

Behind the Easel: Featuring Susan Leyland

by Wendy Stevens



In historic Florence Italy, one can find classic architecture and art, including sculptures through the ages. Just outside the city, sculptor and painter Susan Leyland has found an innovative way to present equine sculptures that speak to the past while looking to the future.

Nestled in an olive grove, her studio lights up as morning rays fall on numerous works in progress, inviting their creator to join them. After rushing through some household chores, and arranging lunch to have that over with as well, Susan has some uninterrupted time to answer the call. Her two labs follow her to the studio, looking forward to playing some ball at break time.



On the studio wall are images of her favourite horse sculptures and paintings from Masters of the past to contemporary work that Susan describes as “a continuous pleasure for my eyes and heart,” and serve as inspiration for her work. Other photos on the wall add to the atmosphere and serve as reference if she gets stuck on a piece.

Susan’s technique has evolved over time. “My first ideas were sculpted in the clay directly with no image other than an image in my mind, a moment captured and created spontaneously which did not always include all the horse’s legs. These sculptures were often referred to as ‘The Horses with no Legs.’ Feeling that this was a limit as it created opposite feelings amongst horse lovers, I have worked to elaborate my ideas and I have created my new sculptures on blocks.”



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Formation



Legend



Front View

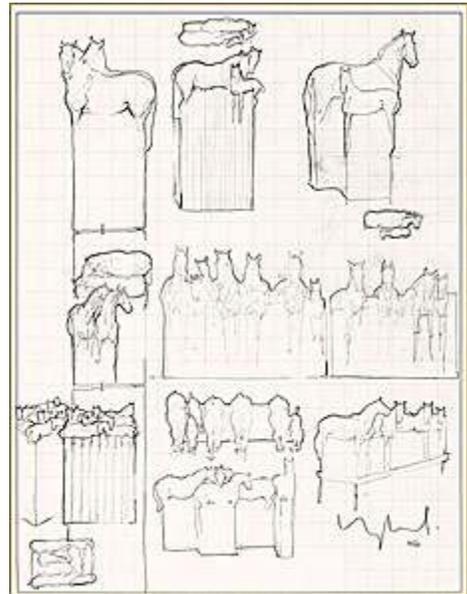


Left Side

On the day she began “Closeness Comfort,” Susan was examining one of her sculptures when an idea came to her to for a new work involving a foal peeking over a proud stallion. She knew the image fit right into her Closeness series, all of which are designed with the same innovative structure of two horses on a block. From their sturdy bases, the horses grow out and upwards for a unique look.

As usual, Susan did some preliminary drawings and sketches of her new idea, solidifying the concept. She worked a white fireclay also called semi-refractory, which is a stony water based clay. At 26" x 13" she was working larger than usual, as it is a prototype for a monument which would be on a high pillar. She says, “I usually work smaller as this size is heavy to turn and move.” That didn’t stop her enthusiasm. “I have such a strong feeling to realize my ideas that I have never lost interest. The goal to innovate and create is high. Composition and balance are primary. At the beginning I model the clay with my hands to create shape and form. I have my own instruments and method learned as a self taught artist.

“I have to keep concentration high so as not to over-work the piece or want to do too much at the same time. To know the right moment to stop, cover with sprayed plastic and continue with something else; that is why I work four to eight pieces at a time depending on the climate and time of year. It generally takes over a period of three weeks to make a sculpture which also depends on size and how many horses are involved.”



The creation process is a solitary one, so to break the isolation, Susan listens to a radio station with international news and stimulating discussions. The only real distraction during work time is pausing to play with the dogs, which serves as a refresher that lets her see her works with a fresh eye.

She had no deadline for “Closeness Comfort,” but as usual she tried to work quickly to hurry the realization of her mind’s eye. However, with mandatory waiting time for clay to dry, and time for second looks, she points out it’s “an impossible task, as art cannot be rushed.”



Right Side



Back View

Using her knowledge of horses and anatomy, Susan let the sculpture progress at its natural rate, “turning it round and round to make sure it is harmonious from all angles as well as above and below. I work to give flowing simple lines and a simplicity of form and balance. One of my thoughts on ‘Closeness Comfort’ was to get the base straight which was far more difficult than the horses!”

She didn’t need to refer back to the sketches once the sculpting had begun, as usual the forms once drawn stayed in her mind. When the figure was complete, she fired it and was ready to present it for viewing and criticism. It was a pleasure for her to see the furnace transform the grey to a soft mother of pearl. The feeling of satisfaction led her to embrace the saying *Today is the first day of the rest of your life* as she anticipated future endeavours.

Susan has reason to hope for a positive reaction to the sculpture, as a similar piece made at a Symposium in Florence was voted “The Public Choice.” However, she finds the very best reward for her is when people are prepared to part with money for them. “When this happens I feel the wish to create more, dedicate more time to improve and innovate and get out into the world, face it and show my work.”

“Closeness Comfort” will be on show this summer. A contemporary art gallery in Florence is promoting her work with other galleries in San Diego (CA), Paris (FR), Milan (IT) and Luzern (Switzerland). She will be holding an exhibition in Italy in the summer and another two in London and Sweden. Susan welcomes comments and questions, and is especially interested to know if others have seen sculptures of a similar style.



Closeness Comfort

You can visit the art of Susan Leyland at:

www.equinesculptures.com