

Arts

Interview: artist Susan Rothenberg

Known for her 1970s pictures of horses, the painter talks about her work on show in New York and London



Susan Rothenberg in her studio © Jason Schmidt

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Susan Rothenberg is staring at a painting of a snowman she made this year, based on a memory from her childhood in the 1940s and 1950s in wintry Buffalo, New York, and pondering whether to fill in the bottom edge, where much of the raw canvas is exposed. “The first thing I am is critical,” she says. “The second thing I am is OK. I’m gonna leave it alone.”

For now, anyway. Rothenberg has been known to repaint even after the canvases have been hung on the gallery walls. One time, she convinced a collector to let her fiddle with a painting he

had bought at auction. So by the time a show of new work, her first in five years, opens at the Sperone Westwater Gallery in New York in November, it's anybody's guess.

Art fans eager to see her iconic horse paintings can be fairly confident that the canvases will be unchanged from their 1970s originals when several appear on the Sperone Westwater booth at Frieze Masters next week. The series of pared-down renderings of horses set against sensually brushy backgrounds served as the artist's entrée at a time when figuration was at a lull. The gallery has assembled a half dozen of the pictures for the fair from Rothenberg's own archive. "They're not doing anybody any good in storage," she says with a shrug. "They're what I'm known for. I got tagged."

She may feel typecast for the horses, but Michael Auping, chief curator at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, who has mounted three museum exhibitions of her work over nearly 40 years, insists that is simply because they were so potently different from everything else around and marked a clear turning point in contemporary art. "The paintings bowled you over," he recalls. "They were direct. They were muscular. They were like giant cave paintings, as if you were seeing figuration for the first time."



'Dos Equis' (1974) © Sperone Westwater

Diminutive and talkative, Rothenberg tends to come across as melancholy — even, or perhaps especially, when her self-deprecating wit is on display and she laughs with the tell-tale hoarseness of a heavy smoker. Studying "Dos Equis" (1974), a striking, nearly 10ft-wide white picture of two horses, at Sperone Westwater before it is shipped to London, she seems to suddenly notice unpainted sections along the edges. "I didn't know it was a habit," she quips.

For her November show, Rothenberg examined the animal life on the sprawling ranch she shares with her husband, the acclaimed conceptual artist Bruce Nauman, in Galisteo, New Mexico. She settled there in 1990, abandoning Manhattan to join Nauman and his beloved

horses. After the vitality of the New York scene, where she had performed with Joan Jonas and socialised frequently, the isolation of the high desert was not always easy, and Rothenberg found companionship among the couple's animals. They have had some 20 dogs over the years, at times as many as seven simultaneously. Some have died natural deaths; others have been lost to coyotes or cars. In her last solo exhibit at the gallery, she painted several, including Mink, Gert and Squirrel, now all gone.

Bubbles, a 12-year-old mastiff-pit-bull mix who is the subject of five paintings in the new show, will be their last dog, Rothenberg says. At first, she chalks up the decision to the dog's effect on the couple's lifestyle. "You stop going out for a movie and lunch because he's so sad he goes under the table," she says. "It's cut down on our travelling because I'm afraid he's going to die."

Then she acknowledges a corollary fear of mortality. "I don't want to get a dog and then die on it," Rothenberg says. "I'm 71, and Bruce is 74."

Both have recently faced health crises. First, Nauman underwent extensive treatment for cancer, which sent Rothenberg into what she describes as a "depression" that blocked her creatively. "I threw a lot of work — I can't even tell you how many canvases — away," she says. "I started it, did this to it, did that to it, my usual process. Then I just thought, I don't want it in my studio. So I ripped it up, put it in the garbage."

Then last year, Rothenberg suffered a severe case of sodium deficiency known as hyponatremia, while on a Caribbean vacation with her daughter. "I didn't know what was sand and what was sea," she says of the disorientation it caused. She was initially misdiagnosed, and her strength and balance were diminished for several months.



'Blue Frontal' (1978) © Sperone Westwater

Since moving to New Mexico, Rothenberg's palette has expanded, and she has often composed her paintings with the subjects seen from above, which can give them an air of vulnerability. In one painting of Bubbles, he lies curled up on the ground, his head, which she has coloured green, lifted in the manner of animals too weak to stand.

Her methods, however, have stayed pretty much the same for decades. She begins by sketching on legal pads, relying on her imagination and memory, not photos or life. She made an exception when painting the horses. "I went to City Hall Park and looked at the cop horse hooves because I was completely lost about what a hoof looks like," she says. Another time, when painting disembodied facial features — "I've always had the tendency to do wholes and parts" — she studied Nauman's ear.

When she hits upon something she likes, she starts painting, and the image evolves organically. In the case of the snowman painting, which she made in her studio in the East Village townhouse she and Nauman keep, she had come across a piece of canvas that for some forgotten reason was missing its upper left corner. The stacked snowballs just seemed to balance the oddly shaped canvas, she says.

Echoing the famed writer's edict to "kill your darlings", Rothenberg notes, "you have to start with knocking out your favourite things, or else the painting can't change. You can't get hooked on fixing things. You have to be willing to go, 'That's great. Goodbye.'"



untitled work (2016) © Sperone Westwater

The upcoming gallery show also will include two paintings of ravens, one a brilliant red seen from behind, against a mustard-yellow ground. “I see ravens every day,” she says. “I feed them. They wait in the tree. They have their babies at our house.” And there are monkeys, rendered from her imagination, which, like the horses, are something of a surrogate for humans.

Auping describes her as “old-school” and means it as a compliment: she is a painter and doesn’t dabble in multimedia like so many younger artists today. She works deliberately, building images slowly. Whatever her ostensible subject, he notes, the magic is in her surfaces, which “keep your eye moving all over the picture, keep you looking”.

Rothenberg, who is in New York for the opening of Nauman’s new exhibition at Sperone Westwater, is returning to Galisteo tomorrow to finish the paintings and allow them time to dry before shipping. While her husband’s latest videos play on the walls, she pauses in an office to look at her “Outline” (1978-79), with the rough, nearly unrecognisable shape of a horse’s head floating in a lower corner. “When I moved it to another part of the studio, I had really dirty hands,” she recalls, with a nod to grey smudges on either side of the mostly white canvas. “I thought, that gives it a good balance.”

Rothenberg's intuition has always held sway over any theory-based agenda. For her, the work is intensely personal. "I certainly don't expect to get a lot of applause for this," she says. "They getcha or they don't."

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