

The Nature of Seeing

In his sculptures of horses, Józef Sumichrast explores the nature of seeing, organic form, and sculptural materials. The artist knows horses, for he rides them in the Pacific Ocean on family vacations at remote Mexican beaches. His pedestal-sized sculptures seem buoyant and some are legless because he often visualizes horses in the water where they swim like dogs. As horses emerge from the ocean, they roll on their backs in the sand to dry off. To avoid being crushed, the rider must dismount quickly.

Sumichrast makes his sculptures from layers of flat, rounded forms that recall natural elevations and depressions in topographic maps. He gives smaller parts of the horse, such as knees, ankles, and cheeks, a near-mechanical appearance. This strategy distances the work from figuration. “My sculptures are not a horse,” he says. “They convey the essence of a horse.”

The artist says that his work “explores the relationship between the second, third, and fourth dimensions.” He employs flat dimensional forms to “minimize a part of the sculpture or to show its basic shape” and uses the third dimension to emphasize a particular part of the piece. He bends or twists many sculptures to show the viewer more than one angle at a time. Instead of “freezing” angles and presenting them to the viewer as Picasso does in his Cubist sculptures, Sumichrast expects the viewer to take a more active role by looking “around the corners” of his work. Light and viewer participation give the sculpture “its fourth dimension,” he says.

The artist started out as a draftsman and graphic designer, became a painter, and then took up sculpture. Each new sculpture begins with a rough sketch, which he develops into a formal scale rendering with a constant horizon like architectural elevations and plan views. Next, he cuts out forms from dense industrial cardboard, saturates them with carpenter’s glue, and wraps them around a pipe or other cylindrical object to curve them. The cardboard forms harden to a condition like plastic.

When he has an inventory of curved forms, the artist begins to glue or staple them together. Once he has completed the sculpture in cardboard, he covers it with Bondo, which is the trade name for a pale butter yellow polyester resin

putty that auto body shops use to repair dents. Sumichrast applies the Bondo with a putty knife, lets it harden, and sands it down to uncover the edges of the cardboard forms beneath and to intensify the sculpture's linear quality.

Some sculptures have red lines on the surface, which function as accents. "Red suggests pain to me," the artist says. "I'm always cutting and scraping my hands as I work. One day I got mad at the sculpture and decided to cut back by leaving a red line on its surface."

This exhibition comprises 15 sculptures, all horses. Among the most recent is **Elevation Triptych** (2007), which presents three horses on separate slabs. One has no legs and one has no head, possibly because we cannot see it from our angle of view. The three horses are curved in a graceful, rhythmic S such that our eye follows them—and they seem to move. Each horse touches the ground in a different way and encloses a different space. Sumichrast cast this work in bronze by building maquettes in cardboard, breaking them into pieces, casting each in bronze, welding everything together and finishing it.

Elevation Triptych is notable for the confidence with which the artist handles the multiple layers of the center horse. Curved and irregular, they suggest a breathing undersea creature. Sumichrast acknowledges that he could not have layered the work with such skill a few years ago. After working with his process for more than a decade, he's mastered it and now can experiment with forms and semi-abstraction in ways that would have been impossible before.

Another fresh invention is **Expanding Gravity** (2007) a sculpture in urethane that the artist suspends so we can look inside its gently moving forms. Viewers should look closely at this piece from all angles, especially above and below, to see how the horse seemingly dissolves into curving forms. Unlike ordinary sculptures, **Expanding Gravity** has many more than four sides—at least six and maybe eight or ten, depending on one's point of view. The artist transforms the back end of the horse from something that people joke about into rhythmic vertical planes surmounted by a cheerful tail.

M Theory (2007), a smaller suspended piece, is the profiled head of a spirited horse that an Ancient Greek cavalryman might ride into battle. Seen from the

front, the sculpture becomes its constituent forms. One of these—the nostril and mouth on the left side—is a particularly nice touch.

Susan I (2007), which shows the artist's wife, is great good fun. Everything is movement here with the figure leaning precariously to one side, one leg buried inside the horse and the other flying outside like a long scarf. The body of the horse is dramatically foreshortened. Its legs point in different directions and its back end is multiple curved layers. Susan's anatomy is divided into forms, her face is flattened, and her fingers are extremely long. Seen from the side, Susan's head becomes a curious fan-like construction and the horse looks positively Cubistic. Because it has at least six sides, **Susan I** rewards viewing from all angles.

S Horse II (2007) is a more topical piece, a horse whose head echoes Picasso's **Guernica**. "The horse is swimming, but twisted in pain," says Sumichrast. "The pain is connected to 9/11." Here again, the horse is the artist's starting point for bold formal exploration.

Sumichrast is amused to find that Asians and engineers like his work. "The Asians respond to the flatness," he says, "and engineers like the way my sculptures are put together." He adds that people couldn't touch his work when he was a painter, but his sculptures are more durable and needn't be approached on tiptoe. "I like that," he says.

Victor M. Cassidy