "I am a detail freak and obsessed with perfection. Pencil works best for that. With a painting, people seem to want it all loosey-goosey artsy, and that's not for me. With pencil I can get all the detail that I'm striving for." Her drawings are so detailed and accurate they look like photographs.

It was soon after college that she realized she could help pay her bills with her artwork. "I started getting pressure from neighbors and friends who wanted me to try to sell my work. I had a huge stack of originals that Dad showed to every person who stopped by the house. I still have one that has a big grease stain because he set it on the kitchen table after lunch when he showed it to someone!"

In 2008 she sent one drawing to a juried art show in the U.S. and won 2nd place--and realized that maybe she should take her work seriously. "It was a fairly big art show, the Equine Dreams show that was part of the Western States Horse Expo in California. The next year I put a couple drawings in the show at the Calgary Stampede, and did that for a couple of years. Now most of my art goes to the states, however, since there is a lot better market for western art down there," she says.

"Most of my originals are sold through various shows in the states, though there is the odd one now and then that my mom likes. I traded her a picture for a bred heifer. I have traded two drawings for heifers now, and the other was to a neighbor friend. The price of heifers right now, I think I might have got the better deal!"

A few people ask her to do specific subjects but she hates commission work. "I've done it a few times, but if it's something I don't really want to draw, it doesn't happen. I have two so-called commission jobs right now but they've both been sitting on my table for a long time because I haven't really wanted to work on them. But I did do a drawing for the municipality, for their 100-year award that they give out. That one was hard to turn down because I got paid to sit at work to draw," says Nicole.

Woodwork and Photography- She's only done a few drawings this year because her woodwork projects have kept her extremely busy. "It makes me a lot more money, to help make my land payment, so I've been focusing on a lot of that. I've always liked fiddling with wood and started by making frames for my drawings. Now I'm into making

kitchen tables, beds, coffee tables, etc. Barn wood is the in thing right now. A couple of interior designers in Calgary use my work, mixing my barn wood with some Victorian design. I am not 'getting' the meaning for this, but they are paying me so I'll do whatever they want! The wood projects are all custom work," she explains.

She also does photography—some of it as art, and some as an aid for her drawings. The photos make a great reference for future drawings. "All of my drawings come from photographs. I like to have the photos to glean the details I need. Sometimes the drawing will be the end result of a couple different photos, or I'll use a photo for some of the background in a drawing, but they are all based on my photos," she says.

She has sent a few photos to shows in the states, and the Calgary Stampede. She got second place in the photo contest in 2011 in one category, and her work has been in Cowboys and Indians Magazine. "One year I was a semi-finalist in their photo contest," says Nicole.

"I sell some of my photos. At first I didn't really think photos sell, but found that they sell for almost as much as my art prints. There is a very small margin of difference. My drawings are quite a bit smaller, so it's nice to be able to offer large-scale works that people want. Most of my photos I sell are fairly large, blown up. These are often images that people want to hang on their wall," she says.

A lot of her work, whether photos or drawings, she sells framed, with the barn wood. "People call me and decide on the frame and when they pick it up it's ready to hang. This really helps, being able to do the framing myself. It saves the customer time and money and it helps me market my work. It really helps to have a finished product."

She sells a lot of her work through trade shows, and has a variety of things to market at her booth. "I have a pretty good little business going now and I'm full of ideas! I probably won't live long enough to try doing them all," she says.

Nicole is really busy in the fall and early winter, with Christmas orders. "I've been booked up since September on those. I'm also doing a half-price print-of-the-day right now through my Facebook page. That's been keeping me busy, too, because playing secretary is not my strong point. Some people e-mail me and tell me they got my print but haven't paid me yet, and I think, 'it's a good thing people are honest because I don't keep track of things very well. Some year I'll hire a secretary for the Christmas months to keep track of the orders so I can just keep working in the shop.'"

"REAL" JOB – Her projects keep her extremely busy because she also has a fulltime job as the Rangeland Agrologist for the local municipality. "During the winter it's just paperwork, but in summer we are inspecting all the grazing leases. For the rest of the province, all the grazing leases are run provincially. Within special areas, we maintain our own. We have 4 community pastures here, so we keep an eye on the grass and look after the grazing," she explains.

All the other range riders are 50 to 60 years old and have been there "longer than I've been alive." When she tries to tell them they should rotate a pasture differently her advice doesn't always go over very well, but she tries.

Coming from a ranch background, she finds this job fairly easy. "I am glad I have that background. I am not just some person who decided to take a degree in agriculture and walks in to tell these guys what to do. I understand how things work, and understand that the pasture closest to your house usually gets overgrazed because it's easiest to keep the horses there, etc." She didn't learn range management just out of a book; she's been in these situations herself—been there, done that.

But she also came out of college with some new ideas. "I kept telling Dad that he needed to stop grazing the prairie so hard. I learned a little bit from the books but there's also a lot of practical knowledge gained just by growing up ranching," says Nicole. One nice thing about her job out on the range all summer is the many opportunities for photos and for possible future drawings.

"I don't know if I'd do as much photography as I do if I didn't have this job, but when I am being paid to drive back roads for 8 hours a day, I see a lot of neat and unique things. There will be the odd horses posing just perfectly right off the side of the road that will be a drawing someday."

She is able to blend many talents together, and everything complements the whole. "It's great being able to make it all work, because my job is flexible and allows me to be able to do my trade shows and market my products," she says.

"And all of these are just things I am doing to ensure that I can make my land payments and buy more cows! It's like all of my life goals are funneled to cows."

The Ranch – Nicole is purchasing a piece of land near her parents' Greystone Ranch. The home ranch was named for the old historic post office near the half-section where they winter their cows. There was no town there, just a

post office. Part of the ranch came into her mother's family in 1911. "Dad's great grandpa moved here in 1910 but at that time he was only 16 and had to wait until 1912 to file on his land. So now I am the 4th generation here," she says.

"I have roots here, and I'm not going anywhere. I've dumped 3 boyfriends because they won't move out here. The number one rule for a boyfriend is that he must love cows. The boyfriend I have right now is more of a horse person, but he's a farrier, so maybe he can stick around," says Nicole.

"I have a half section now, and one quarter shares a half mile of fence with Dad. The other one is a couple miles south. I have just over 30 head of my own cows, and I'm keeping heifers because I can't afford to buy them. This year I traded Mom a coffee table set for 2 heifers, not knowing what the price of bred heifers would be this fall—so I will have to make a very fancy-ass coffee table! I told Mom she might get a kitchen table thrown in there, too."

Her work keeps her busy and she's always glad for the work. "Otherwise I'd go crazy, because I always have to be doing something. My house isn't the cleanest because of it all, but the work comes first! In the winter it's a little easier, but in the summer when it's nice out, being indoors is the last place I want to be," she says.

Her goal in life is to get more cows, and more land, and maybe someday quit her job and just do her own things. She has always had horses, but is down to 3 at the moment. "I am trying to find another colt come spring, which will be another project, to train it. And one more thing for Dad to yell at me about when we are moving cows. He'll say, 'We're not training horses! We're moving cows!' but this is a good way to train horses, on the job."

Her cattle are mainly Red Angus. "Their breeding is probably $\frac{3}{4}$ to $\frac{7}{8}$ Red Angus with a little Hereford. At this point I'm just trying to build up my herd, and once I get things more established, I'll think about breeding to a more terminal bull for the steers. For now, however, I'm trying to create heifers and grow my numbers. Right now they are getting pretty strong Red Angus. I'll have to find a second bull either this spring or next spring and I'll probably get a Hereford bull again to get more Hereford mixed back in, and get a little more hybrid vigor—and more money for them," she says.

The cattle give lots of opportunities for photos and subject matter for future drawings. "I want to do more drawing with cattle. I have one drawing that's just a bunch of steers at the bunk. It's been one of my better sellers because it is different; it's not just the typical buckaroo horse that every other western artist focuses on. I don't have enough time to do a pile of originals and most of the art shows I go to are more focused on the equine aspect. They want horses in the pictures. I do some work for the American Quarter Horse Association annual show, so it has to be horses. That's one of my better selling shows. But when I make enough money to quit my job, then I'll start drawing my cows!" A good cattle picture has a lot of eye appeal; for most ranchers, nothing beats a good cow picture.

"I have 3 or 4 drawings here on my table that I'm working on. I love branding scenes, and a lot of my reference photos are taken at brandings. The one drawing I really want to do is just a mama cow licking her calf—a bigger calf (not a newborn). One of these days I will do that one, but it might be 4 years from now at the rate I'm going!"

"I don't know why I got the skill for drawing, because it's a struggle for me to sit still very long. It might not be the best talent to have, until I get crippled up from ranching and have to sit still!" Hopefully she won't cripple her hands.

"I am not the best roper, and dallying is my worst thing. I keep telling myself that I need to learn to rope with my left hand, and not my right hand!" she quips.

When asked where she inherited her talent, she says that one grandmother painted a lot. "She never marketed any of her work but she was pretty good at it. My mom is also very talented with crafts. She doesn't actually draw or paint but she was always cross-stitching or making Christmas baskets," says Nicole.

"My talent has given me an avenue to help pay for cows and a ranch, and is working pretty well for that. I also do it because I like it. On my website there's a little section about me, but it all comes down to the fact that I do what I do because I really love cows. In high school I realized I was the only girl who wanted cows. My friends' goal was to teach me to talk about something besides cows so I could find a boyfriend. Then I went to Olds College, an agricultural college, and discovered that there were all sorts of people just like me! I'm ok!"

"Those are the friends I can still talk to—the ones I can talk to about cows all day. They have to share my passion. There is nothing better than checking cows on a warm summer day when all of them are healthy and happy and everything is quiet. There is a lot of satisfaction in taking care of cows."

[to see more of Nicole's work, check her website at www.greystoneimages.com]