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Horsepower

Rethinking the Equine in Contemporary Art

Artists have been fixated on horses since the sun rose on Stone Age cave painters. Millennia later, in 1819, Lord Byron articulated the compelling mixture of wildness and nobility so often associated with horses in his epic *Mazeppa*. At the beginning of the poem, its Cossack hero Ivan Mazeppa is strapped nude to a fearsome wild steed, ready to be dragged across Ukraine in punishment for his infidelity. Like Mazeppa himself, the horse is an outcast punished for its lack of restraint:

> "Bring forth the horse!"
> —the horse was brought;
> In truth, he was a noble steed,
> A Tatar of the Ukraine breed,
> Who look'd as though
> the speed of thought
> Were in his limbs;
> but he was wild,
> Wild as the wild deer,
> and untaught,
> With spur and bridle undefiled—[1]

Byron's articulation of the horse's competing characteristics of integrity and degradation illuminates key qualities associated with horses in Western cultures from antiquity onward. Not only do horses have national identities, but they possess the extra-animal intelligence and muscularity required to conquer vast swaths of land. Horses also shepherded us into industrial modernity: In the 1770s, the term "horsepower" was employed as a marketing gimmick to liken the force generated by novel steam engines to the better-known power of draft horses.[2] Whether a wild horse, a warhorse, or a workhorse, the animal's brute strength, endurance, and capacity for instruction have charged them enough that entire genres—the equestrian and the Western—have consolidated around their symbolic weight. In dominant visual cultures, horses most frequently signify political power, physical prowess, and the freedom such qualities afford history's victors. This approach is evident in the imperial portraits made between the Renaissance and the nineteenth century, like Titian's *Equestrian Portrait of Charles V* (1548) and *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1801) by Jacques-Louis David, and in twentieth-century monuments to the Confederacy, like the Robert E. Lee Monument in Richmond, Virginia, which was installed in 1890 and removed in 2021. But such equine expressions of freedom are compromised, dependent upon both a rigorous disciplining of the horse's body and the subjugation of non-dominant classes.

More than 140 Confederate monuments in the United States, many featuring horses, have been removed since 2015 in recognition of their ideological ties to white supremacy.[3] However, even as these statues dwindle from public view, a proliferation of Western and equestrian tropes has saturated our media. Horse girls and cowboys abound in the American cultural imaginary, from fashion campaigns for Wrangler, Cynthia Rowley, and Helmut Lang, to Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" (2019), Jordan Peele's *Nope* (2022), and television series such as *Yellowstone* (2018–present) and the *Westworld* revival (2016–22).[4] And while many of these recent uses of equine imagery are mere regurgitations of the old tropes of tamed femininity, rugged masculinity, and frontier anxiety, lately a new cohort of contemporary artists have been approaching the horse and its genres with renewed criticality. These contemporary artists explore the horse as an embattled figure of power and control, revealing and resisting the dreams of conquest it typically signifies.

Historical equestrian imagery often depicts the power born from

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a human-animal bond while overlooking the rigorous training and cultivation rituals that enable it. In Sarah Miska's painted portraits of contemporary equestrian culture, both humans and animals engage in dressage.[5] Her paintings, wrought with scrupulous attention to detail, feature closely-cropped depictions of human and horse hair stylings. The composition of *Rider with Blue Helmet* (2021) centers on a neat ballet bun, double-wrapped in a silk scrunchie and adorned with a series of glistening jewels. Not a strand is out of place in the tightly-coiled hairdo, as though the bun were a precious object in a Dutch vanitas painting of earthly excesses that will soon perish. In *Brown Twisted Tail* (2022), Miska focuses on a horse's tail fashioned into a plait. The restrained hair coils around itself, wrapped in a knot near the tail's base. More than the composition of *Rider with Blue Helmet*, which could have been lifted from an advertisement or a DIY hair tutorial, this image of a horse's hindquarters is alien and somewhat grotesque. Across Miska's body of work, her compositions denaturalize the strict management of riders' and horses' appearances. Her focus on such minor moments of discipline—the perfect wrapping and adornment of hair—suggests how external powers shape the bodies of their subjects. Given equestrianism's strictures of self-presentation, it is no wonder that equestrian tools such as sturdy boots, belts, and stirrups are some of the most iconic fetish objects of authority.

Practices of dressage were of particular interest to a coterie of mid-century Marxist cultural critics, who likened the conditioning of the capitalist subject to the inculcation of obedience and suppleness in a trained horse.[6] Henri Lefebvre's theory of dressage posits that "humans break themselves in [*se dressent*] like animals. They learn to hold themselves. Dressage can go a long way: as far as breathing, movements, sex. It bases itself on repetition."[7] Repetition, therefore, codifies certain ways of being and makes learned behavior second nature. When used as an aesthetic tool, however, repetition can induce the opposite effect: defamiliarization (think, for instance, of how bizarre the word "concrete" might sound when spoken aloud 50 times in a row). A scene in artist Kenneth Tam's video *Silent Spikes* (2021) captures an Asian man on a soundstage, spotlit from above and dressed in denim and brown leather boots, with a bandana wrapped around his neck and a cowboy hat on his head. Eyes cast downward and unaware of the outside world, much less the camera and the viewer, he torques his body in gyrating, circular motions, one hand in the air as though balancing himself on a mechanical bull. The repetition of this performance of masculinity—its hip thrusts, its taming of an imagined animal—imbues the gesture with strangeness and humor as well as soft sensuality: The video's subject resembles a masculine correlate to the wind-up ballerina in a jewelry box. Further, a voiceover narrates in Cantonese the events of an unsuccessful 1867 labor strike on the Transcontinental Railroad, reminding viewers that the rugged frontier life of all-American cowboys was enabled by the exploited labor of Chinese-American workers.[8] In Tam's reprisal of the rugged stoicism of the American cowboy, he engages in a kind of anti-dressage, using repetition to reveal the unnaturalness of the cowboy's habitus and narrating a resistance to the exploits of Western expansion.

The horse and its genres teach us not only how individual bodies are shaped and manipulated by greater social and political forces, but also give expression to broader national myths. One such myth—the whiteness of the cowboy as a quintessential figure of freedom and nobility—manifests in almost all representations of the American West, from a Google search of the term "cowboy" to the haunting animatronics found in Old West towns. In reality, an estimated one in four nineteenth-century American cowboys were Black and often worked as

Top: Chandra McCormick, *Angola Penitentiary, Men Breaking Wild Horses, Louisiana State Prison Rodeo* (2013). Archival pigment print. Image courtesy of the artist and Prospect New Orleans.

Bottom: Deana Lawson, *Cowboys* (2014). Pigment print, 40 × 50 inches. Image courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

Dominique Knowles, *The Solemn and Dignified Burial Befitting My Beloved for All Seasons* (2023).
Oil on linen, 78 × 64 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles.
Photo: Paul Salveson.

cowhands tasked with taming the unruliest of horses.[9] *Black Cowboy*, a 2016 exhibition at The Studio Museum in Harlem curated by Amanda Hunt, offered an unraveling of the white-washed history of the American West, as well as an exploration of the contemporary cultures of Black cowboys. In Deana Lawson's photograph *Cowboys* (2014), she captures two riders at a dignifying low angle with a striking flash. The men emerge from a pitch-black night, faces partially obscured by a cowboy hat and a bandana, imbuing the scene with stoic intensity. And *Wildcat* (2013), Kahlil Joseph's single-channel black-and-white video, depicts an annual Black rodeo in Grayson, Oklahoma in iconic, contemplative slow-motion. The riders twist, fall, and jump from their horses' contorting bodies with baroque seriousness and grandeur. If Tam's rehearsals of cowboy swagger break down the cowboy archetype, Lawson and Joseph reconstruct it, harnessing its associations with power and prowess to associate their subjects with an agency of which they have historically been stripped.

Chandra McCormick pushes the relationship between Blackness and the Western further, drawing a connection between the condition of Black masculinity in the United States and the "breaking" of wild horses. Her photograph *Angola Penitentiary, Men Breaking Wild Horses, Louisiana State Prison Rodeo* (2013), also exhibited at The Studio Museum and part of a photo series documenting inmates at the maximum-security Louisiana State Penitentiary (named "Angola" after the slave plantation that formerly occupied the land),[10] depicts a group of inmates shrouded in dust as they use ropes to harness the brute strength of several horses. During this rodeo, roughly 10,000 spectators—who are, in McCormick's photograph, overwhelmingly white—gather to watch inmates partake in a ritual that bears striking similarity with the severe labor conditions forced upon chattel slaves and, later, Black cowhands.[11] The figure of the cowboy signifies not only freedom, but also freedom's costs. Here, Angola positions the temporary release of inmates from their cells as a moment of celebration and heroism at the same time as it reinforces their lack of agency. The conditions of the horses in the photograph parallel the conditions of the inmates: Their physical binds and enclosure within a circumscribed arena are the preconditions of disturbing spectator sport.

While artists such as these use conventions of the equestrian and the Western to explore the horse's ideological ties to power, Dominique Knowles strips the horse from narratives of conquest entirely. In his recent exhibition *My Beloved* at Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Knowles freed the human-horse relationship from the structures of management, dominance, and constraint, instead making it a site of religious encounter. A series of windswept landscapes, some taking the form of altarpieces through their triptych structure, honor the artist's recently deceased horse. The horse appears in some works only as an amorphous shadow, and in others, it is not straightforwardly represented at all. In one work titled *The Solemn and Dignified Burial Befitting My Beloved for All Seasons* (2023) (all of the works in the exhibition share the same title), a whirling abstraction awash in earthen rusts and browns embodies the shifting perspective of a horse in motion. An additional square emerges from the top edge of the painting, where a deity would be placed in an altarpiece but which here features only a greenish haze. Knowles extracts the horse from its usual context—a muscular body traversing a wide terrain with might—instead representing its sublime surrounding atmosphere as a field of buzzing color.

Knowles' compounding of the Western, the devotional, and the romantic genres might be understood as what cultural critic Lauren Berlant has called "genre flailing," a mode of managing the discordance between

the ideals embedded within a genre and transfiguring those ideals into ordinary life.[12] The storied masculinity of the cowboy, riding his horse through open plains with gun in tow, disintegrates in Knowles' contemplative paintings, which favor softness over violence and mourning over triumph. "Genres," writes Berlant, "provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art."[13] The genres of the Western and the equestrian are therefore not only a matter of semantics, made up of a rubric of repeated visual and narrative conventions, but structures of feeling that guide how we process the external world and our place within it. Whether through challenging the Western's aesthetic conventions of composition and performance, as in the work of Miska and Tam, or through revealing hypocrisy baked into the logic of the genre, as in the work of McCormick and Joseph, contemporary artists working with equine motifs do not resuscitate old genres so much as implode them. In a changing world —one characterized, in part, by the foreclosure of a frontier mentality hopeful for boundless economic and territorial expansion—the idioms and logic of our genres must also change. The equestrian sculpture will crack; the rider will fall from his horse.

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1. Lord Byron, *Mazeppa, A Poem* (London: John Murray, 1819), 22.

2. "Why one horsepower is more than the power of one horse," *Institute of Physics*, www.spark.iop.org/why-one-horsepower-more-power-one-horse.

3. Bonnie Berkowitz and Adrian Blanco, "A record number of Confederate monuments fell in 2020, but hundreds still stand. Here's where," June 17, 2020, updated March 12, 2021, *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/national/confederate-monuments/; Miles Parks, "Confederate Statues Were Built To Further A 'White Supremacist Future,'" *NPR*, August 20, 2017, www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544266880/confederate-statues-were-built-to-further-a-white-supremacist-future.

4. Nadia Lee Cohen (@nadialeecohen), "giddyup @GANT x @wrangler campaign out now," Instagram photo, September 15, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CiiDOpOtoJr/; Cynthia Rowley, "CR x Marfa," directed by Katherine Goguen, YouTube video, May 18, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FTuxN1JCfw; *Helmut Lang Seen by Antwaun Sargen*t, Hannah Traore Gallery, February 11–23, 2023, accessed June 23, 2023, www.helmutlang.com/seen-by-antwaun-sargent/.

5. Dressage, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, refers to "the training of a horse to perform special, carefully controlled movements as directed by the rider, or the performance of these movements as a sport or in a competition."

6. Lisa Moravec, "Dressage Performances as Infrastructural Critique: Mike Kelley and Yvonne Rainer's Dancing Horses," *Dance Chronicle* 45, no. 1 (2022): 57–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2022.2027182.

7. Henri Lefebvre, "Dressage," in *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London: Continuum, 2004), 39.

8. "The Chinese Workers' Strike," American Experience, PBS, www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/tcrr-chinese-workers-strike/.

9. Katie Nodjimbadem, "The Lesser-Known History of African-American Cowboys," *Smithsonian*, February 13, 2017, www.smithsonianmag.com/history/lesser-known-history-african-american-cowboys-180962144/.

10. "Angola State Prison: A Short History," Voices Behind Bars: National Public Radio and Angola State Prison, Columbia University, https://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/caseconsortium/casestudies/54/casestudy/www/layout/case_id_54_id_547.html.

11. "Prison Rodeo," Louisiana Prison Museum & Cultural Center, www.angolamuseum.org/rodeo; Simeon Soffer, director, *The Angola Prison Rodeo: The Wildest Show in the South*, 1999.

12. Lauren Berlant, "Genre Flailing," *Capacious: Journal of Emerging Affect Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (2018): 156–62, https://capaciousjournal.com/article/genre-flailing/.

13. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press: 2011), 6.