

Looking at Animals: New Work by Deborah Butterfield

by Nancy Princenthal

“The first subject matter for painting was animal. Probably the first paint was animal blood.” John Berger writes. The metaphoric uses to which animals have been put, he goes on to say, are founded in mutual incomprehension; we share their experience no more verifiably than we do those of trees or stones. And yet it is their very resistance to apprehension that exerts irresistible attraction. “The animal,” we feel, “has secrets which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man.”¹

Those secrets are preserved—indeed they are celebrated—in Deborah Butterfield’s sculpture. It seems essential to the character of the horses she depicts that they are not in service to people. Unlike the vast majority of equine subjects in art (and literature), Butterfield’s are not instruments of warfare, or agriculture, or pre-automotive transportation, or of the status that accrues to owners of costly property. Rather than inclining to human use, Butterfield’s horses tip toward the natural environment. Early examples were made of mud and sticks. Sometimes they were fenced by palisades of tilting tree limbs, bark intact, that created crosshatched screens; seen through these fences, the horses resembled sketches in process: forms coming into visibility. In these early sculptures, the animals’ integration with their surroundings approached camouflage. For many years now Butterfield’s horses have been made of more durable things, including salvaged scrap metal and, as in most of the recent work, tree branches cast in bronze. But for all the stability of these materials, they still resist capture, and have, always, the postures of animals unsaddled and unbridled.

This is not to say that Butterfield is a naive romantic who promotes freeing horses to run wild. She lives on a ranch in Montana and is a horsewoman who practices competitive dressage; she breeds, raises and trains horses for that purpose. She also holds black belts in two kinds of karate: this is on her resume, and is clearly as important an accomplishment to her as her long history of exhibitions, or her educational background, which includes graduate study in ceramics at the University of California at Davis under Robert Arneson. Among her provocations as a student there was the production of ceramic saddles, bigger than life, lavish and ceremonious, and altogether incompatible with known categories of sculptural or ceramic form. But this precedent, too, would have to be shattered for Butterfield’s abiding subject to take shape.

One recent big, standing horse, *Sulphur* (2013)—the large examples are roughly life-size—is assembled from substantial pieces of trees (always salvaged; Butterfield doesn’t use milled lumber) that lend it a muscular jaw, imposing hindquarters and sturdy limbs. Its slightly open mouth suggests the slightest sense of aggression, as does its powerful, curving neck. The much slenderer, ashy components of *Willow Creek* (2014), another large standing horse, are delicately woven together in a tangled weave

¹ John Berger, “Why We Look at Animals,” in *About Looking* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 5, 3.

ZOLLA/LIEBERMAN GALLERY INC.

and convey an active, almost skittish energy. *Bristlecone* (2014), a third large horse, sprouts twigs and even dried leaves; the effect is of a shaggy, unkempt animal, serenely heedless of observers. The smaller horses represent a similar range of posture and form, each element made to trace the subtlest contour of muscle, bone and gait. Most of these are also cast from wood, but one of the smaller horses, *Red Fox* (2013), is made from scrap metal, rusty and much dented and bent, and seems a little frail, even ghostly. It shares that disposition with *Cascade* (2014), a horse in large scale that is portrayed lying down. Subsiding as much as reclining, it is evocatively skeletal—the suggestion of an exposed spine, including its vertebral processes, is particularly sharp—but the slight lift of its neck and head lend it a poignant breath of vitality. Installed in a group, the disparate but related larger horses form a community, not quite social but mutually aware, and self-sufficient.

The procedure by which the bronzes are cast is laborious, time consuming, bound by tradition and dependent on extremely skilled craftsmen following a great number of precise steps. In all of these features, including especially its reliance on discipline and training, as well as on close and sympathetic collaboration, the foundry process is not unlike dressage. The sculptures that result are mostly unique, since adjustments are made after casting (itself done in two stages—first the armature, then the pieces of wood attached to them, which are removed and cast individually, then welded into place) and patination, which itself involves several steps.

Even when viewed very close up, the cast bronze reads as wood; the illusion is extraordinary. And the carbon at the work's heart—in the casting process, which turns the original wood to ash; in the flesh the wood symbolizes; and in the skeletal scaffold which supports and survives that flesh—is a molecular link tying animal to environment, and equine to human. Bridging the microscopic perspective and the full scale helps us see that drawing in space, as Butterfield does, is what nature does, too. “Be discrete about the spaces / That hold the forms together / The voids by means of which we live,” the late Vicki Hearne wrote in a resonant cycle of poems inspired by Butterfield's work. Viewing these sculptures, we stare into thin air, grasp at straws and hold tight, their strength a happy mystery. Which is, in fact, as good a metaphor for the puzzle of esthetic experience as it is for why we look at animals.

- Nancy Princenthal