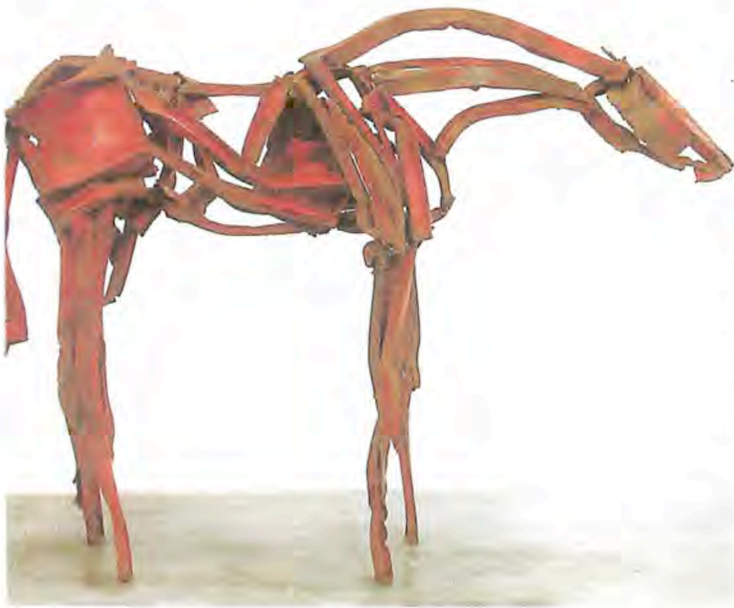

Rosa, 2005. Welded found steel, 30 x 124 x 67 in.

Laurie Delk: *Where do you find your raw materials?*
Deborah Butterfield: For the branches, we go all over the place. A fellow who used to work for me now works on a 16,000-acre cattle ranch, and they invited me to come and gather wood there. It's beautiful pine, almost like bristle-cone pine, and it's up on ridges near the Crazy Mountains where it gets completely weathered.
LD: *The wood looks windblown, and are those worm trails?*
DB: Yes, and the pine beetle, which they say if we have another winter like we had, that if global warming is truly happening, that the whole Yellowstone ecosystem is going to lose so much forest that it will be frightening. It would be good for me, there would be a lot of dead wood, but it's very scary. Many animals would go extinct, because they would have no place to live and eat. I guess what bothers me is that people, because they aren't there to see it, don't think it's important. It's so egocentric, the idea that you can't protect something if you don't directly benefit from it.

But back to the wood, my husband John and I raise hay, and I have a friend who trades me hay for sticks. She lives on one of the rivers, so I regularly get wood from her property. The foundry collects sticks on the Snake and Columbia Rivers. I sometimes ship wood back from Hawaii, in big containers, so I have a collection of wood. I guess it is like my own scrap yard.
LD: *What about the found metal pieces, the steel?*
DB: It's the same with the metal. I have been collecting it for 25 years now, so I have piles of yellow, red, green, and blue.
LD: *From scrap yards?*
DB: Yes, mostly from the scrap yards in Bozeman, some in Billings and Helena.
LD: *When you come across a piece of metal or wood, do you have an idea at that point what part of the horse it could be, or does it come later when you are looking at the massive pile of material?*
DB: Usually later, although some pieces are obviously going to be useful for legs, and some giant pieces are going to go somewhere in the body. But, in general, I just try to grab stuff, and somehow I get imprints of what is possible and not possible to use. I don't have time to think about each little piece, I am just piling: usually, I am crawling around on the piles, and throwing things down, and if I am lucky I have an assistant who puts it in the truck. But it's scary, very dangerous.
LD: *Do the woods get mixed in together, for instance, the woods from Hawaii and those collected locally? Do they ever end up integrated into pieces?*
DB: Sometimes they do, but usually I don't mix them. In one piece, I used both and named it *Hapa*, which in Hawaiian means "half." Most of the people in Hawaii are a beautiful racial mixture, and they call second-generation people "hapas." Generally, I keep the wood together unless there is a reason not to. Sometimes, it just happens.
LD: *I read that you alter the found metal pieces as little as possible.*
DB: Actually, I alter them quite a bit, but I try to keep their original character, and the paint. I pound the heck out of some of the pieces. Some are such heavy steel that there is not much I can do to bend or alter it, and the only thing I can do is cut it. After cutting one particular piece, we had to get a 20,000-pound press, and it was jumping around. The thinner the metal, the more I can manipulate it. Some of the pieces—like *Palma*, a multi-colored piece—were very formed. I used forms that were boxed in, like the casing for a pulley; it looked like a little baby coffin on there, a three-dimensional constructed look. I try to put things together, a lot of times I weld pieces together to make three-dimensional, box-like forms that become elements in the piece. It varies with the material, whatever it will let me do.
LD: *Are the wood pieces left as is?*
DB: Sometimes. We cut, glue, and screw them together, or we "bend" them, which means we break them in two. I build a big bronze horse by sorting through sticks that I think will be useful as armature sticks. They cast them in bronze, and then we weld an armature, which is there permanently. In most cases, we bend the bronze, either manually or with a hydraulic press. Sometimes we cut it and put it back together. The legs are almost always cut; we'll cut the end off, about eight inches, and weld it back on. That's the really fun thing about bronze—the guys at the foundry are such geniuses with it, and so it makes it look as if you haven't done anything, because it becomes so natural that you accept it. Bronze is so flexible, it's a very loving material, at least if you have people who are so good at working with it that it becomes easy.

That's how I feel about steel now too. At the moment, I have two assistants, and all three of us are comfortable welding and cutting. I think the work really sings then, because there isn't the hampering of having to do things that are extremely difficult. As I get older, I am realizing that I am going to have to allow people to help me more. You just can't lift 100 pounds over your head forever.
LD: *When you apply the patina, do you reference back to photographs of the wood original?*

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DB: Sometimes the original is just wonderful, and we definitely reference. Two guys at the foundry are fabulous with patinas. They usually get the piece roughly done to look like the photograph. It takes a long time to patina these things—almost as long as to build them. When I get there, I can decide whether I want to go with what they have or change it. Sometimes the guys are so right on that I just direct them and then I put some highlights and dark lights on, and sometimes I completely take the color in a different direction. Sometimes, we'll each work on a big horse. But you have to have a positive air-flow mask. It's hard. You're holding a torch all day, on concrete, it's not pleasant. We move them outside a lot and wash them down and try to see what they will look like in the light outside, which is always disappointing because inside when they are lit, they look so beautiful. Then you take them out, and they fade. When you wax them, in some ways they get richer, but in some ways there is less of a range in the color. So, I think they always look their best when they are hot, when I am working on them. Sort of like ceramics, before you fire it, it looks so great.

I ultimately choose the sticks for their value and their shape, not for their color. You make connections, and things end up being part of the figure, part of the anatomy. One piece of wood has been bleached gray, and one is brown, and you don't have a visual connection. With the patinas, though, you can lead the eye around by synchronizing color with form. It's poetic license, I guess, and sometimes I make them a completely different color from the wood.

LD: *But ultimately, the outcome is so naturalistic, that we as spectators, at least at first glance, believe it to be real wood.*

DB: Yes, and that's the thing. It bothers me that they are trompe l'oeil. It isn't really my intention to be a super-realist. The point is that the most interesting wood is the wood that is almost back to dust. The big horse in the corner is the big part of the tree—the sun had hardened the outer part just under the bark, but the inside was almost powder, very moldy and bad to work with. We were all coughing and choking. But in another year, it will just be dirt again. There is no way to glue, screw, wire, or nail such wood together and have it hold. For me, bronze is the way of making this wood permanent, so we can have the pleasure of seeing how interesting it is—its history and age are so expressive and evocative. Bronze is a means to end. Really, if people never know it's bronze, I'm thrilled.

LD: *It's almost a suspension of realism, rather than realism itself. If this were truly wood, it would be incredibly fragile and unapproachable. But the strength of the metal betrays our eyes, and we teeter between knowing it is bronze and seeing it as wood.*

DB: Yes, it's really thinking about wood and impermanence. Sometimes things need to be made permanent so that you can have them there long enough for people to contemplate them. But bronze isn't permanent either. It is so reactive, and it is going to change; the patina will change, but the essence of the form will be there. I think, like a pile of sticks, even as it falls apart, it ought to look good. I love the disintegration aspect in some ways. I don't like it when they turn green necessarily, but I think things can fall apart in an interesting way.

LD: *Two pieces,* Isabel *and* Hawaii, *were placed in close proximity at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette show,* Isabel *upright and* Hawaii *seated. It occurred to me, that if* Isabel *were to collapse, it would look something like* Hawaii. *And although the placement of the sticks seems random, they form the angles and curves of the horse's body.*

DB: That's what horses look like when they lie down, they sort of collapse. I try to keep a random thing, and yet it's always about weight and balance and the "angle of repose." But there is a dynamic and a logic, in the sense of physics, and it makes sense that something is where it is. I want people to feel those decisions in their own bodies, so that it is something they apprehend rather than intellectually understand.

LD: *Is there an aesthetic difference for you between working with wood and working with steel?*

DB: Yes and no. Part of it is the same joy of just putting stuff together. I can't help it. I just love to make stuff. But, of course, the process is very different. You have to wear a welding mask when you are making the armature. But I tie the sticks on, and the foundry takes it apart, casts everything, and welds it back together, and I don't really see it again until it is time to do the patinas. At that point, we have ground pieces of bronze sticks off many times, moved them, and re-welded them or found other pieces that were cast and put them on. It's a more demanding environment when I am doing the welded steel horses. A lot of the welding is on the floor, and there are a lot more fumes because it is painted

***Wind River*, 2004. Bronze, 91 x 109.5 x 60 in. Work installed at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.**

COURTESY TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

Left: *Sunup*, 2005. Welded found steel, 43.5 x 54.5 x 13 in. Below: *Redhead*, 2005. Welded found steel, 30 x 124 x 67 in.

metal. You have to wear a respirator and a mask. That part is frustrating, but I love it because it is so fast. When I weld something, it is done. I don't have to send it away, and I get to live with it longer. The steel pieces usually stay with me until they go to a show somewhere, so I become more attached to them because I get to see them every day.

With the wood from Hawaii, I only make one shipment. We used to go for four or five months, and at the very end, John and I would send home one large container for our art. So then, I got to have the wood pieces around me for quite awhile, and that was very nice too.

There is an element of color in the steel pieces that makes them more fun. But I enjoy them both. I think what is hard is that people come in and see a gray show, and in fact it just depends on the focus of the show. In real life, almost half of my work is colorful.

LD: *You mentioned differences between your work indoors and outdoors. Where do you feel your work is more appropriately placed?*

DB: It doesn't have to be a museum space, but I really like them in the context of human architecture. There are few places outside where they really work. We had *Hawaii* out back on an old brick patio, and it was wonderful there. It was just a rectangle of brick, but the work needs those geometric edges. We have another work at the end of our dining room table. I think having a horse in the house is every little girl's dream, but I love the idea of having this *being* there with you. I was once accused of making big horses just so I wouldn't be lonely in my studio. A very valid point.

LD: *In the 1980s you worked with plant materials and paper. Do you think you will ever return to those more ephemeral materials or are you comfortable with harder and longer lasting ones?*

DB: What I am not comfortable with is traveling all over the place restoring my old stuff made out of lily leaves and dust. But I keep thinking things are going to slow down at one point, and I foresee hanging out in Hawaii and just playing with some stuff, more on a personal level. When the work was only $300 or $400, I felt that it didn't matter if it disintegrated.

LD: *It is part of the transience that seems to pervade your work.*

DB: Right. Basically I will make things out of whatever is around me.

LD: *What was the progression from the ephemeral to the greater permanence of the metals?*

DB: The mud and stick horses, even the paper horses, were always on a steel armature so they would have structure. I made a few horses that were all wood. But the bugs eat them, the wire expands, the wood shrinks. They ended up being so grotesquely distorted that I didn't feel they represented my vision, other than in some totemic way. That part bothered me. Anyway, I would make the welded steel armature with chicken wire, and then the mud and sticks would be tied and blended into the chicken wire, and they are still around 30 years later. It's pretty amazing. I always thought that the armatures were very interesting, even when I covered them in plaster, but they needed a certain surface tension on the chicken wire to make them strong, so they had to be completely filled in.

We moved to an old farmhouse—the first place we ever owned—with a little dairy barn that we converted into our studio. It's now our office because we built a bigger studio. I gathered all of the junk from the farm. It was just a disaster, 29 trips to the dump, and I started welding armatures out of old fence posts and things lying around, intending to put mud on them. I think I did throw mud on them—I had a lot of old wire mesh and fence. Then I realized that they didn't need the mud. So I got into some pieces that look like drawings: they are three-dimensional but filled with lines and crumpled wire. Sometimes I would add sticks, wooden fence posts or snow fence, something that was really wood, and that led to making stick horses and the mud and stick horses. At first I tried to make mud and stick horses into bronze, and we mixed wax with Vaseline, beeswax, and different kinds of flowers and grasses to make it like mud. I made little stick horses with wax and we cast them, but it seemed too foreign. I hated working with wax: I liked the

TOP: COURTESY GALLERY PAULE ANGLIM / BOTTOM: COURTESY GREG KUCERA GALLERY

Habitat, 2004. Cast bronze, 31 x 123 x 65 in.

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idea, but I didn't like the reality. And so it led to just using the sticks.

LD: *You participate in the sport of dressage. Do you feel that the restrained movement of dressage transfers into your constructed horses? They seem to be still, yet simultaneously alive with internalized action.*

DB: You hit the nail on the head. It is doing work with your horse. It looks like you are just going in circles, which is pretty boring to the observer who isn't totally into it. It's like doing yoga or Pilates with your horse, more like karate, because there is a progression of the mental. It is physical, in terms of the strength, but it is also about balance and mentally asking the horse to wait. You direct them, even though they get excited, trying to recapture the beauty of the horse when it is displaying itself. But then you are asking it to carry a person, which screws up its balance. Maybe it's like the bronze—it's natural, but it is totally a construct. You are capturing the idea of the freedom and expression of the horse on its own, but by being art, you are totally changing it, you are civilizing it. I think this comes into the works too. My horses aren't wild mustangs, they are horses that have chosen to make humans part of their lives.

LD: *Do any of the stances of your created horses directly relate to dressage?*

DB: No. It's really more like you said, the internal tension, the internal dialogue—the discipline, the rigorousness of it. It would be really easy to go too far with these. When I have a piece that I think is successful, I have managed to keep the edge. I am sure that some people think they are too pretty, but I try to keep the beauty of a real kind, which has that balance between beautiful and ugly, terrorizing and comforting.

LD: *How do you respond to people who ask, "Why just horses for so many years?"*

DB: I am sure that, to many people, one work looks just like another. Someone asked last night, "Do you ever get tired of making horses?" You know, I am still high over the ride I had the day before I came here. I rode my two mares and a friend's horse. It was such a wonderful experience, and I think that is what continually goes into the work every day. If I didn't have that daily relationship with the horses, caring for them and riding them, it wouldn't be the same. You really have to be an interpreter, because horses are pretty fragile. So many things can go wrong, so you become quite paranoid and you are always looking for slight changes of attitude. As they get to know you, they become better about telling you what's wrong with them.

LD: *I think the fragility you speak of is evident in the work, even in the construction itself. These horses do not stand on large sturdy legs. In fact, the legs are quite small at the base.*

DB: Yes, they really are. It's a precarious moment on earth, and I think that vulnerability and impermanence are a large part of the work. They are very beautiful, and I can get very carried away with them, but there is also something quite ominous about them. Daring to love, and then losing that love, especially through death, is a difficult thing.

LD: *Do you think you will work with other materials in the future?*

DB: Yes, I hope to find something interesting. It just takes so long to gather enough materials. It took me a long time to get into colored metal, because I had to build up a junkyard full of piles of yellow, red, green, and blue. It is the same with new materials. It takes me awhile to find enough stuff and start collecting it.

LD: *Your work is quite musical, which is interesting because dressage involves choreographed movement to music. Is that a conscious transfer? There are definite moments of musicality (staccato, legato) in the horses' forms. They are like solitary musical compositions.*

DB: I love music, but I don't know about its structure. Yet I remember when I was young, I saw a Kandinsky show and I *heard* it. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, he described color as having a sound, as well as a spiritual designation. And that really influenced me. Yes, I think the horses are very musical in my own sort of tone-deaf way, perhaps a sound the wind would make creaking through an old house. It's like an anecdote I heard. A musician was asked, "How do you play the notes that way?" And the musician responded, "The notes are easy. It's the spaces in between the notes that's hard." And that's how it is with this work. It is the spaces in between, the negative spaces, or the pauses that give you the rhythm of the work.

Laurie Delk is a writer currently, as an evacuee from her home in New Orleans, living in Illinois.