

## Deborah Butterfield: the Horse in the horse

by Buzz Spector, 2021

Over the course of her career, Deborah Butterfield is unwavering in her choice of horses as subject matter. Her sculptures are marvelous in their evocation of what is essential to our experience of the animal whose history, so entwined with human culture, is also one of autonomy and of its own world. The novelist Jane Smiley notes the affect in Butterfield's horses by pointing to the responses of people familiar with their care and breeding: "I have never met a horse lover who did not gasp at the truth of Butterfield's horses." The truth in this regard is more a matter of apprehending a certain energy than recognition of anatomical correctness. Butterfield refers to this energy as *chi*, the Taoist term for life force.

The materials Butterfield employs in her sculptures are those of studio practice, evolving from mud and found sticks through larger pieces of salvaged driftwood, and on to artifacts of industry, including steel, aluminum, and plastic. All the works in this exhibition are cast in bronze, with each sculpted horse first assembled from fallen branches or driftwood carried back to the studio from countless expeditions to this forest or that shoreline. Bronze is the preeminent medium in Butterfield's art for a number of reasons: it is a metal alloy both hard and fusible—that is, more easily melted—and it resists corrosion for centuries. Since the hot metal expands to fit a mold, it can preserve even the smallest surface details during casting, a property of great importance for components meant to simulate the texture of wood. All of these qualities matter, physically, as means to the end of durable outside display of the art. Less visible to observers is the connection of the artist to the foundry, the place where the physics and chemistry of the medium intersect with artistic aspiration. Here another regard arises, of the 35-year friendship Butterfield had with the late Mark Anderson, owner of the Walla Walla Foundry. Several among the sculptures in this exhibit are from the final horses Butterfield and Anderson were working on before he unexpectedly passed away, in November 2019.

In a recent conversation Butterfield reflected on the essence of her connection with Anderson: "Mark is the reason I'm able to have so much fun in my art," she noted, going on to describe times that the two of them went on "stick raids," dragging suitable wood for miles through forests, scrub brush, or shorelines. Butterfield first met Anderson in 1984, just a few years after he opened his foundry (at first called "Bronze Aglow") for business. She invited him to make a visit to her studio, a necessity given that Butterfield was a new mother at the time. Anderson was immediately responsive to her art, and to the technical challenge of casting it in bronze. Butterfield made a few small horse sculptures out of sticks and Anderson cast them. Those successes led to projects at ever-larger scale, even beyond life-size. Butterfield shared an earlier concern, that "there was never enough cast bronze wood for me to make the choices I felt were best." She was grateful for Anderson's recommendation that the horses take form with real wood attached to welded armatures before being cast. Butterfield explained, "The beauty of the bronze is that we could cut portions out of individual elements, refinish them, and put them back together." Butterfield points out that Anderson was not simply a contract fabricator, "he was a maker, he really didn't have any workers do things that he himself hadn't already done."

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Not included in this exhibit is *Mark*, a standing horse dedicated to Anderson. The photograph of this work shows the majestic calm of the animal, a comportment that echoes Anderson's centeredness in life. Butterfield characterizes it as "strong and simple and stout . . . totally the foundation of our work together." The comparatively small number of constituent elements in *Mark* reveals the tenderly engineered balance of the sculpture, a quality it shares with real horses in such a pose. Another standing horse, *Lumen*, is willow and hawthorn branches. The pale grays and ochres of its patina relate well to the dried wood from which this sculpture was cast. *Lumen's* presence, so to speak, is both alert and controlled. The dramatic curvature of the neck is reminiscent of a *dressage* pose, although not quite completely aligned with the torso. Similarly, the front and rear hooves are close to each other, suggesting it is collected, a *dressage* term for a horse that is gathered together, both physically and mentally.

All sculpture in space invites its viewers to orbit the work, learning about it through movement. Butterfield's horses are static forms activated in our imaginations as we take them in from various angles. This affect is more vivid in the large horses than in the smaller sculptures on bases, but in every one of the horses here, circulating around the work raises our awareness of the life force that animates them. This is as true of the horse laying down, *Cascade*, as it is of the standing horses on view. Since the actual animal spends most of its life in movement or otherwise standing (horses even sleep mainly while standing), *Cascade* represents an uncommon equine behavior. Butterfield relates the pose of this sculpture to that of the *odalisque* (reclining nude) in painting, pointing out that the way *Cascade* looks over her shoulder can be read as subtly seductive. Indeed, the artist describes her construction methods as parallel to the way abstract painters make their work through accumulations of brushstrokes. Butterfield also acknowledges the vulnerability of recumbent horses, "when they let you approach them while they are laying down it's like an audience with nobility . . . since it's awkward for them to get up, it's an honor when they let you approach."

Two other standing horses are in the exhibit. The curving branch that completes *Iron Spring's* right rear leg suggests that the animal is about to start moving. So, too, *Iron Spring's* slightly raised neck and head allow us to envision it in motion. *Char* stands in a similar pose to that of *Mark*, but the patina on this horse is much darker, referencing the visible surface scorching of its elements, picked from the ashes of a wildfire near Butterfield's home in Bozeman, Montana. Although *Char's* pose is still, it does not convey a melancholic attitude. Rather, the *chi* here is of a being able to burst into movement—if not into flames—at any approach it deems unwanted. All of the large horses—in fact, slightly larger-than-life—share an attitude of freedom as well as composure. Theirs is the demeanor of horses on the range, not in a stable. The same autonomous attitude, of power and freedom is true of the five smaller horses on pedestals. It's worth noting that the bases on which these sculptures are positioned provide a certain imaginative space to viewers, as if their reduced scale were a function of distance as well as a fact of their material size. Four of the smaller horses are named with words from the original Hawaiian language (Butterfield has maintained a studio in Hawaii for 36 years), including *Keoni*, or The Homeland, *Halia*, or Remembrance of a Loved One, *Kilolani*, or Cloud Interpreter, and *Úla Palani*, which means Vivid Red. The fifth horse is named *Pine Cone*, a clear reference to the bronze cones on one of the branches in this animal's neck.

Butterfield draws this distinction, "It's more about energy than it is about anatomy." The powerful symbolic overtones of the horses recall Vicki Hearne, a poet who, like Butterfield, was a skilled equestrian. Hearne offered memorable language in a poem expressing the artist's responsibility to make

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“The Horse in the horse, the Rider in / The rider, the heart beneath the tongue.” What is profound in Butterfield’s art is comparable, in its way, to the task of poets, working not with language they have invented but, rather, with words already spoken or written to death, and bringing them back to life.