

Originally published Thursday, June 9, 2011 at 7:02 PM

Review: Deborah Butterfield's contemplative horses at Greg Kucera

Recent horse figures by artist Deborah Butterfield are at Seattle's Greg Kucera Gallery through July 30, 2011.

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Special to The Seattle Times



Horses inhabit a fascinating position in art. They can be symbols of hunting or military prowess, representatives of the wild, or figures that pivot between tamed culture and untamed nature.

Deborah Butterfield, the artist who may be most definitively associated with horses today, began making sculptures of horses in the 1970s. She has said, "I first used the horse images as a metaphorical substitute for myself — it was a way of doing a self-portrait one step removed from the specificity of Deborah Butterfield." Now, three decades into her fascination with the subject matter, the horses stand on their own as independent beings of elegance, power and existential meaning.

Eight recent sculptures — three quite large, over 9 feet high, and five small, around 3 feet high — quietly stand in the galleries and outdoor space of the Greg Kucera Gallery. These are not mane-tossing, galloping beasts that might tempt an ambitious cowboy or empathetic teenage girl to ride them. They are contemplative, self-contained creatures, like equine versions of the isolated, expressive humans sculpted by Giacometti.

The power of Butterfield's figures comes, in part, from the contradiction between the tranquil, solid stillness and the dynamic, evocative methods of her construction.

Butterfield, who keeps horses in Montana, begins by making a model for each sculpture out of branches and twigs, choosing different kinds of wood for their formal and associative potential. These recent sculptures feature Madrona wood, driftwood, and wood from trees native to Hawaii, where Butterfield spends a lot of time.

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The lines of the branches do not simply outline the forms of horses, they create the contours through an accumulation of simple or energetic lines that seem to build up from within. This is three-dimensional gesture drawing, and the result is both skeletal and muscular.

Butterfield selects individual shapes and lines very carefully. The curve of a branch can represent a brawny haunch; a tapering stick becomes a hoof delicately touching the ground.

The pieces are then cast in bronze (in a complicated process that involves creating molds and burning out the original wood), welded together and patinated to create the realistic colors of the original wood.

The choice to cast into bronze is important. Not only does it render the sculptures weightier (and more desirable as lasting works of art), it creates visual and conceptual contrasts between ideas of naturalism and simulation and between fragility and strength.

Frankly, these contradictions differentiate Butterfield's sculptures from kitschy driftwood or bent-willow art and align this body of work with her previous use of scrap metal.

Butterfield captures such realism and naturalism in her sculptures that it is almost shocking to see the "extra" tracery of twig forms that extend from the legs and hoofs of the small-scale sculpture titled "La'ala'au." For the first time, Butterfield has broken beyond the natural form of a horse.

In all of the sculptures on view, the expressive lines create an evocative tension with the sense of still isolation, a tension that opens up existential possibilities. Ultimately, the sculptures invite gentle contemplation about individual existence and the possibilities of expression and connection.