

SUSAN LEYLAND – text by author, art historian Tamsin Pickeral

The striking work of Susan Leyland combines originality with exquisite execution and pure aesthetics; it is indeed a rare delight to come across an artist whose work is so genuinely original in every aspect. Her work is simultaneously complex and simple being a marriage of crystalline linearity and geometric form with powerful underlying concepts. She is also one of those rare artists whose images of horses are deeply moving but never saccharine. Leyland is in effect an artist first and an equestrian artist second. Her subject matter of horses, though something for which she has a deep affinity and understanding of, is a means to an artistic end. It is through this equine vehicle that she is able to explore her artistry and to relate her emotional responses to it, and it is this rationality that makes her work so truly sublime.

Her work is defined by its perfect balance, a balance that extends from its actual physical form to the manifestation of emotion. She brings together pure, simple and brilliant geometric form and from these spare, unfussy shapes conjures horses of tremendous beauty and character. These pieces are first and foremost impactful for their harmonizing of form and space to such extent that their visual aesthetic is not restricted to those who admire horses. Leyland does however have a pansophic understanding of horses from the inside out. She has spent a life time studying these most majestic animals; their physiognomy, their nature and the connection between horses and humans. This tremendous knowledge has led to a recent evolution in her working technique that has resulted in these most recent and stunning pieces. Leyland, who is as skilled a draftsman as she is sculptor has typically produced a series of detailed and beautiful sketches prior to her work in clay. However, her recent pieces have no working sketches and are entirely spontaneous being images produced from clay as an extension of her own thought processes; a steady stream of consciousness translated into her materials.

Leyland is well known for her Horse Block sculptures, of which her newest feature in this exhibition. Her working methodology is fascinating and for the emotion and soul in the sculptures. She begins with the block and from this evolves these tremendous equestrian figures, which according to the artist literally develop as she manipulates her clay; it is in every sense a birthing process and the journey of something exquisite born from a soulless lump of grey clay. The Horse Block sculptures have a sense of timelessness, merging a feeling of the ancient with a pathway to the future. They are resonant of quiet grandeur and majestic composure, each one expressive of deeply felt but contained emotion. The shapes created by the horses emerging from the blocks and the precise and brilliant balance between the two is masterful. In addition Leyland's sparing use of line and detail creates a dynamic variance in texture and visuals, one that is further enhanced through her bronzes and the extensive range of subtle patinas she creates.

In contrast to her Horse Block sculptures is her recent series of bronze and steel Gallivanting Horses, but in true Leyland fashion these again balance her other work. The Gallivanting Horses are expressively energetic; they are light, joyous and full of quick, fleeting movement. These are horses at play, full of spirit and fire and in direct contrast to the stately, quiet and almost iconic feel to the Horse Block sculptures. So in two separate groups of works Leyland captures all facets of the horse and addresses the deep, elusive and inherently alluring spirit that runs at the foundation of these magnificent animals. These captivating pieces convey a little of the mystery and magic of the horse and yet they also allow one to closely identify with them. As such they reflect back to the viewer clear and present human conditions, those of a mother's love for her child, of mutual affection between friends, the joy in another's company and the silent pain of grief and loss. In Leyland's own words, her work is "a mirror that reflects words I do not speak, music I cannot play and song I cannot sing ... it is a means of expression for my love of family and of life and equally for inner sadness and loss ... my work is an expression of my desire to accomplish, day by day, something tangible ..."