

# Tough by Nature

*Lynda Lanker proves that ranchwomen are the real thing. They do not live a soft life. By Lee Juillerat*

**L**ynda Lanker had never met women who grabbed rattlesnakes by the tail and killed them by smacking their heads with a rope. She had never met women who chewed tobacco. And, until she visited women who live and work on ranches, she had never appreciated their “scars of battle,” their wrinkled, weathered faces and hands.

“It sure wasn’t like all the westerns I’d seen as a kid,” Lanker says of the ranchwomen she visited, photographed, drew and painted.

“These women were the main characters and they’re working and doing things, difficult things.”

For 19 years, Lanker visited ranchwomen in 13 western states. The

result is “Tough by Nature: Portraits of Cowgirls and Ranch Women of the American West,” an art exhibit and book featuring her portraits of 49 ranchwomen in their environments.

In compiling the project, she gained an unexpected appreciation of their lives and work. “These women have a love of their land and their animals, their lives, and their situations,” she says. “They have a passion for it that keeps them there in hard times. They are problem solvers. It was apparent to me they have anything but a soft life. As tough as it is, that’s in their blood. They’re in it for the long haul...they persevere. They know that things take patience.”



*Elladean Hays Bittner, Congress, Arizona, 2005  
Egg tempera, 28.5"x20.5"*

*“You know, every day you are out, your whole life depends on having a good horse.”*

It also required patience for 69-year-old Lanker. When she launched the project, she thought it would take a few years because the initial focus was on Oregon ranchwomen. As it developed, however, it was expanded to ranchwomen across the West. The years multiplied as she delved deeper into the women's lives, visiting them to get a sense of place.

"I walked onto their ranches and they were so generous and open, telling me about their lives, and I was so humbled by that. They were doing me a favor by letting me into their lives."

She purposely sought out women who reflect the land, explaining: "I wasn't looking for a pretty face. I'm looking for authenticity. I want them to be the real thing. They don't put up a veneer, a screen, a front of who they wish they were."

"Tough by Nature," her collection of paintings, drawings and lithographs of ranchwomen, opened last summer in Eugene, Ore. It will move to other venues in Oregon, California, and Texas this year. In planning the Eugene exhibit, Lanker required the museum to hold a



*Ann Daugherty with Luke in Alpine, Texas, 1996*  
Charcoal, 40"x27"

*"The rule is, if you go, take a dog with you. And hopefully the dog will get bitten by a snake instead of a child."*

*Lindy Burgess, Sheridan, Wyoming, 2005*  
Plate lithograph, 19"x27.5"

*"If someone comes up to me and says, 'Are you a cowgirl?' I'll say, 'Well, I couldn't put it quite that way. I'm a good hand.'"*

*My favorite thing is, in the spring, this time of year, riding up through a pasture, usually through a creek bottom that's normally dry, and seeing water running.*



*Seeing everything growing, and the smells, and there's a freshness in the air.*

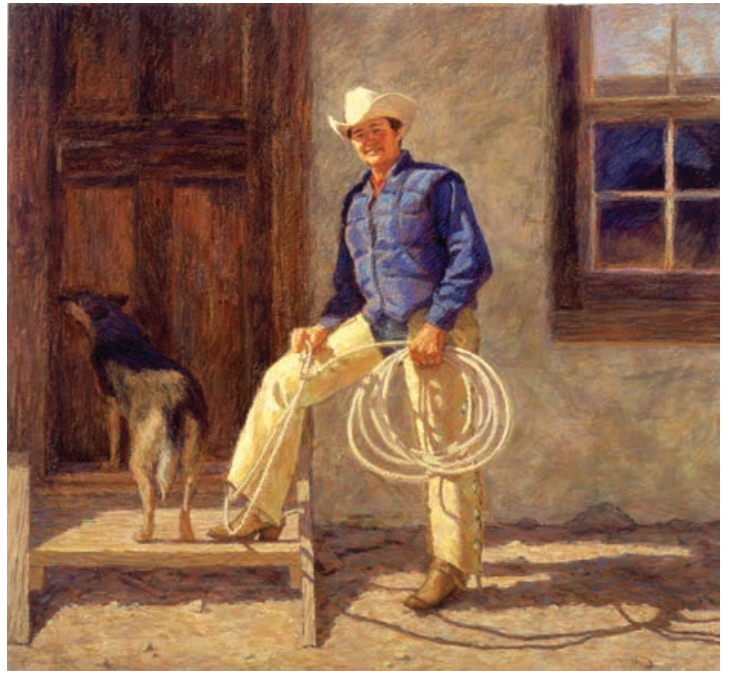
*To me, there just isn't anything better when riding by myself, out wherever that.*

*And seeing the cattle, all of the babies, and looking at the clouds and skies that are so wild in the spring. There isn't anything better. — L L*

series of programs involving ranchwomen so people in urban areas can learn about ranch life. “We need to hear from people actually working the land. I believe ranchers are often maligned, and I want people to have an understanding.”

The artwork is illuminating, but the book provides a better understanding of the women through their commentary. “When people talk about the book, they talk about the stories,” Lanker says of these unvarnished tales. “They were very open and candid.”

The book has also impressed author/screenwriter Larry McMurtry, former Supreme Court Judge Sandra Day O’Connor, and Grammy Award-winning poet Maya Angelou. In his foreword, McMurtry writes: “The literature of the cowboy is very romantic literature. It leaves out the women by the simple method of stereotyping, by reducing them to an outline. Lynda Lanker, in these portraits,



*Ruby Gobble, Cimarron, New Mexico, 1997*  
Oil pastel, 40”x43”

*“It’s bitter, bitter cold, you’re pickin’ up the baby calves and bringing ’em in here and putting ’em in front of the stove. And we bilt a fence with chairs for ’em around the stove.”*

*Sara Shields, Westcliffe, Colorado. 2011*  
Egg tempera, 22.25”x20.25”

*“I love that tremendously intimate relationship with creation, that day-to-day knowing the meadowlark song better than anything.”*





Kay, Kay Cee and Sadie Shelton  
Ellensburg, Washington, 1995  
Oil pastel, 60"x40"

"Growing up never knowing the word 'bored.' Always having cows to check, move, salt, or just go riding bareback in the hills. That lerns ya how to ride. It's a long way to walk home."

Grace Rice  
Monument, Oregon, 1999  
Stone lithograph, 13"x14"

"I never used rough language and always had the respect of men."



fills in the outline."

O'Connor says in her introduction: "Because I grew up on a remote cattle ranch in the Southwest, I can relate to these portraits and to these women who have lived on ranches or farms caring for cattle, sheep, horses, or some combination of animals. These are women who worked to earn a living from the land, women [who] have worked in harsh and difficult environments to sustain their lives and those of their families."

In her afterword, Angelou praises the author, explaining: "I thank Lanker for her art, and I appreciate her for her daring. I was happy to meet these cowgirls and I would be happy to call them and Lynda Lanker sister friends, because I am proud of their fortitude."

For Lanker, who describes herself as "totally a town person," she balances the praise she's received with sincere appreciation for the ranchwomen who educated her. "This was like another world, a beautiful world, but a hard world," she says. "These were struggles I had never witnessed before. They have things to teach us even if we never step on a ranch. For every woman who's featured in the exhibit and on the book's pages, there are hundreds more." ■

*Lee Juillerat lives in Klamath Falls, Ore. Lynda Lanker lives with her husband Brian in Eugene, Ore.*

"Tough by Nature: Portraits of Cowgirls and Ranch Women of the American West" is available through OSU Press for \$45. Go to <http://osupress.oregonstate.edu/book/tough-by-nature>. Lynda Lanker's exhibit is available through Landau Traveling Exhibitions (<http://www.a-r-t.com>). The following dates and venues are confirmed: Oregon Historical Society, Feb. 1-March 31, 2013, Portland, Ore.; National Cowgirl Hall of Fame and Museum, May 9-Sept. 9, 2013, Fort Worth, Texas; and Turtle Bay Recreation Park, Oct. 18, 2013-Jan. 19, 2014, Redding, Calif.