"Dogs, Horses, Humor, and Memory: What's Behind the Clown's Smile."
By Donald Fodness

Since 2020, artist Paul Kenneth has focused much of his energy on painting dogs and horses. By forming a series that so overtly references a "Dog and Pony Show" in the title "DOG & PONY", and in the restricted subject matter of dogs and horses, the artist builds himself an escape pod in case the work underwhelms or fails any grandiose expectations for what art ought to achieve. There is both humor and sadness in this gesture, similar to the way a clown portrait hides melancholy behind the make-up of an exaggerated smile. Perhaps the sadness is about the nature of the art world and how artists are expected to interface with its opacity, double binds, and vague paths towards varied definitions of success.

Outside of any potential sadness, Kenneth's work is laudable. He has noteworthy drawing abilities and a mastered understanding of context and conceptual rigor. His work is wildly accessible, offering a way forward in an art world entangled in a morass of one dimensional, short sighted, and archaic tokens around identity. The work is deeply personal yet explores big ideas related to memory as a psychological phenomenon (rather than identity or autobiography). What makes Kenneth's work accessible is play, humor, and the extremely bracketed and palatable subject matter of dogs and horses: icons of lovability.

Kenneth's work is funny on many levels. His comedic sensibilities are present in the way he distorts imagery, as well as his confined subject matter, materials, color (or lack thereof), as well as his process. The artist generates a solitary feedback loop by assigning himself a task to memorize an image, then draws that image from memory. This process is simultaneously goofy and serious in its genuine exploration of the nature of memory and its limitations. It celebrates the beauty of memory, while revealing its flaws in the way we confabulate and contort memory to fit our larger preferred narrative or constructed self. The multiple roles Kenneth assumes in this process are also somewhat goofy: he plays both the rigid teacher and the eager student, and/or the strict manager and the faithful employee. While on one hand this is a kind of solipsistic playfulness, the way he plays and the outcome are serious.

His imagery of horses suggests fidelity, nobility, power; they are regal — and also cute! Mixed in with his sense of humor is a palatability that is genuine and sincere. Kenneth wants his audience to understand the work, at least, on the most basic level. Images of dogs and horses in art and popular culture are so accessible that kitschiness inevitably pervades the source material. While some explorations of kitsch carry tones of irony, Kenneth's work is not condescending or pretentious. His exploration of these animals, their cuteness, and their associations with domestication is an artistic investigation of humanity.

There is a cliché about dogs looking like their owners, and in Kenneth's distorted drawings, this type of anthropomorphism exists in both the representations of dogs and horses. Their connections to humans is evident in the way he represents them, but is also found in the curious stories the artist stumbles upon through researching his subjects. Some of these stories are about the width of railroad tracks being directly related to the scale of the horse's body and our reliance on beasts of burden. Others are about the history of the "dog and pony show", and most and notably there are stories about the first visual representations created by humans. It's no coincidence that Kenneth's work visually echoes the work of prehistoric cave paintings in the way these animals are formally arranged. Details in this series occasionally respond to other art historical imagery from Chinese Fu dogs to Romanesque equine statuary and even Picasso's Guernica.

These references are from various time periods and span cultures across the globe. Occasionally these grotesquely bulbous, veiny and erect horse images throughout history reek of masculinity and male vigor. The juxtaposition of this imagery alongside intentionally cute, cuddly, and comic memory distortions into a flattened taxonomy of horse-ness reflects both humor and self awareness. Perhaps the agreeable nature of Kenneth's subject matter is a bit too palatable, much like the way jam bands are

inoffensive and easygoing. His work seems aware of this potential, and much of the art historical content and the allusions to academic theory suggest irony embedded in the work. This coy self-awareness balanced with the sincerity is where both the humor and beauty of his work lies. As an artist, Kenneth cleverly transitions from creating easily accessible art with palatable interpretations to embedding his work with academic understanding, full of theoretical and art historical scaffolding. While his work carries deeper levels of meaning, its basic representational nature, palatable subjects, and lack of pretension align with what Thomas Wolfe calls for in "The Painted Word." Conversely, he incorporates ideas about the gaze from John Berger's "Ways of Seeing," though in his work, the gaze involves animals—horses and dogs—looking back at the viewer, perhaps mocking and expanding the conversation.

The works in "DOG & PONY" exclusively depict either dogs or horses as subjects for paintings, drawings, and sculptures. While some of the works represent a single dog or horse as a subject, many of the works in this series include multiple figures (horses or dogs) that occasionally make up a larger whole image of either a dog or horse icon. In this way Kenneth composes a meta mosaic. Visually, the work is comprised of parts that cleverly reference the whole. These particular images, as well as other images of his that simply repeat various icons of the same animal subject throughout the entire field of the two dimensional space, carry a *horror vacui* quality. Once the viewer understands that the content is about memory and cognition, this formal trick appropriately references the way our mind compartmentalizes information. These forms reference a quasi scientific taxonomy of like subjects and also reveal the linguistic nature of Kenneth's work. Many of these pieces reflect the way we read or scan the page, as well as the way we articulate and understand symbol systems to carry and document information. The benefit of drawing as a language, versus written or oral language, is both universality in accessibility along with subjective interpretation.

Most importantly, hidden behind the clown's smile, Kenneth's work intellectually explores memory and aspects of the mind. While we tend to think of this subject primarily in the realm of psychology, Kenneth's curiosity around memory as an artist reveals experiential truths around the topic in ways that only an artist can. His work illustrates cognitive distortions, the need for confabulation to complete a whole arching narrative, the fleeting nature of memory and the human need for documentation.

Kenneth assigns himself a difficult task — challenging himself to draw from memory. Inevitably, because of the fallibility of memory, a distortion unfolds. That distortion becomes a central feature of the work. This then, while the overall form resembles the subject of its smaller constituents (a horse composed of horses, etc.), captures the nature of how we cluster, store, and retrieve memories. In this regard, the subject matter and the content differ in appearance, but in the act, gesture, or process they are greatly aligned. Kenneth's restriction to black and white media removes excess information and distraction. It also removes us from the present and shifts perspective and perception of a subject.

There are inevitable comparisons to black and white television and photographs that often conjure ideas and images of the past. While he clearly uses greyscale to achieve his imagery, notions of black and white evoke ideas around ways of thinking, and contrasting viewpoints with little room for deviation. This seems relevant in a world that feels absurdly polarized socially and politically, especially for how evolved we are in those arenas, as well as technologically.

Technologically his drawings are simple and archaic. While these works often reflect history, they are timeless and relatable to a variety of contemporary audiences. The "Dog and Pony" content is a clever way to combine art historical footnotes alongside the deeply personal, the kitschy humor of pop culture, and lovable subject matter. Questions arise about how sustainable these self-assigned parameters are for the artist. Kenneth's brilliance as an artist shines through the cracks of his constructed confines. This generates a curiosity about how he looks toward the future, rather than the past, for new frontiers in subject, content, and form.
What will the dog, horse, or anything else look like in Kenneth's sci-fi dystopian vision of the future? Either way, it will surely be funny.

Paul Kenneth
One Trick Pony
Graphite on Paper
22" x 30" inches
2021

Paul Kenneth
Hold Your Horses
Graphite on Canvas
40" x 50" inches
2021

Paul Kenneth
Barking Up the Wrong Tree
Graphite on Canvas
48" x 60" inches
2023-2024

Paul Kenneth
Barking Up the Wrong Tree (Detail)
Graphite on Canvas
48" x 60" inches
2023-2024

Paul Kenneth
Barking Up the Wrong Tree (Detail)
Graphite on Canvas
48" x 60" inches
2023-2024

Paul Kenneth
Horsin' Around
Oil on Canvas
60" x 84" inches
2021

Installation view of Paul Kenneth's exhibition *DOG & PONY* at the Galleries of Contemporary Art, University of Colorado Colorado Springs.