

# MONUMENTI



Photo: © Massimo Bianchini

## the sculpture of Susan Leyland

interview by Lyne Raff

*Horses emerging from blocks.*

*But being attached to blocks does not make these horses lifeless; they are gestural, sensual, and tactile. They have been called "Poetica Leggerezza"- "Poetical Lightness". They prance inside columns, which somehow grounds the work while at the same time placing it up on a pedestal.*

*'Here, for your observation, are Horses,' these equines seem to say. They look*

*monumental, ancient. Quietly ethereal, vigorous, expressive; sculpture and sketch all at once.*

*The artist likes her work to speak for itself to each individual viewer.*

*So here, for your observation and regard: Susan Leyland's Horses.*

Outside Florence, Italy, in a town near Impruneta, a group of clay horses sits on a work table in an artist's studio. The horses, in

various stages of completion, seem to be coming to life, their bodies emerging from pillars of solid clay as their faces gaze out the window at the olive trees shading the hillsides.

This is the studio of Susan Leyland, where sketches, sculptures, and photos of horses gaze out of nearly every bit of space. It's a scene that any equine artist would find familiar, and one in which any horse lover would be right at home.

Like most equine artists, Susan's love for

# del cavallo

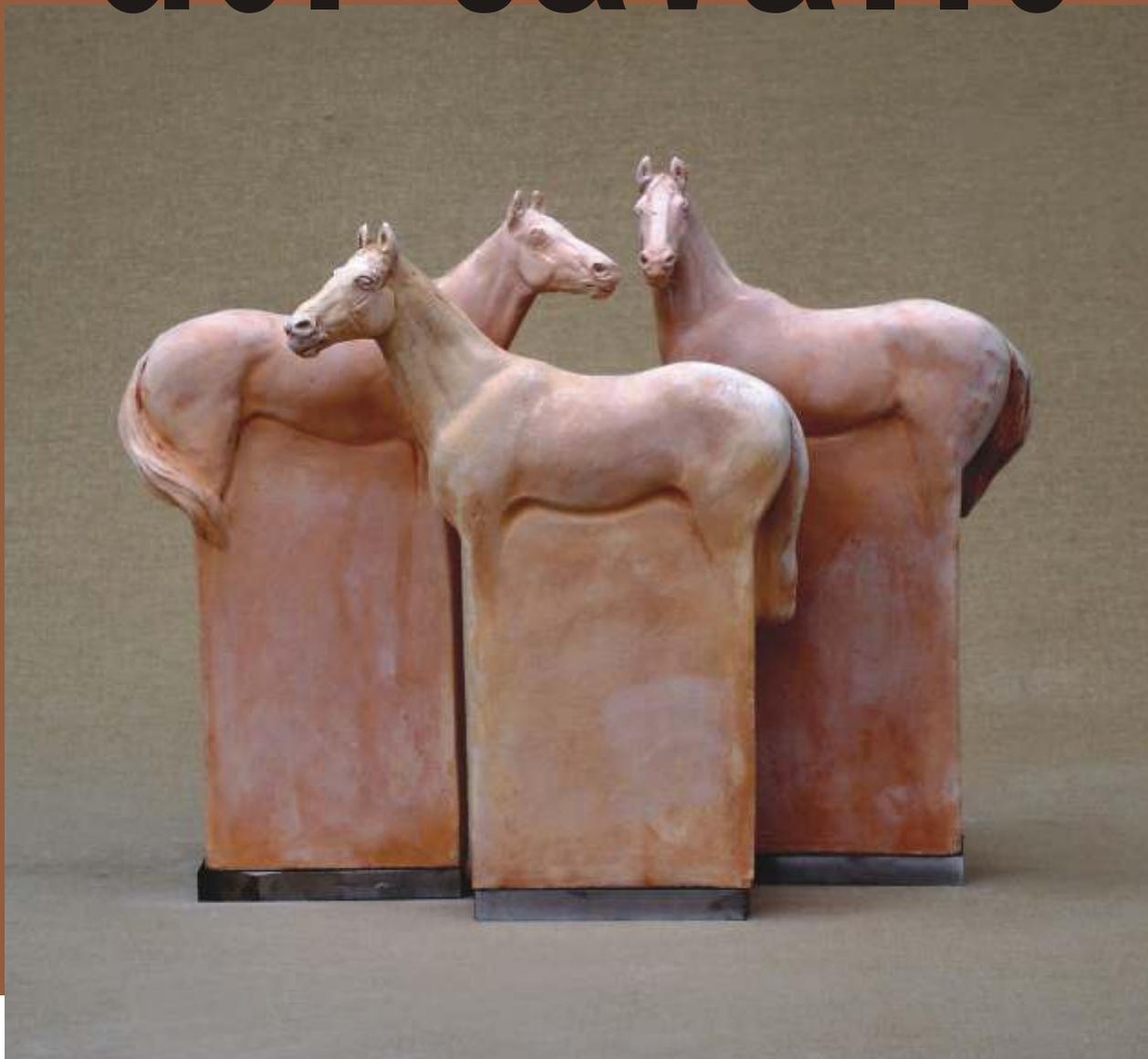


Photo: © Massimo Bianchini

Above: 'Equine Sculpture', 25 x 32cm. Facing: 'Standing Horses', 21 x 22cm. All photos: Massimo Bianchini.



'Block Horse Sculpture'  
28x 18 cm.



'Gallop Three'  
36 x 65 cm.



'Copyright Pillar'  
33 x 19 cm.

horses began very early in life. Her happiest memory in childhood, she says, was the day her grandfather, a veterinarian and Hackney Pony breeder, gave her a small Dartmoor pony named Robin.

“He sat me on his knee and told me that he was going to give me something which I should never sell as it might end up in the mines. This he made me promise. I was only four,” she remembers. Susan kept her promise, and looked after her pony until he died at the age of nineteen.

Her grandfather taught her to ride without a saddle. “I remember him being patient but strict,” she says. “He and my Auntie Mimi transmitted their love of horses,” she goes on; “but thinking again, maybe I was born with it.”

Susan has wonderful memories of Robin, and remembers loving the feeling of riding. “The freedom of it all—jumping hay and straw bales, galloping what seemed to be everywhere... He used to buck too, but that was part of the fun.

“We would ride through fields and woodlands. I remember the bluebells and the coo-cooing of collared doves and the sound of pheasants. We would jump small ditches and stop for picnics beside a stream. I would listen to the noise of the water, and to the chirping of the birds in the hedgerows while watching my pony munch the green grass. I felt free and part of life and living.”

Soon, though, Susan began to grow up and was sent to boarding school to begin her education.

“Boarding school was a big change,” she says, “and life at school was not easy. The first boarding school I went to was all sport and horses, the second all study and religion.” Although she showed talent at an early age, her art, sadly, was placed on the back burner while she finished school. “I was gifted in art and won several prizes, but I did not pursue it and went on to study languages, and then secretarial skills!” she remembers. Her first job after graduation was as a secretary at the Cambridge Institute of Criminology, but she disliked it, and a year later, in 1973, she left England and went to stay with a girlfriend in Florence.

When her friend left soon after, Susan found herself alone in a foreign country. At that time, Italian designer clothing had just taken off in Japan; since her frame was just right for modelling, she landed a job being a clothing model for the Italian design house Ferragamo in Florence. She stayed with Ferragamo as a fashion model for several years.

“Much has happened since that first day,” she says. “I could not speak the language when I arrived here in Italy and I had to find work to keep myself. At the beginning I modelled clothes, then I taught English and after that horse riding.” She settled in, met and married an Italian, and had three sons.

Meanwhile, she never lost her love or her



Photo: © Massimo Bianchini



## MOULDED INTO THE CLAY IS ALL THAT I AM



Photo: © Massimo Bianchini

Top Left: 'Horse Sculpture', 33x 24 cm. 'Bassorilievo' (five horse Bas-relief), 36x153cm. Above: 'Horses Resting', 20x26cm. Photos: Massimo Bianchini.

passion for art.

“As long as I can remember I have always drawn horses as well as landscapes, sketches and flowers,” Susan says.

Where some find themselves bound by the limits of their media, Susan's creative process worked the other way around. “I have endeavoured to portray the horse in all possible manners searching for the medium to work with me. I have made etchings, painted in oils and mixed media, sculpted in wax and made bronzes. I have always liked experimenting. I am unable to follow step by step guides, as my family knows with my cooking!” she jokes.

In 1998 her first exhibition of drawing and

sculpture was a resounding success. It was an auspicious beginning, and it was the moment she realized she would be an artist. “After my first exhibition I knew that was what I wanted to be,” Susan recalls; and yet somehow, despite the fact that it was a near-sellout, she could not let herself accept the idea. “The word *artist* was one of those almost unobtainable, special words which I felt one just did not *call* oneself. I felt one had to really *deserve* to be called such.”

After gaining tremendous initial success with her first show, Susan began to take her sculpting even further. A neighboring artist gave her access to studio space and introduced her to the process.



Photo: © Massimo Bianchini

Living near a place so famous for its terracotta since Etruscan times, she says, couldn't help but stir what she calls a fascination with the media of clay. A signature theme, that of terracotta horses with no legs, came about almost by accident.

"One day I was persevering to make a horse in clay but I just couldn't find the way of making it as I wanted," says Susan. "The fine legs were just too delicate to hold the weight of the horse's body. After one leg broke I took a hammer and broke the others, and then impaled the horse with no legs on a metal rod. Well, all of a sudden, it seemed to look better than it did before." That moment, she says, marked a beginning for her sculpture. "I began to make horses with no legs mounted with a metal rod on stone and old wood.

"In my latest sculptures on high bases and blocks, I merge the horse and base together and the theme evolved over time."

The subject of classicism is undeniable in her work. She remembers that the statue of Hyperion by John Skeaping, erected near her home in Newmarket, had a big impact on her as a child.

"I am captivated when seeing certain works by past Masters," she goes on. "The charisma, beauty, and inner forces which these sculptures transmit are almost sublime." The ancient Tang Chinese horses, Greek sculptures by Fidia and Lysippos, the Roman sculpture of Marco Aurelia, the Italian Renaissance sculpture and art, and the monumental equestrian sculptures in London and Paris are among the works Susan considers instrumental in her artistic development. "Virtually everything I see is absorbed as part of me and my art," Susan believes.

"The greatest help given to me was by a gallery director in London, who stretched me to new challenges and levels which I had not dreamed of before meeting him. He told me that if I was ever contented with what I had done, then I would never proceed. He told me that whatever I did, paint or sculpt, my work should always be recognizable. He gave criticism and encouragement. Thank you, Tony."

Susan does not stick to one favorite breed of equine subject; instead she lets the project decide where to go, selecting the type of horse to suit the sculpture or the sculpture to suit the horse. "If the horses to be sculpted are on a square block, then I think that well-rounded horses suit that best, like Lipizzans and Andalucians."

*'The Conqueror', 16 x 13cm.*

She loves the Thoroughbred, too, but says that she finds them a challenge. "They are just so anatomically perfect and beautiful that there is little margin for mistake," she notes.

"I love the elegance of Dressage Horses and the tension and expressiveness of Show Jumpers. But then I like the look of old horses, with their quiet wisdom and sagging backs. I like to depict foals, young and playful. I like to capture moments in time, family groups and herds, a look, an expression, a moment of freedom, a moment of communication."

She says she found her artistic voice in using water-based clay, and works with a semi-refractory type which contains crushed fired clay to make the finished pieces stronger. Susan works from her own sketched ideas as often as she lets the shape evolve on its own as she sculpts. "Sometimes I only have a vague idea in my head. Sometimes I work on a piece as near to the subject as possible, sometimes I do a detailed study before starting to work. And sometimes I elaborate on a sculpture I have already made," Susan says. "It just depends.

"The first stage is to shape the clay into the basic form getting as much work as possible done to create and realize the idea. At the end of each working period I cover the horses' ears and faces with cling film, then I cover the whole sculpture with a slightly water-sprayed transparent plastic bag. Spraying with water



Photo: © Massimo Bianchini

Sketches: © Susan Leyland

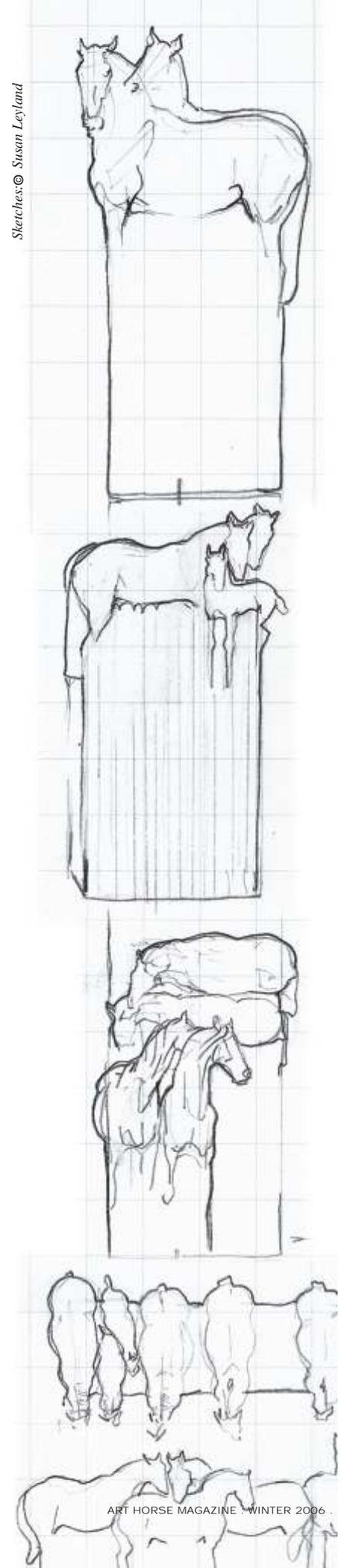




Photo: © Massimo Bianchini

*Above: Susan Leyland in her studio, surrounded by her favorite inspirations. Photo: Massimo Bianchini.*

is not always necessary, depending on the weather, but covering between working periods is fundamental to enable the clay to slowly dry but to remain moist on the surface.

"I work with very few tools. The bases are cut and straightened with something like a wooden ruler. The horses are moulded with my hands and a few useful tools, like a rounded edged pencil, a paintbrush handle, a home made piece of wood in the shape of a small square. I also use a tire patch, cling film, talc and hand-cream. These tools are a self taught artist's tools.

"The clay is very stony so to create the soft and smooth finish the stones must be well pressed into the clay. Cling film, being transparent, can be put over clay and work can proceed on top of the film if wished. The talc and hand-cream soften the edges and create smoothness. The tire patch is used to beat the clay to flatten and round the surfaces. The working and leaving process is repeated as many times as necessary.

"When the sculpture has hardened but it is still soft on the inside, it is hollowed or

perforated with a metal rod so that the clay is not too thick. The hollowed sculpture must have an air escape hole and any other holes made must not be closed otherwise it will burst during firing. At each working session the sculpture progresses, as better shape and detail are obtained. The final movement of the heads and necks must be made before the clay stiffens too much, at this stage even a small change like moving an ear can be very important as afterwards it is too late."

Susan usually works on several sculptures at the same time, and finishes a sculpture over a period of two to three weeks. Once the sculpture is finished, it's left to dry completely before firing at the MITAL artistic terracotta works not far from her house. The pieces stay in the furnace for a week.

Her Five Thoroughbred Bas Relief is the sculpture she says she's most proud of. "Due to its size, it was technically the most difficult piece I have ever made."

"There are sculptures I've done which I feel are important to me as they mark different periods in my life. There are others which are

important because they are prototypes of my work evolution.

"The ones I keep for myself sort of say something extra to me. But if I had to choose a recent favourite, then I think it would be the moveable block sculpture called *Equine Sculpture*, as it is a synthesis of my work up until now. Also *Standing Horses*, which gives me a feeling of timelessness."

Everything in Susan's life was going well. But then, in 2001, a tragic accident occurred that took her son, Alan. "My life and world changed drastically when Alan was killed. I say killed in the sense that it was he whose life was taken from him by an incapable person driving the wrong way up a one way street. My life and heart have never been the same. The dedication to my work and the hours in my studio have helped me support some very difficult times.

"My sculptures therefore are a mixture of my life and my feelings. Moulded into the clay is all that I am. I search to arrive at harmony and balance, simplicity and beauty as well as something unique and unseen. I aim high and give my total self to my work."

I search to arrive at harmony and balance

Photo © Massimo Bianchini



Above: 'Classic Four', 25x 35 cm. Below: 'Running Horses', 37x62cm. Photos: Massimo Bianchini.

simplicity and beauty

Photo © Massimo Bianchini



Susan says that the time she spends working in her studio now is what gives her joy. "The satisfaction of creating something personal," she continues. "The challenge to innovate and evolve. The pleasure to meet new people."

"Each year I give myself a goal, but then I have already forgotten what this year's goal was. Maybe I have achieved it, maybe I haven't."

"Looking back on what I have done this year the block sculptures have marked 2006. What future do I see for myself? I have just been asked to let some of my work be taken to the PalmBeach3 Art Fair in West Palm Beach, FL in January, and I am going to London for a few days also to meet a gallery owner from Santa Monica, California for The Cambridge Art Gallery. I have just opened an exhibition in the most beautiful town called Lerici.

"The future will bring what it does, but what I do hope is that every day I wake up with the desire to create and to be able to continue creating. I want to create the positive side of life within me, and to create something which communicates this idea to others."



~Lyne Raff

*Susan Leyland was born in Whiston, Lancashire, in Great Britain, and now makes her home in Impruneta, Italy.*

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recent exhibitions:

2002 Frost & Reed, London/Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

The Gallery, Place des Vosges, Paris

Galleria Tornabuoni Firenze & Pietrasanta

Primo Premio Scultura - Equine Art Guild.

Penne & Carta, Napoli

2003 SS Annunziata al Poggio Imperiale, Firenze

2004 Fiera dell'Arte Contemporanea, Genova

Giò Art, Lucca

Galleria Tornabuoni, Pietrasanta

2005 Frost & Reed, London

Galleri Hippo, Sockholm

Galleria Tornabuoni, Firenze/Pietrasanta

Alan Kluckow Fine Art, Sunningdale, England

Sculpture Symposium, Impruneta, Firenze

2006 Galleria Tornabuoni, Italy

Hotel Shelley e delle Palme, Lerici, Italy

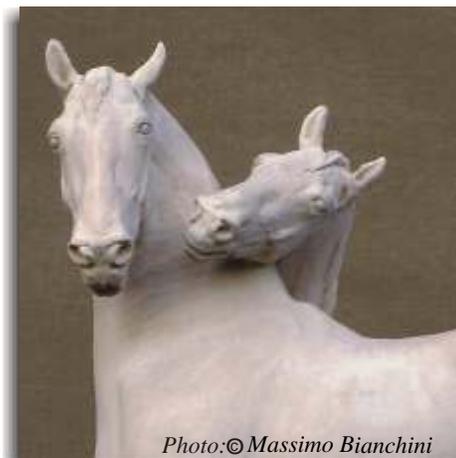


Photo: © Massimo Bianchini

Top: Susan at work.  
Above: 'Closeness Comfort',  
66 x 37 cm. (detail). Photos:  
Massimo Bianchini.