

A HORSE NAMED MEMORY LANE

A Series of Stories & Interviews

PAUL KENNETH

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- THE HAUNTED HORSE -

M

ystery was my first real friend. Her plastic coat was auburn and creme. A mane of black yarn trickled down her neck. Below her tangled mane, Mystery was pierced on either side by two shiny red handles. She hovered mid gallop, tethered within a metal frame by four opposing springs. Only once did I attempt to climb onto her back. As if in protest, her springs squealed and bit at my bare thighs. Mystery was a mare with a wildness that could not be tamed.

My first memory took place in the basement of my family's Minnesota lakefront house. It was the first of many memories where I would be confronted by death. Mystery and I spent that morning gazing out the window at the geese who roamed the shore of the lake. It took all of my toddler strength to drag her from the window to the center of the room. There I positioned Mystery to watch me while I performed. She listened in earnest during my first act as I strummed a ballad upon my toy ukulele. For act two I would perform a feat of penny swallowing. Mystery watched with bated breath while I devoured those first twelve pennies. The coppery taste lingered like blood on my tongue

as number thirteen twisted and became lodged in my throat. The pain in my throat struck fear in my heart. My thoughts raced while I gasped for air. As my panicking eyes met Mystery's gaze a calm washed over me. If this was the moment when death would strike me down, I remember her black-brown eyes told me that I would not die alone. With this sense of comfort my throat relaxed. As if conceding in defeat, Lincoln went tails up and heads down, slipping from my throat to my belly. Maybe it was the tears in my eyes or the lack of oxygen in my brain, but as I gulped down that first mouthful of air, I swear I saw Mystery sigh with relief.

Years later when I returned to the place where our home was laid to rest, I found it to be a landlocked husk of its former self. A recent fire had opened the walls and charred its bones. While walking through the rubble I came upon a hardened puddle of plastic and springs. As the two glass eyes stared up at me from the congealed mass, a flood of dormant memories was released inside me. I'd like to think that Mystery haunted that abandoned home for years before her demise. I imagine the neighbors stirred from their sleep by a faint squeaking of springs. It comforts me to think of my first real friend gently rocking back to life as the wind blew through the windows over her tangled mane.



- PIECES OF MARTIN -

M

artin Bachman was a teenage silhouette always tethered to that Stancraft wooden speedboat. His daily waterski sets were visible from our basement window that peered out on Bryant Lake. The Bachmans lived in a house three doors down from our own on Beach Road. But not Martin, he lived on the water.

The morning he would die on the water, there was a strange stillness to the lake. As the sun began to rise, fog drifted and swirled in trails across the glassy surface. For waterskiers, this was the golden hour, a perfectly glazed mirror without the hint of a windswept ripple. Martin's parents had left town for the weekend and placed the babysitter in charge. She was experienced behind the wheel of a boat. So when Martin asked her to take him out that morning she thought nothing of it. Without a spotter aboard, she couldn't know how quickly he had fallen. As the rising sun blinded her eyes, the propeller cut Martin to pieces.

The engine of a yellow floatplane wailed as Mr. and Mrs. Bachman dropped flower petals from the sky. Carnations fluttered and whirled in the breeze before settling onto the surface of the glassy lake. I saw bits of Martin in those pink and red petals. And as the fragile, teardrop silhouettes disappeared below the water, a single finger washed ashore.

Act I:

An Interview with

Paul Kenneth

By A. Horse



Horseplay, graphite on paper, 9" x 12", Paul Kenneth, 2020.

A. Horse: After looking at your work, it appears you have a sort of love affair with drawing. How did this relationship begin?

Paul Kenneth: Some of my earliest memories revolve around creative play. When I was old enough to grip a crayon or squish a clump of clay, my mom discovered that I was capable of entertaining myself for hours. This developed into a daily ritual when as a toddler, she would sneak me into her workplace and stow me under her desk. While she worked above, I drew below. I illustrated books of monsters, clowns, and lumberjacks as if it were my job.

AH: Why horses?

PK: I do not have a simple answer to this question, which could partially explain why I have experienced such longevity with the subject. My initial inspiration began with a dream where a horse appeared amidst an endless black void. It communicated a story to me that encompassed all of time. In an attempt to unravel this unshakable dream I created a series of observational horse studies. In spite of my diligence to capture the likeness, these horses remained lifeless and empty of emotion. It was not until I began drawing horses from memory that they began to do something that bordered on the experience of my dream. I am interested in how the symbol of a horse can function as a mode of communication. Horses are a conduit through which I communicate my stories, both real and imagined.

AH: Some of your horses tickle my funny bone while others pull at my heartstrings. I don't know whether to laugh or cry when I look at this work. Are you interested in these kinds of emotional responses?

PK: The short answer is yes. The long answer is that it's complicated. Just like emotions, sometimes while I am making this work I let my thoughts wander. In these instances, whatever I am thinking or feeling gets embedded into the piece. At other times I focus on a specific memory, person, or feeling to help conjure the horse into being. Things tend to get a bit sticky when my emotions become tangled up in my reaction to the thing I am making. It's almost as if this phenomenon allows the piece to become self-aware. When this happens the piece begins to wiggle, and one cannot force or fake a wiggle, it can only be welcomed.



Hold Your Horses detail, graphite on canvas, Paul Kenneth, 2021.

**“Natural beauty
is most potent in
the Other.”**

-Paul Kenneth

AH: I know that the things you are depicting are “horses”, but there is something off about them. There is something strange and monstrous in the way you are rendering horses. Are you afraid to represent the natural beauty of the horse?

PK: Horses have long been a symbol to depict a very specific version of beauty. “Strange” and “monstrous” are often words used to describe feelings of otherness. I find beauty and majesty in all forms especially when those forms push against my unconscious expectations of normalcy. Natural beauty is most potent in the Other.

AH: As I am a horse with no name, I cannot help but wonder if your pictures of horses have names?

PK: While these horses are birthed from my imagination, I do not feel they are completely mine to name. A creature should be granted the power to name itself. This is why my chosen name is different from my given name.

AH: If the naming of a thing is left in the hands/hooves of that thing, how does your title process work?

PK: My titling process always begins after the work is complete. A title has to fit the work and not the other way around, so I test out different titles until I find one that works perfectly. For example, the first three drawings that I created in this body of work went through five title changes before they named themselves after current horse idioms.

AH: I'm curious why you landed on the idiom as a titling mechanism. It feels like they fail to capture the essence of this work.

PK: All language is flawed. But idioms have a marvelous way of highlighting their own inadequacy as verbal and written communication. These clusters of words that have pre-determined meaning becomes meaningless to the outsider. My titles for this work is part of an attempt to play with words so that they might name a thing without having power to define the thing they name.

AH: Why don't your title cards look like the rest throughout this exhibition?

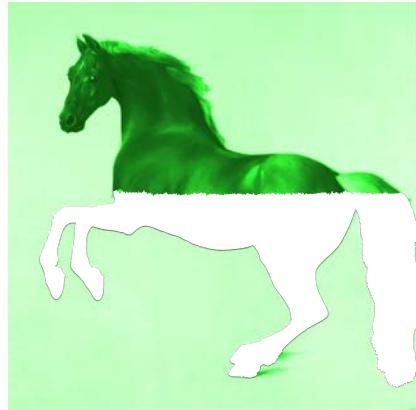
PK: Exploring physical touch and how it reveals itself to the viewer is instrumental to my artistic practice. When the installation of my work was complete, I was provided with a printout of my wall labels to review. They felt cold. I took this as an opportunity to make my own labels through graphite rubbings that could coexist with the horses. I find that these types of considerations can extend the reading of the work.

AH: As a horse, I appreciate the black and white palette of this work. Did you have equine vision in mind when making this aesthetic decision?

PK: There are multiple factors that led to this decision. The limited palette focused my attention on the marks and shapes that make up a horse, highlighting the materiality of the work. And yes, on a conceptual level it points to equine vision, early cinematography, and human limitations of color perception.

AH: With the amount of severed heads that exist in this work, I think that it is interesting that they do not read in terms of violence. Why do you suppose this is?

PK: I would argue that these horse heads are not severed. Severed implies that the heads exist in a post-body state when in fact, these heads are pre-body. The two pieces that depict the body of the horse perform how the whole horse may present itself. The horse head is then able to do the work of signifying a horse while inviting the viewer to complete the body with their imagination.



- THE CORPSE-HOME -

I was two years old when my father told my mother he was in love with another woman. She was standing at the kitchen sink washing the dinner plates when he approached from behind and uttered those unforgivable words. A doctor cheating on his wife with his nurse - such a fucking cliche.

The house was beige back then, with shit-brown trim. All that is left today is the two-car garage. It sits on an empty lot a block away from the original address. The beige has since been painted over in a sickly green somewhere between seafoam and pickle juice, but perhaps fittingly the shit-brown trim remains.

When I was three the divorce was finalized on my mother's birthday. Without my father's income, there was no way for my mother to afford a lakefront house on top of providing for four children, so the house was sold to a wealthy CEO of a local hearing aid company. (A fact that fell on my father's one deaf ear. This is not a joke, he is deaf in his right ear!) My mother held me in her arms as we watched our house get sawed in half. It was like a domestic magic trick gone awry. The contractors severed the house at

its waist. The first and second-floor stories were separated from the basement and hauled with the two-car garage, down the block and placed on an empty lot. An abandoned eyesore hidden from the neighbors by a thicket of trees, it was only visible from the eastbound lanes of Highway 62. The basement wound of the original house was soon covered by a suburban mansion like an obscene scab. For years we would look down from the highway upon that corpse of a home which, in spite of its color, refused to decay.



- A FRANK SPANK -

learned to poop in the toilet by myself just before we sold the house on Beach Road. In preparation for the sale we had to wash and hide all traces of our family from the home, which, in hindsight was an unnecessary accommodation since the buyer cut the house in half and abandoned it down the street.

With the help of my maternal grandfather, the sale was finalized and the last of the paperwork signed. Perhaps in an effort to celebrate or simply distract us from the impending move, our Grandpa Frank took me, my three older siblings, and my mother out for ice cream at McDonald's. This field trip struck us as unusual since it was already past our bedtimes. We got ice cream cones to go and then returned to say one last goodbye to our childhood home. My vanilla soft serve had a bittersweet taste that night. I blame my grandfather for the events that were to unfold, as he should have known better than to order a large ice cream cone for a two-year-old. When we arrived back at the house I quickly ran to the bathroom to demonstrate my new skills of pooping, still carrying my icecream cone. Alone in the bathroom, I attempted to balance the dripping

turret shaped cone on the counter next to the toilet, but no matter how hard I tried, it did not want to stand up. The alarm of my bowels, compounded with the frustration from the cone's unwillingness to stand upright increased the tension in that small space. In a burst of anger, I grabbed the sticky drippy cone and hurled it upwards with all of my might. My strength must have been conjured by the deep sadness of having to leave this home, because the cone launched like a rocket ship. For a few moments, the cone defied gravity as it clung to the ceiling, giving me enough time to poop the way I was taught like a good boy. When I exited the bathroom with pride the pristine bathroom had a new coat of paint: McDonald's Vanilla. My mother's expression at seeing the bathroom was a mixture of horror and astonishment. I remember how hard she struggled to hold back laughter as Grandpa Frank gave me a spanking that I would never forget, a spanking that I proudly earned.



Pony Up, graphite on paper, 9" x 12", Paul Kenneth, 2020.

Act II: An Interview with Paul Kenneth By A. Horse

A. Horse: There appears to be a range of speeds with which this work was made. How do you use time as a generative force in your creative process?

Paul Kenneth: This body of work is the culmination of more than a year of rigorous horseplay. There is a great range of time and energy spent with each piece. For instance, the canvas drawing titled *Hold Your Horses* took about two months with me drawing every day. Within that one piece, there are horses that were drawn in a matter of seconds, and others that took hours. I find it fascinating how the marks and rendering changes and evolves with time. Perhaps another example of this can be found in the large oil painting titled *Horsin' Around*, where I started with quick iPad drawings that were then laboriously translated into oil paintings. Each horsehead took only seconds to draw digitally and hours to paint.

AH: The way in which you use pictorial space to bring the drawn horses together without letting them touch creates an intensional density. Can you speak to the importance of space and density?

PK: You are correct in that space and density play very important roles within this work. In the drawings, the space created by the previously drawn horse dictated the size and shape of their future horse neighbor. In this way, I was actively collaborating with the horses as they were being created. This density was essential for me when installing this work, so as to create a conversation between the pieces, through placement, sightlines, and shadows. I believe that every viewer is going to come away with a different experience because they bring their own stories to the work. One of my goals as an artist is to provide a dynamic viewing experience that evokes emotion and encourages imaginative play.

AH: Knowing your proclivity toward painting and drawing I was surprised to see so much sculpture in this installation. How did this come about?

PK: I arrived at the horse-shaped shelves rather late in the creation of this body of work. They were born out of necessity when my exploration of the drawn and painted horse progressed and I became increasingly curious as to what these horses would look like if pulled from the paper or canvas. This curiosity led me to start squishing out polymer clay horse heads every night before bed and they soon became a stampede of polymer ponies filling up sandwich bags. When these three dimensional forms began conversing with their two-dimensional relatives, I knew they were important. So after testing different display methods for these miniatures, I realized that the only logical display solution was to build my own horse shelves. I think of these shelves like a lasso with enough slack to allow the viewer to pull away from the wall only to be roped back in. While the material form is solid, the visual form undulates between sculpture and drawing.

**“It does at times feel
like my head is full of
horse soup.”**

-Paul Kenneth



Hot to Trot, polymer clay, & wood, Paul Kenneth, 2021.

AH: The overwhelming repetition of horses generates a viewing experience that I can only liken to a walk through a soupy fog, where I proceed with anticipation not knowing what might appear before me.

PK: It does at times feel like my head is full of horse soup. The repetitious horseplay allows me to see the world through a new lens. As new horses emerge from the soup they strengthen and alter the nature of every horse that came before. I was in a constant state of wonderment as I watched this work transform in a magical manner. Until I truly understand what it means to be a horse I cannot say what is and is not a horse.

AH: There are some rather poignant formal and relational interactions within the placement of the clay horses. What were you thinking during this staging process?

PK: As odd as it may seem, I wasn't thinking that much when arranging the horses. I simply sat down and played with them for hours. Over time they began to assemble themselves, developing relationships that surprised even me!

AH: What is your relationship with levity?

PK: I was raised by a family that used levity to cope with difficult circumstances. It is in my DNA. To laugh in the face of horror is a magical way of denying power to that terrible thing. Levity gives me the ability to make it through each day. I hope that my viewers are able to experience some of that empowering magic.

AH: The statement that you wrote for this installation reads, “Its eyes were two black glassy lakes, staring at me through a dream swept fog. I could have drowned in those eyes. As if to greet me, the horse reared up on its hind legs. It stood towering above me, a mountain of muscle and flesh. My animal fear subsided as the beast gave a slow wink and a nod. With its eyes, it spoke to me a story without uttering a sound and in a language without words. This is that story.”

How specific is the story that you want the viewers to understand after seeing this work?

PK: I want that story to be specific and unique for each viewer.



Horsing Around, oil on canvas, 2021, Paul Kenneth.

**“... something left
unseen awaits discovery
by the viewer in an
imaginary realm.”**

-Paul Kenneth

AH: The horse has been used as a symbol throughout the history of painting in the Western World.

Is it important that your work speaks to this history?

PK: When I first began to explore the subject of the horse I was thinking more about prehistoric painting than Western art history. I cannot help but wonder what it was like for those first humans who recreated their visual experience of horses through pictographs and hieroglyphs. Generally speaking, I am more interested in how the horse has been depicted over time, across the world, in different mediums. To reduce the conversation of the horse to painting in the Western World might be like, well, beating a dead horse.

AH: Who determines the outcome of the work, you or the horses?

This sense of rivalry is something that I experienced while making these pieces. It created a strange tension between me and the horse where I often didn't feel in control of what was happening. I'd like to believe that no matter how much influence I have over the work, the horse will always have the final say.

AH: Is your use of abstraction a way to tame the horse and its image?

PK: I do not have any desire to control or tame these horses. Abstraction is a strategy for alternate possibilities of form. These limitations are in place to reign in my desire for control. In this way, the suggestion of something left unseen awaits discovery by the viewer in an imaginary realm.

AH: Was there an original horse and/or a final horse? Do you extract horses and parts from a character pool?

PK: The original horse has been buried in a shallow grave of paint, and the final horse will only be revealed after my death. A character pool seems limited and I have not yet experienced any limitations. If there is a location of extraction it would be more like a river or tide. The horses show evolutionary traits that are in many ways self-determined. If the horse wants a big booty, so it shall be.

AH: Are there horses that you have kept hidden away from the viewer?

PK: Yes, those are the horses that you have to watch out for.



- THE MYSTERY OF HORSE ROCK -

T

he hull of the canoe cradled my little body as I gazed upward. The rock formation jutted out over the lake like a looming giant. It was a speckled grey granite with splotches of pink-rose towards the water's edge. The surface had been worn smooth by glaciers during the last ice age a little over 10,000 years ago. The air was crisp with the scent of pine which wafted down from the treeline that sat atop the cliff. The water was clear enough to see the boulders on the lakebed twenty feet below. Our canoe floated above and below rock as if by magic.

Halfway up the granite face, a prehistoric painting depicted a stampede of hooved beasts. Swaths of iron oxide red torsos bled into the manganese dioxide black haunches. White accents from chalk or guano spotted every third beast. Their manes swirled and teeth gnashed as they ran wildly. The sheer size and primal energy of this ancient mural was unlike anything I had ever seen before. These odd-toed ungulates resembled horses with their large barrel body, prominent necks, and signature muzzles.

"They should not be here." my mother whispered over my shoulder. My grandmother confirmed this fact from the front of the canoe with a single nod. Her gaze drifted over my head to meet my mother's and the kindness left her face as her eyes became stern. With a finger pressed to her lips, she commanded silence. My mother should not have uttered those words, but it was too late. Caught on the breeze, her words made their way up the granite wall within earshot of the painted horses. The creatures peered down at me with terror in their eyes. In an effort to free them from their rock-bound prison, I plunged headfirst into the water. This was the first time Grandma Iris saved me from drowning.



- MARINA-BLUE #2 -

W

e were not rich like the neighbors with their speedboats and waterskis. Our wealth was an illusion. For a boat, my father had settled on an old used pontoon that was carpeted in a Marina-Blue #2 astroturf. Our lake recreation consisted of tying a frayed yellow nylon rope to an inflatable pool toy in the shape of a horse, which was then pulled at a top speed of 10 miles per hour by Old Blue. For safety, we donned the orange emergency life preservers, the kind that are reserved as a last resort on sinking ships. These vests were not designed with style or comfort in mind, being composed of three rectangular styrofoam blocks wrapped in vinyl to create a horseshoe shape. Wearing one of these floatation devices was torture. The neckpiece dug into the base of the skull while the parallel chest blocks enacted a slow strangulation.

We caged these angry orange garments along with a menagerie of inflatable animals in a screened enclosure that abutted our basement, which was at the top of a grassy hill that led down to the dock. I was alone in the basement when the windstorm

struck, making the inflatable animals rustle and float within their cage. In an act of dramatic emancipation, the screen door burst open and I watched from the basement window as our animals sought freedom in the wild. The horse reared up and leaped into the sky, the snake slithered across the grass, and the monkey somersaulted down the hill. Each animal's dance was choreographed by the wind. All of them had the same destination: the lake. Witnessing this wild release from an upstairs window, my mother rushed downstairs, scooped me up under one arm, and bolted out of the basement into the back yard. But by this time the parade of animals had already reached the shore of the lake. Realizing that we would have to set sail in order to perform a rescue, my mother rung a horseshoe vest under her other arm along with a fishing net. We pushed off Old Blue on a snail-paced quest as the wind bit our faces and the storm clouds rolled in.

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