

Deborah Butterfield's Rescue Mission

by John Yau

In 1980, after Deborah Butterfield received her second National Endowment grant and a Guggenheim Fellowship, she decided to travel to Israel, where she began making her sculptures of horses out of found materials retrieved from junkyards in Jerusalem. By moving from mud, tree parts, and salvaged sticks to found industrial detritus, Butterfield was able to introduce another layer of meaning into her work.

Now, nearly forty years after her time in Jerusalem, her subject continues to be the horse. She is one of the few artists to have an intimate grasp of a horse's physiology, the great English artist George Stubbs among them. However, the difference between Butterfield's horses and those by Stubbs and others is profound.

It is this difference that I want to address. Butterfield has made horses out of a wide range of materials, including yarn, barbed wire, car parts, pieces of plastic, and discarded metal letters. This is one of the paradoxes of her work. The horses are often made out of the very things that altered their existence forever, either by fencing them in or by superseding them in productivity, ostensibly rendering their contribution to society's efficiency obsolete. Mankind's industrial development – which began to rapidly accelerate in the 19th Century – pushed horses from a central role to a marginal one.

The horses made of car parts are just one of many distinct groups in Butterfield's oeuvre. I see each group as constituting a specific herd, with its own character and implied history. It also strikes me that each herd can be viewed as focusing on a discreet subject while conveying very different perceptions. The materials they are made from are part of the significance.

I think one of the underlying features of Butterfield's horses is that they can be understood as survivors. Despite the unsettling world they inhabit, they will somehow manage to endure. This persistence and our tendency to read her horses as mares further adds to our understanding of them.

I have long had the feeling that Butterfield could make one of her sculptures out of any material that you could give her – she is that masterful. When she makes them out of worn, stripped tree branches or driftwood, as she does in this exhibition, I am struck by the way the weathered wood evokes the environment in which it was found, Montana or Hawaii, for example, two places where she lives and works. It also suggests a post-human world, but not in any way that

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is overt or didactic. Rather, it is a perception that exists at the edge of comprehension, like a haunting dream.

In contrast with the way other artists have treated the iconography of the horse in paintings and statuary, Butterfield does not invoke the equestrian contribution to human conquest or glory: her unadorned sculptures are not aggressive steeds ridden by man. They do not stir up associations with the American West and the role they played in that bloody history of conflict, surrender, and domination. Rather, they inhabit a peaceful realm in which humans are absent or insignificant. In contrast to the perception of the horse as subservient to our desires, these calm animals have made us invisible.

Butterfield's horses can be recumbent, suggesting that they could be foals. It is almost as if they are arising out of a pile of wood. An artist must understand the horse's outward appearance as well as its internal anatomy to make such a piece. This is Butterfield's genius: she not only assembles horses out of disparate parts, she seems to become part of them.

The horses can be standing, their heads bowed. Some of the branches might be smooth, while others are pitted or flecked with clinging bits of bark. There might be a few leaves still attached to thin branches. They are both garlands and not garlands. Each piece of wood is essential to the sculpture and, at the same time, a distinct thing exerting its own unique identity. Certainly, no two branches are alike. The thickness, the feel of the surface, and the bearing of the material — from sinuously curved to ramrod straight — all do their part to imbue the sculpture with a distinct personality. This is what separates her work from other artists who have used the horse as a subject: Butterfield's strike us as having distinct personal traits.

When she ties one branch to another, she invites viewers to engage with the constant interchange of the physical and the visual. This interplay, which also encompasses the dialogue between the individual parts and the entire assembly, is one of the many pleasures the work has to offer.

Another of these pleasures — and I think this one has not been written about enough — is the merging of formal mastery with each horse's individual anatomy — the arch of its neck, the turn of its head — all matters of subtlety to which Butterfield is deeply attuned in the sculptures' real-life counterparts.

The other thing that should be noted about Butterfield's sculptures is their achievement as three-dimensional drawings, in which each branch can be viewed as a distinct linear form moving through space, activating what is around it. I think Butterfield's formal mastery

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combined with her sensitivity to materials is but one part of this accomplishment. The other part is how well she knows and cares for her subject. The combination is unique.

Butterfield's horses are resonant metaphors addressed to society and to history. They remind us that the natural world is not there to be subjugated, and that such outmoded beliefs have led us to the precarious state of the planet, which we continue to despoil without a real regard for the future. Using weathered wood and other materials, she comments on our production of non-degradable waste. Looking at Butterfield's work, you might not think she is a politically or socially conscious artist, but you would be mistaken. There is deep compassion and responsibility pulsing through all of her work, a feeling of independence, celebration, desolation, sadness, joy, and lamentation.

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