

# Horse Crazy

Deborah Bright

*The stable where I ride is 95% populated by women riders. At times  
(most times) I feel like I'm about 12 years old there. Paula Allen*

“What is it about girls and horses, anyway?” queried a journalist in a recent newspaper article, noting that almost every middle-class white girl in North America is or has been a horse-girl, or at the very least, knows one. My own curiosity about this phenomenon was reawakened in the early 1990s when a female colleague on the admissions committee at the New England art school where I teach mentioned that a number of female applicants had submitted renderings of horses for the “free drawing” requirement of the admissions portfolio. While this didn’t astonish me—after all, boys submit drawings of gore-spattered monsters and muscle cars with some regularity—her report that the male committee members routinely greeted the horse drawings with hoots of disdain and derision made me curious about the gender dynamics of girl-horse love and the volatile reactions it seemed to provoke.

Here I must confess my own desires, too, as a former horse-girl turned artist. I daydreamed a nation of horse-girls who shared this obsession, a fierce army of horse-girl warriors impervious to male mockery. Flouting the social consensus that they should have moved on from horses to boys, these rebellious applicants were signaling their membership in a subversive sisterhood. If we nurtured their talent and rewarded their insistence on preserving their deviant passion, I fantasized, we could move mountains.

It was all a mirage, of course, a shimmering vision made of sand. As I soon discovered to my dismay, many adult women who had been or who remained lovers of horses were unsettled and even hostile to the idea that their equine attachments might have any anti-social or subversive undertones. But while conducting an anecdotal survey of former horse-girls in my cohort, I found other women artists who were exploring the

explicitly transgressive potential of horse-love by the early 1990s, including Daphne Fitzpatrick, Janet Biggs, Julia Kunin, Patricia Cronin, Christine Lanzl, Ann Fessler, and Lucy Gunning. Clearly, the time seemed ripe for reassessing women's horse-love and horse-art in a revitalized context.

If postwar American-style modernism was notable for suppressing content in favor of the material properties of visual media, the postmodern *fin de siècle* brought it back with a vengeance. The crisis of identity that marked much late-twentieth-century art in the U.S. (who am I? where am I located?) was provoked, in part, by rapid and traumatic changes in the U.S. economy which created widespread uncertainty about the future. Demands for equality for racial and ethnic minorities, women, and gay men and lesbians, added to the increasing visibility of immigrant, low-wage labor, produced waves of social panics over the decline of what conservatives termed "traditional values."

Much of the art of this period reflected a broad preoccupation with naming and locating oneself in this destabilizing world—a task often displaced onto fashion and sublimated in consumption. But postmodernism's dismantling of the Kantian ideal of the autonomous, unitary, self-knowing subject opened up new possibilities for artists to explore the multiplicity of self-images we both produce and are produced by throughout our lives, both consciously and unconsciously. Perhaps the best known artist to explore this territory was Cindy Sherman whose many self-incarnations as film actresses, she-monsters, characters from melodramas and historical divas called both authorship and the production of subjectivity into question. While a horse-girl identity wasn't part of Sherman's repertoire, it seemed no less significant to some of us as a formative image and experience of erotic selfhood. Following the conventional wisdom, I would concur with Anna Freud's observation that "A little girl's horse-craze betrays either her primitive autoerotic desires (in the rhythmic movement of the horse); or her identification with the mother (if she enjoys caring for the horse); or her penis envy (if she identifies with the animal and sees it as an addition to her body); or her phallic sublimations (if her ambition is to master the horse and train it." (Schowalter 512) But I suspect that there's more to the story.

In elementary school, a herd of us horse-girls would spend recess galloping, trotting and cantering around the playground (tricky on two legs); whinnying, snorting,

blowing, pawing, nickering, and tossing our manes—jealous of the girls with long ponytails. Few of us owned horses or rode regularly, but borrowing images from picture books, popular television shows, and our cherished collections of model horses, we conjured a world of beauty, gentleness, speed and power. Around puberty, my mates and I gradually relinquished our horseplay though I vividly recall one girl who maintained a hardcore horse identity into junior high. But she was increasingly isolated in her horse-world and eventually she, too, was conscripted into the mysteries of starter bras and mascara. While I was away at college, my mother donated my scuffed plastic, metal and china horses to the Salvation Army. I did not protest.

Proposing any linkage between girlhood horse-craziness and a woman's adult sexual orientation or behavior is fruitless; it seems clear that horse-craziness is no more particular to North American white girls who grow up to be “butch” or “femme,” queer or straight. But what interests me is how fantasy horse identification might function in relation to the development of gender identity in girls before they “become Woman.” Nor am I denying that horses are a staple of male fantasy; obviously they are, from the legendary stallions of Alexander the Great and the Prophet Mohammed to the acclaimed modern play, *Equus*. The mythic centaur of hellenistic legend, half man and half horse, was a potently masculine and bearded creature; there was no female equivalent. But rarely do boys develop that crazy passion for horses that girls do and this suggests that the psychic and symbolic functions of the horse might be very different for the two genders.

My hunch was bolstered when a horse-illustrator acquaintance introduced me to a trade magazine for painters and sculptors of horses, *Equine Images*. As I leafed through a stack of these, I discovered an artistic subculture with its own exhibition circuits, marketing strategies, and standards of artistic merit. The prices commanded by the most renowned equine artists were enviable. To cultural elites, the art displayed in *Equine Images* is the embodiment of kitsch. It also happens to be a field dominated by white female artists, though a disproportionate number of the prizes and commission, from postage stamps to bronze equestrian monuments, are awarded to men.

If I can generalize about gender differences from the selection of artwork I observed in *Equine Images*, male artists tended to portray horses with riders performing

purposeful masculine tasks like racing, rodeo-riding, playing polo or leading cavalry charges. American cowboy art, the legacy of Frederick Remington's century-old popularity, is a highly lucrative and male-dominated marketplace with its own museums and passionate collectors. Women artists, on the other hand, tended to portray riderless horses in idealized natural landscapes or magical fantasy settings. The horses' individual personalities and anthropomorphic qualities were much more consistently articulated in artworks by women, while for men, the aesthetic pleasure of the horse was more often expressed through the animal's mastery by a male rider.

As an art student being inducted into the formalist rigors of post-painterly abstraction in the mid-1970s, I was shocked when I first encountered Deborah Butterfield's stick-and-mud horses at a mainstream commercial gallery in Chicago. I was ambivalent yet mesmerized by these sculptures for though I'd been taught that such blunt figuration signaled the artist's failure to transform recognizable subject matter into abstract form, I could not help but admire Butterfield's monumental refusal to do so. Here was a horse-girl, I thought to myself, who hadn't caved, who had managed to parlay her passion into serious marketable art. I only learned later that I had projected my own wishes onto the artist. In a 1989 interview with Marcia Tucker, Butterfield denied any personal investment in horses and stated that her concern, fostered in the climate of feminist and anti-war activism of the early 1970s, was to reclaim the horse figure in monumental sculpture from its masculine and militaristic associations. (Tucker 156)

Neither did Susan Rothenberg's celebrated horse paintings from the same period evolve from any emotional memories or childhood attachments. When queried, Rothenberg demurred that the horse shape emerged from her unconscious in the course of doodling on a piece of canvas. As she put it, the "big, soft, heavy, strong, powerful form" provided a point of tension for her painterly struggles with two-dimensional flatness. "The horse was a vehicle for me, the same way Jasper Johns had to use his imagery." Though she resisted content analysis, Rothenberg nonetheless suspected that there was more to her horses than mere formal challenges. In a 1991 interview with Joan Simon, Rothenberg acknowledged that the horses in her paintings two decades earlier could also be understood as stand-ins for herself.

In an uncanny instance of life imitating art, both Butterfield and Rothenberg subsequently became avid horsewomen. Butterfield has taken up *dressage*, the most exacting of professional equestrian events while Rothenberg shares husband Bruce Nauman's passion for raising quarter horses on their New Mexico ranch. In the face of the strict prohibitions on sentimentality in subject matter thirty-five years ago, I suspect it was precisely because they *weren't* horse-girls in their youth that both Butterfield and Rothenberg could use the horse so unselfconsciously in their art.

Indeed, one has to go back earlier in the twentieth century to find more apt progenitors to the current generation of horse-girl artists. Romaine Brooks and Leonora Carrington both remained relatively obscure until the 1970s when the efforts of feminist art historians brought their work modest notoriety and a few retrospectives. Though both women employed distinctly different pictorial styles and codes—those of symbolism and surrealism respectively—each produced highly eroticized horse images with overt psychobiographical references.

Romaine Brooks was an American expatriate who moved to Paris during the *Belle Epoque*. Abandoned by her father, raised by an abusive mother and forced to care for her schizophrenic younger brother, Brooks became an instant heiress at twenty-eight when both her mother and brother died. Freed at a stroke from economic and familial constraints, she could live her life independently as a painter, though she was always haunted by her miserable youth. Her taste for male attire marked her at the time as an “invert,” Havelock Ellis's label for those of either sex who identified with the opposite one. Brooks' contemporary, novelist Radclyffe Hall, also adopted masculine garb and went by the name of “John.” Brooks painted Hall's lover, Lady Una Troubridge, as a monocle-sporting dandy with bobbed hair.

Swept into Natalie Barney's legendary gynocentric literary salon on the Left Bank, Brooks became Barney's lover and lifelong friend. Independent wealth gave these two American heiresses the freedom to ignore convention and live as they pleased, though “evil-flowered decadence” perfumed their reception among male peers. In 1920, Brooks painted Barney's portrait as *L'Amazone*, and included a totemic horse figurine in the foreground. The title of the painting referenced Barney's noted reputation as a “masculine” horsewoman; that is, she rode astride rather than side-saddle as bourgeois

ladies were expected to. The painted horse statuette is galloping away, tail flying, toward the orientalized landscape visible through the window behind Barney.

The horse as both symbol and agent of freedom appears again in Brooks' sinuous *art nouveau*-style pencil drawings from the 1930s. One of these, *les Empecheurs* (the Impeders), is easy to read—and the artist intended it to be so. Two vengeful furies (a mother and brother, perhaps?) grab the tail of a winged horse-woman as she tries to leap from the ground. The woman's body melds with her steed's, her hair flowing into its wing. In several other drawings, Brooks repeats the winged woman motif: *Climbing One's Wings*, and the overtly lesbian *On the Wings of Love*. In this latter work, the active, more masculine, woman's wing merges into that of another animal avatar, a hawk.

Another vibrant “ancestor” of contemporary horse-girl art is the surrealist Leonora Carrington. Daughter of a Lancashire industrialist, Carrington was a nineteen-year-old art student when she met the German surrealist painter Max Ernst and commenced a torrid affair. Shedding the British reserve with which she'd been raised, Carrington reveled in her sexy outlaw life, painting a series of allegorical self-portraits in an Ernst-inspired style.

In her 1937 self-portrait, *Inn of the Dawn Horse*, Carrington fetishized her body in skin-tight white breeches, a man's jacket and high-heeled boots. Seated on a disquietingly animated Lady-chair, her dark hair tumbling mane-like over her shoulders, she extends her right hand to a nursing hyena with Ernst's piercing blue eyes. A large white rocking horse hovers against the wall above and behind her while through the curtained doorway, a white horse dashes—mane and tail flying—into a wooded landscape.

Rather than invoking Freud's theories in her work, Carrington drew on childhood tales and alchemical mysticism as the wellspring for her horse imagery. Surrealism, after all, is about the enlargement of one's consciousness beyond the narrow terrain of everyday perception, embracing the power of dreams, wishes and compulsions. This is the realm where human, animal and fetish object share equal vitality and symbolic intensity. As Carrington herself put it: “In *l'amour passion*, it is the loved one, the other who gives the key. Now the question: who can the loved one be? It can be a man or a horse or another woman.”

In her play *Penelope*, written in Mexico a decade later, Carrington dramatized the conflict between a young girl who spends hours riding her white rocking horse in the nursery and the girl's father who sternly forbids her to continue rocking because she is "too old for such nonsense." The girl escapes her father's prohibition by becoming a white colt and flies off to a dreamworld where "the imagination neutralizes the male enemies of magic." As in Romaine Brooks's drawings, Carrington's girl/woman escapes from the punitive and constricting world of bourgeois patriarchal order and the institution of the family that both teaches and enforces it. To do so, she becomes a horse.

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Taking into account my earlier observations about the fantasy drawings by women artists in *Equine Images* and these two examples from the histories of modernism, we might consider alternative symbolic understandings of the horse as a fetish object for a significant number of women in our culture. Recent revisions of psychoanalytic theory by contemporary feminist thinkers, particularly theories of fetishism and the masculinity complex, are suggestive. Sigmund Freud and traditional psychoanalysis theorized fetishism as an exclusively male sexual deviation, the consequence of the boy's oedipal stage gone awry.

In the classic oedipal drama, little boys accidentally spy their mother's vulva and misrecognize the absence of a penis as a sign of her having had it removed. This arouses in the boy an unconscious fear of his own castration, thereby bonding him psychically to the father as the one who both possesses the penis and is the (phallic) enforcer of the law. In the Freudian view, fetishism—the substitution of a foot, a shoe, hair, or a piece of lingerie for the object of desire—results when the boy fixates on such an object near the site of the 'missing penis' and substitutes it for the absent member, thus psychically restoring his fantasy of the mother's body-with-penis and allaying his own anxieties.

For traditional psychoanalysis, then, female fetishism is an oxymoron. If girls have no penis to begin with, there is no anxiety about losing it; rather, girls identify with the mother's corporeal and symbolic "lack." Those few girls who persist in disavowing that lack and insist on their "phallic" subjecthood, develop a "masculinity complex." For

Freud, this was the basis of adult female inversion. Today, of course, we would view any individual's erotic identity or object-choice as resulting from the complex interplay of genetic, psychological and environmental factors. Where the Freud *was* revolutionary was his insight that the turn of a subject's sexuality is profoundly shaped in childhood; that young children are not erotically innocent.

In a 1991 essay on female fetishism, Elizabeth Grosz suggested that girls/women may gravitate (unconsciously, of course) to a phallic substitute as a love object as a way of disavowing the powerlessness associated with being female in a heteronormative, patriarchal culture. Thus the choice of a horse as a girlhood fetish object might be understood as a way-station (or jumping-off point, recalling Brooks' and Carrington's images) on some developmental trajectory toward a more flexible and empowered sense of self than that offered by mainstream society. The choice of a large and powerful, yet gentle, animal substitute resonates with Rothenberg's observation that she was unconsciously compelled to choose a "big, soft, heavy, strong, powerful" creature to embody her existential self as painted form.

Personally, I am intrigued by feminist theorist Teresa De Lauretis's refreshing insight that all erotic behaviors and desires should be viewed as "deviant," with none morally superior to another. The anxious compulsion to fix and enforce a normative standard of acceptable and deviant sexual behavior is better viewed as a displacement of other social anxieties onto the bodies and lives of citizens, anxieties about national and social stability, the changing nature of the family, and renegotiations of traditional gender, sexual, and racial arrangements. De Lauretis's generous and non-judgmental view provides a way to account for -- and take pleasure in -- the strange richness of erotic fantasy, including a girlhood passion for horses. But even putting the words "girlhood" and "erotic" in the same sentence is deeply suspect in a society still invested in myths of childhood, especially girlhood, innocence.

Where female fetishism is concerned, De Lauretis posits that for some women, the lack is not the penis or phallic power, but the female body itself as a desiring and desirable object. Taking pleasure in one's physical body, in its power and presence, is denied to a majority of middle-class women in mainstream U.S. society and is fueled by a hyper-consumer economy which repeatedly equates women's self-worth and social



desirability with an unattainable standard of appearance represented by the fashion, advertising, exercise, dieting and entertainment industries. At increasingly earlier ages, the female body becomes a site of alienation, discipline and punishment. Embracing and identifying with the sensuous beauty, monumentality, and power of the unbridled horse, kicking up its hoofs and running free across boundless fields of dreams, is a potent fetish to ward off the real-world constriction of women's physicality, power and presence in a society that still fears and belittles these. Horse-craziness, it seems to me, is nothing less than a form of self-love.

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Crazy Horse was an Oglala Sioux Indian chief who fought against being relocated to an Indian reservation. He took part in the Battle of Little Big Horn. Did You Know? Crazy Horse refused to be photographed. Did You Know? Crazy Horse teamed up with Sitting Bull to decimate Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and his cavalry in the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Three kids, who hope to capture their own wild mustang, outsmart a ring of horse thieves and return a prize stallion to its owner. Director: Eric Hendershot. The tale of the extraordinary life and times of Lucky, a horse that was born in captivity but achieves his dream of running free with the help of a stableboy. Director: Sergei Bodrov. Stars: Chase Moore, Maria Geelbooi, Arie Verveen.