Susan Rothenberg
MATRIX/BERKELEY 3

University Art Museum
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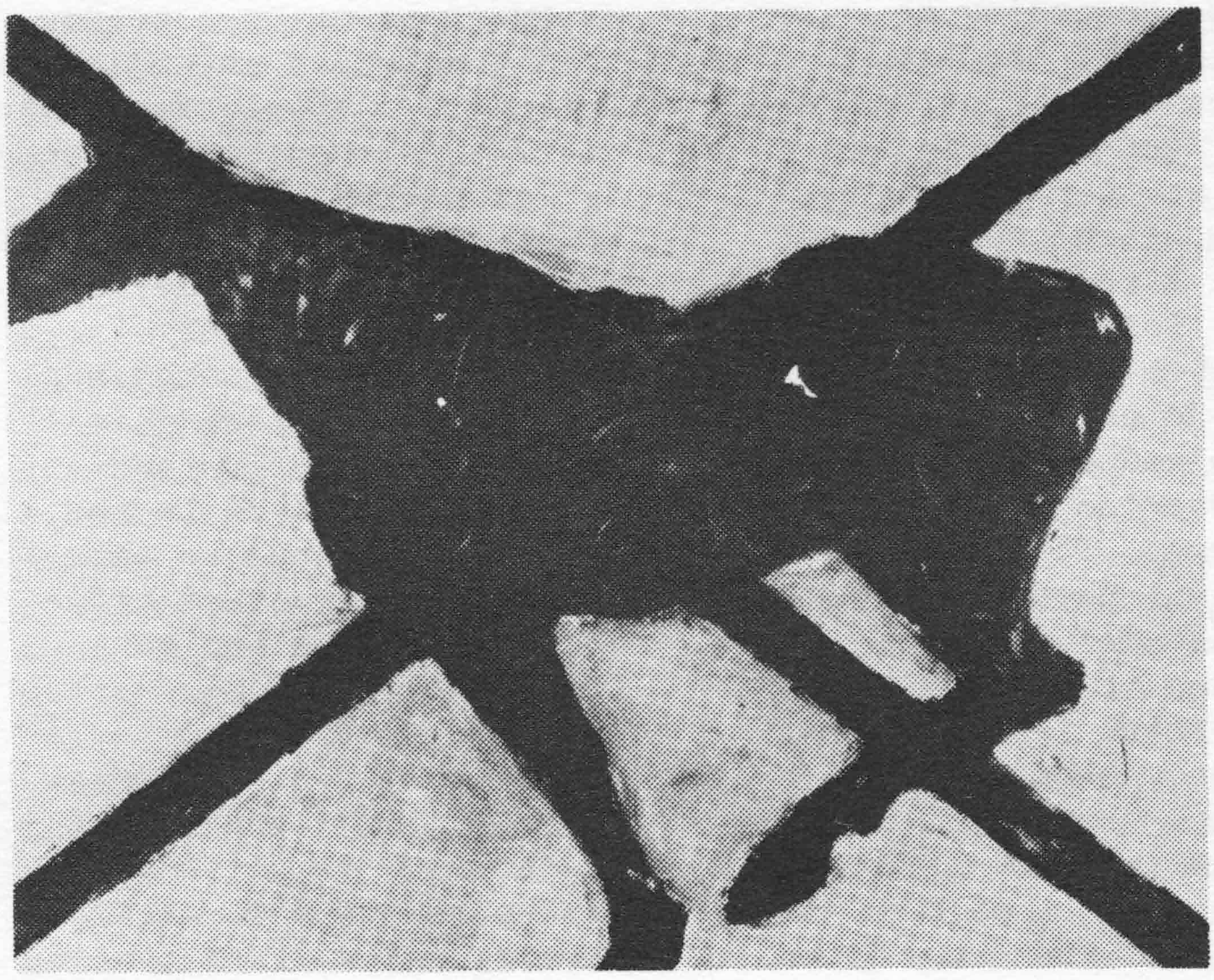
Butterfly, 1976



Spontaneous descriptions of Susan Rothenberg's work begin with the statement that she paints horses. Indeed, since 1974 there has been a rich flow of powerful, disturbing portrayals. The animals are shown alone or in pairs, stationary or running, divided linearly or undivided. Though clearly an obsession the subject matter of Rothenberg's art was arrived at accidentally, according to the artist: "I had been doing abstract paintings, using a central dividing line so as to keep the painting on the surface and call attention to the canvas. But I wasn't satisfied with what I was doing. So one dull afternoon two and a half years ago, I doodled the image of a horse. It divided perfectly. Maybe there was some unconscious reason, but horses really don't mean anything special to me. I rode tham at camp, but that's about it. The horse was just something that happened on both sides of my line. The image held the space and the line kept the picture flat."(Rothenberg, New York, May 3 '76).

Rothenberg's remarks cement her concerns in the issues of 1960's and early 70's mainstream or formalist painting. Basic is an interest in maintaining the inherent flatness of the picture. Rothenberg employs a sophisticated formula that combines a "figure" (the horse), a scaffolding based on crossing or single lines, and a brushy, richly elaborated, abstract surface ground. The three components at times merge, forming a rapprochment between the normally opposed poles of the figure and ground. Together, one complex plane is created, with each component helping unify and connect the parts. At other times, Rothenberg alters these relationships to allow spatial illusions and modulations to occur. The horse becomes separated from the surface on these occasions.

Introducing a representational element to normally abstract painting concerns is Rothenberg's unique contribution. Though important for its enhancement of formal complexity, inclusion of the horse offers further rewards as well. The associative possibilities of this subject are unmatched by almost any other animal. Though called up unconsciously, according to the artist, nevertheless this choice of subject significantly enriches her more pictorial interests.

The range of associations possessed by the horse starts with graffiti-like depictions in prehistoric caves. The magical content of that imagery continued past the point at which the animal was domesticated. In the work of Franz Marc early in this century, for example, the wild horse maintained its demeanor of abandon, a quality uniquely the property of nature in its most chaotic and unrestrained states. These attributes undoubtedly led to the use of the horse in contemporary literature as a symbol of human sexuality.

Rothenberg's paintings draw on this wealth of associations, seeming to resubmit the familiar subject for new consideration, even veneration. The misleading lack of complexity in her subject recalls Josef Albers' explorations of the square; similarly, Rothenberg develops her theme in a variety of ways. Beginning in 1974 with stationary animals, apparently plowhorses, she altered the demeanor and number though never the fundamentally iconic treatment. One of the most significant modifications was dividing the animals with horizontals, verticals and diagonals. (Compare Non mobilier and Butterfly).

Though seeming to be centralized, the verticals rarely bisect the painting. Instead, the lines are used to visually counterbalance the off-center placements of the horses. Moreover, the diagonals often emanate from near the corners of the canvas, not at the corners as they might if formalist theory was paramount. These lines, too, are determined by the placement of the horse. Rothenberg's contradictory use of the dividers has several implications which together suggest multiple aspirations.

A breach with formalist dogma is announced by the inclusion of the space-defining figurative element, the horses, and the artist's use of dividers represents a further departure. Though addressing conventional issues, Rothenberg parodies one of the most rigid of these, the absolute submission of all planar incidents to the shape and character of the picture plane. Indeed, the manipulation of the dividing lines according to the physical placement of the horse implies a struggle for dominance between the figure, and ground.

The inherent heroism of the horse is ultimately diminished if divided. Its symbolic content is reduced--literally drawn and quartered--when the animal becomes a motif for artistic manipulation. Just as the horse was domesticated by man, then, nature is tamed by art in Rothenberg's work. The vibrant characteristic of the horse has literally been X'd out, as if part of a fetishistic activity, the barbarism of which is suggested by Rothenberg's graphic style.

Rarely graceful, Rothenberg's renderings have a primitive, even awkward aspect. This quality alligns her with several other artists who might as a group be called "Primary Imagists." Like such contemporaries as Neil Jenney and Jon Borofsky, elemental subjects are rendered with a gestural quickness, and graffiti-like forcefulness. Moreover, among artists of this persuasion, there is a marked elimination of contextural details. Instead, an emphasis on archetypal and universal situations is present. Thus the depiction of a pair of horses in Neopha becomes predictable for it suggests a sexual coupling.

Rothenberg's work is part of the general rejuvination of figurative art in recent years. Her contribution to this tendency is in the production of extra-ordinarily powerful images that are singularly evocative of a meeting between archetypal symbols and the transforming energy of art.

Susan Rothenberg was born in Buffalo, New York, in 1945, and educated at Cornell University, George Washington University and the Corcoran Museum School. She is represented by the Willard Gallery, New York.

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Selected group exhibitions:
Sachs Gallery, New Talent, NYC '74; Jared Sable Gallery, Toronto '76; California State University, Los Angeles, New Work/New York '76; Holly Solomon Gallery, Animals, NYC '76; Sarah Lawrence College, Painting 76-77, NY '77; P.S.1, May Painting Show, NYC '77; Museum of Modern Art, New Acquisitions, NYC '77; New York State Museum, The State of Art, Albany '77.

Works in MATRIX:

Non mobilier, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 75 3/4". Lent by Miani Johnson, Willard Gallery, New York City.

Butterfly, 1976, acrylic and matte medium on canvas, 69 1/2 x 83". Lent by Maggie Trakas, New York.

Neopha, 1976, acrylic and tempera on canvas, 32 x 37 1/2". Lent by Joseph A. Helman, New York.

Selected bibliography about Rothenberg:

Herrera, Hayden. "Reviews," Art News, LXXIII (Sept. '74) pp. 99-100.

Kramer, Hilton. "Art," The New York Times (April 24, '76) p. 17.

Seiberling, Dorothy. "Dutch Treat," New York, IX (May 3, '76) pp. 72-73.

Tannenbaum, Judith. "Arts Reviews," Arts Magazine, L (June '76).

Selected one-person exhibitions:
112 Greene Street, NYC '75;
Willard Gallery, NYC '76;
Willard Gallery, NYC '77.

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