

Making
Horse
Sense



Ceramics by Sara Swink

about this body of work

Though I've made plenty of horses doing all kinds of things over the years, this series of horses is by far the longest I've kept with a particular subject. I didn't start out with an intention to stay with them, I just stayed interested and the horses kept coming up with more ideas. That being said, they began with something in particular that I was struggling with.



Bandwagon (2023)
13"x 6"x 4"

Higher Horsepower (2022)
13"x 6"x 4"



As the pandemic was winding down and I was transitioning out of solitude, I struggled with reopening my studio classes to others. I was very irritable and resistant. In 2022, I made the collage shown here in order to invite the unconscious perspective, which led to a series of horse sculptures that culminated in this body of work. The horses, with the help of the rabbits, began to lead me through a period of gradual reconciliation with myself and others. The horses are playful and offhand, allowing

A corner of the collage that started this series of horses. The horse, standing on heads, seems to act as a filter for a range of difficult emotions. The girl on the stage feels shy in front of a large audience. The rabbits remind me of yin and yang aspects of all things as I strive for balance, looking forward and backward with alertness. I noticed much later the black (yang) rabbit is guiding the horse by the reins.

me to take things more lightly, recognize my own feelings of fragility, let go of unrealistic expectations, and connect in a more relaxed way with people in my studio. Admittedly, I'm still working on all of it.

Subsequent collage work and the progression of pieces revisited a theme I've returned to again and again: predator and prey. Horse, rabbit, big cat and domestic cats stand in for aspects of my own human psyche. How do I support myself, and how do I prey upon myself



left, *Stand Up Citizen* (2023) 9.5" x 4" x 5"
above, *Horse with 4 Heads* (2023) 9" x 6" x 5"
right, *Horse with 2 Heads* (2023) 9" x 6" x 5"

Lettie Jane Rennekamp, Portland painter extraordinaire, brought her high school ceramics class to my studio for a field trip. She connected with this piece *Outlook*, said she wanted to buy it, and asked what it was about. I explained I had been having a hard time as a teacher and this piece was an attempt at reconciliation with that role. To my surprise, she expressed a similar struggle. Why it should be a surprise, I don't know. So many artists struggle with teaching. But the other thing is, I was idealizing HER as a teacher, and we turned out to be on the same page.



above, *Outlook* (2023) 11" x 5" x 5"

left, *Red Chair with Thinker* (2023) 9" x 4" x 4"



Butterfly Speaks for Me, (2023) 23" x 12" x 7"

I came to this idea while noodling in my sketchbook of a figure with a butterfly as its mouthpiece. I had a lot of fun making this piece with all its garden motifs. I wanted to find the word for butterfly in another language: *papillon* in French, *mariposa* in Spanish, and then I looked up the Greek and in ancient Greek, the name is *psyche*. An aha moment! In all my exploration of Jungian ideas, *psyche*, which also means soul, is central. *Psyche*, which some think of as mind is, according to Jungians, autonomous. So this piece, *Butterfly Speaks for Me*,

describes my psycho-artistic process down to its essence. When I collage, when I doodle, when I noodle, I am inviting the unconscious, or *psyche*, to have her say. She speaks on my behalf.



About these butterflies

Many months later, this idea about butterfly/psyche was still percolating. I wanted to incorporate it into horse, another stand-in for the instinctual self. But it didn't work as a mouthpiece on the long snout of the horse, so after fiddling around, it became butterfly vision.



left, *Co-pilot* (2024) 8" x 7" x 5"
above, *Co-pilot in Bloom* (2024)



Standing in stillness allows the gentle butterflies to land. (Think of a teacher allowing students and their psyches to have a place to land.) This is an attitude and stance I would like to cultivate within myself for my artistic practice and as a teacher. Get out of my own way, get out of students' way. Let the learning unfold and discovery take place with gentle support. Let each person discover her own wings.

Sometimes the butterfly feels more like a slug and takeoff is delayed. Still, there's plenty to learn on the ground.

Bystander (2024) 12" x 5" x 5"



left, *Idealist* (2024) 9.5" x 5" x 5"
two views, above, *Pega-Slug* (2024)
9" x 10" x 6"



Without Within (2024) 10" x 12" x 5"

This is my neighborhood. My place. I carry it within. It's a part of me and an influence on everything I create.



Wherever I go, there I am.



Committee (2024) 10" x 10" x 4"



Moving Forward (2024) 9" x 15" x 5"



Path (2024) 10" x 9.5" x 7"



The idea for *Moving Forward* (left) is straight out of my collage. (See page 3) Yin and yang rabbits lead Horse, who carefully picks its way across the path strewn with heads. A well trained horse is surefooted and trusting, and the rabbits, being generally gentle and quiet, are trustworthy guides. In *Path* (above), rabbit guides horse without a halter and lead.

What does all this mean? It feels like a good direction to go.

In this period, surface treatments of naively painted animals suggest the bubbling instinctual creative wellspring within. This feels like the completion of a cycle and a return to source.



Bestiary (2024) 17" x 13" x 8"

In one sense these pieces could be seen as a glimpse into the swirling chaos of ideas and machinations that go on within.

The unconscious mind is a wellspring of creativity. In the many hours of making these pieces, I had an immense feeling of expressive satisfaction along with the thrill of massive uncertainty. I like that creative edge, uncomfortable but promising.

Lenny D, the first of this series, was inspired by a painting by Leonard Daley, an outsider artist I encountered in *Raw Vision* magazine.



Wellspring (2024) 10" x 10" x 10"



Lenny D (2024) 10" x 8" x 6"



Do you know who you can trust?



Foe Friend (2024) 19" x 19" x 10"

Nay (2024)
22" x 18" x 11"

What does a horse say? "Neigh!"
In my sketchbook, I cracked myself up by spelling it NAY and it dawned on me that this is a political statement, a response to the exasperating Biden Trump election bullshit and to the despicable decisions being handed down by the Supreme Court. All the critters agree. It's "NAY!"





*Not Quite Feeling Like
Myself (2024) 6.5" x
11" x 3"*

The inner gator lurks within, threatening, menacing and everpresent. One Jungian interpretation I heard is that the alligator or crocodile in a dream symbolizes an undeveloped aspect of self. It seems like it's demanding attention by causing fear, like a nightmare—not something to be avoided, but something to work with and get to know.





above, *Seduction* (2024) 17" x 14" x 8"
right, *Clash* maquette (2024) 7.5" x 8" x 4"

Horse is
being lulled
by this
dangerous
and
manipulative
predator.





Green (2023)
11" x 5" x 4.5"

Sara Swink: My life in clay.

I make clay human and animal figures that seem to reveal what's going on under the surface—emergent feelings and thoughts. It's a kind of dialogue with the unconscious. My hand-built sculptural work imparts ideas through intuitively chosen and combined bits of narrative that feel compelling. Animals are instinctual beings, while humans are often cut off from their instincts; an animal may symbolically bring me a quality I can identify with, learn from, and embody.

I often use collage to gather inspiration, recombining and developing ideas by sketching on paper and in clay. I like to riff and doodle, one idea leading to another, in an endless progression of a personal narrative that reflects and feeds my inner life. Each piece has a story to tell, even if it's hard to put into words. I use a gritty sculpture clay, incise into the clay, bisque fire, finish with oxides, underglazes and glazes, then fire to cone 5/6. I experiment a lot with ideas and surfaces.

My love of clay began at the age of 8 with the encouragement of our next-door neighbor who was a potter. In high school, I learned to throw on the potter's wheel, hand build, and mix glazes; I bought my own kickwheel with money earned cleaning houses. I left ceramics behind until I took a class at Palo Alto Art Center nearly twenty years later. This was followed by a workshop in 1998 with Coeleen Kiebert, whose methodology fuses artmaking with the psychology of the creative individual, and whose approach I teach. At the same time I pursued an academic art education in art history, ceramics, drawing, printmaking and foundry work at Foothill College, San Jose State University, and San Francisco State University through the first year of graduate study in ceramics. I taught at a number of California venues and in my own studio, while participating in regional shows. In 2006, I moved to the Portland area, where I established Clay Circle Studio, continue to show nationally and teach locally. In 2013, I was featured on Oregon Public Broadcasting's "Oregon Art Beat".



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