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theartsection



Susan Rothenberg, *Four Red Birds*, 2017, oil on canvas, 60 3/4 x 35 inches. Photo credit: Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York

In 1990, the painter Susan Rothenberg left the New York art scene she had been a part of since the 70's to live with her husband, Bruce Nauman, on a 600-acre ranch, an abandoned, ruined Tanoan Indian settlement in northern New Mexico. Galisteo, a town of about 250 residents, has been home to artists Fritz Scholder, Agnes Martin, Harmony Hammond, writer Lucy R. Lippard, singer/actor Burl Ives and fashion icon/filmmaker Tom Ford.

After statehood in 1912, academically trained painters poured into New Mexico, attracted to painting the land, light and native cultures. An unmoved Edward Hopper, not succumbing to the surrounding beauty, found an old, rusted train to paint. Abstract painters, such as Andrew Dasburg, an exponent of Cubism and mentor to the artist group "Taos Moderns," and Beatrice Mandelman, New York School artist and an innovative print maker, came later. Like Bruce Nauman, who left Los Angeles for New Mexico in 1979, many artists and writers just wanted a quiet place to work and live. As a conceptual artist, his life is difficult before ideas crystallize. When he is at loose ends, there is ranch work. Learning about horses reinforced his sense of the importance of intense observation. In contrast, Rothenberg's approach allows for continual "mucking about" in search of subject matter.

There are attempts to compare Rothenberg with other New Mexico artists, Georgia O'Keeffe and Agnes Martin. They all left New York City for isolation in the Southwest with modernist ideas about abstraction and figuration. However, Rothenberg's and O'Keeffe's respective energies are very different, even when painting similar subjects such as bones. Like Martin, Rothenberg appreciates "the grid" but she doesn't share Martin's repetitive obsessiveness.

Born in Buffalo, NY, 1945, Rothenberg says she was "not a well-behaved child." Those who knew her as a teenager would be surprised she now spends most of her time alone in a white room. Growing up, she danced, took art lessons, and often visited the Albright-Knox Art Gallery's collection of modernist artists. She enrolled in sculpture at Cornell University but didn't finish. She lived in Greece, returned somewhat lost, then entered The Corcoran School of Art. Studies there were traditional - drawing an arm, a leg, copying a picture before being allowed to advance. A severely restricted palette had to be understood before colors could be added. Many of her future works will be based on "parts," her belief that "a hint" is enough to convey a whole figure.



Susan Rothenberg, *Triphammer Bridge*, 1974, acrylic and tempera on canvas, 67 1/8 x 115 inches. Photo Credit: Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York

Impulsively, she came to New York City in 1969 during massive breakdowns of boundaries between the arts. She continued dancing, constructed animal limbs for Nancy Graves' sculptures, and did performance art with Joan Jonas, including a piece in which she held on to the inside of a large, turning wheel, a premonition of her circular, deep painting spaces. During this time animals appear partially on canvas edges in experiments with collage and unusual materials (*Screen Door*, 1967-68, *Nine Sheep*, 1967-68). She first received critical response in the 70's when she drew an iconic horse on a large canvas. A line drawn down the center flattened the identifiable subject, in prevailing modernist mode (*Triphammer Bridge*, *New Talent*, A. M. Sachs Gallery, NY, NY, 1974). The painting sold to the collector Holly Solomon. Early solo shows in New York (Willard Gallery and 112 Greene Street, 1975) consisted of large-scale paintings of horses that continued the innovation of introducing imagery into minimalist abstraction. She became a key figure in the revitalization of painting.

The *New Image Painting* show at the Whitney Museum in 1978 recognized a number of artists exploring a great variety of new painterly ideas; painting was officially declared no longer dead! This changed the general institutional outlook on contemporary art, which had been dominated for over ten years by works made outside of galleries and museums. The exhibition was controversial as it reflected the art market's desire for presentable, sellable painting, as opposed to art that was often turned into mere idea or removed to vast sculptural locations in difficult, remote places.

Rothenberg was asked, "Why a horse?" She replied she wanted something "fleshy with bones, rather than an innate object." "It could have been a giraffe," she quipped once, obviously, not necessarily so, as the rectangular shape of a horse fits better on a canvas close to its size. She said she didn't know where it came from and had no particular feelings for horses. However, she had been looking a lot at pictures of ancient Altamira and Lascaux cave paintings. Those who have actually seen them describe them as simultaneously alive and still. Rothenberg herself is a highly physical persona with deep affinities for animals, once wanting to be a veterinarian. She seems always to have had pets. Visiting California for her one and only teaching position with her young daughter from her first marriage, the family cat went along. It fits she would be

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Susan Rothenberg, *White Mountain*, 1980-1981, acrylic and flashe on canvas, 105 x 75 inches. Photo Credit: Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York



Susan Rothenberg, *Yellow Studio*, 2002-2003, oil on canvas, 81 x 85 inches. Photo Credit: Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York

attracted to an art-classic, powerful animal motif. Her reticence could be attributed to intuitively knowing it wasn't about illustrating a horse, but something else – pursuit of imagery awakened by the horse.

“The Horses” were replaced by a tuning fork emerging from an elongated frontal horse view. Parts continued to slip away. In *Blue Body* (1980-81) a horse head floats to the top of the canvas adrift from the vanished body. In *White Mountain* (1980-81) the horse head slides down a steep road or throat.

The ranch brings open spaces, a different life, a new home. Rothenberg references native culture not directly but through discoveries made during many daily walks over uneven and hardened earth – old pottery shards, bones. There are continual, unexpected encounters with wildlife and vistas. From the back of a horse, or atop a ridge are new ways of seeing entangled limbs, multiple viewpoints, circular activity and unexpected animal dramas. Works convey the struggles of the events as well as how to paint them. “The anxiety and sometimes distorted way of seeing things I would guess come from my wanting to impose energy on the place. We live a fairly isolated life here. I look for the weird to liven things up. Sometimes I probably make it more weird than it is.” And, “Sometimes the painting starts to relate very directly to either sights seen, or experiences felt; other times it just goes off on a tangent that you can't really articulate. Some of the pictures are truly mysterious to me – which is why I so often say publicly that I don't know or don't care what they're really about. And yet I can also say that the paintings are prayers – they have to do with whatever it is that makes you want more than what daily life affords.” In Galisteo, she gets to know horses for the first time. She learns to ride – on her own horse, a gift from Nauman. Once again, she paints horses, now through physical connections. She used to think of them as “flat, quiet images. Now I know they're all muscle and gristle and each one's different. They step on your foot, it hurts.”

To Rothenberg, New Mexico is brown. She wants to stir it up with more red – her signature color. She also likes a certain shade of Giotto blue and a memory as a hospitalized child crying for a “blue monkey.” She likes “dirty whites” so there isn't so much color, how she feels about herself. The intense light of New Mexico was problematic. She built her studio with as few

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windows as possible, installing florescent lighting. She brought outside colors, such as greens and yellows into the studio that mingle with the florescent (*Yellow Studio*, 2002-3). Rothenberg admires Matisse, Abstract Expressionists, Newman, and Still for paint handling and intensity of color. Color, though, is also in response to something real, not just for pure pleasure. She shares with Mondrian unwavering attentiveness to tension and balance of forces within the picture plane. Sharing his later interests in conveying movement (and sound) in paint, she produced the remarkable *Mondrian Dancing* for the 1985 *Whitney Biennial*. This ever-so painterly work in grayed colors grabbed notable attention in the midst of clamoring contemporary art that had abandoned tradition.



Susan Rothenberg, *Mondrian Dancing*, 1984-85, oil on canvas, 78 x 91 inches. Photo Credit: Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York

Rothenberg's drawing and painting are so intertwined that she defines drawing as being on paper and paintings as being on canvas. Drawing starts as unselfconscious marks or doodles. Her electric, feathery style moves unceasingly over what she is experiencing. A School of Visual Arts instructor once said, "For God's sakes, Susan, stop all the fluttery around, I want a solid line." At the suggestion of Elizabeth Murray in 1981, she changed from acrylics to oils, leading to a slower and more carefree way of working. Adding a palette knife led to more complex surfaces. Paintings begin using rags dipped in "dirty" turpentine to

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make broad sketches. She paints what she sees or from memory. She is about subject matter and image and struggles to find whatever may not be apparent to her in that significant realm of painting not able to be articulated.



Susan Rothenberg, *Heads at Tank*, 1990, oil on canvas, 66 1/2 x 49 1/2 inches. Photo Credit: Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York

Her most recent show at Sperone Westwater, NY, NY (January – February, 2020) had, as usual, many surprises. The title *Stone Angel* adds the tension of oppositional words. Like poets, Rothenberg will use titles to do a lot of work to help ambiguous works be more accessible. There is the struggle with the human figure. “I have never felt comfortable painting a complete figure, I guess I still don’t.” On a large, piano-shaped canvas, *Pianist Playing Schubert* seems constructed of parts trying to find their place. The musician’s face, in Goya darkness, is difficult to comprehend. Music has evaporated. In *Sack*, provocative shapes amid positive and negative spaces defy realistic imposition; in *Four Red Birds*, birds, a favorite subject, are calling. As the flattened birds on the same plane diminish in size, raw red “caws” fade away. *Pack Rat Fall* is rising or motionless, contentiously evoking *Zorba’s* metaphor of dance as choice - live or die. I wondered about Rothenberg’s reactions to New Mexico’s twisting trees considering her years of dance and interest in movement. On the ranch, many grow by Galisteo Creek in often water-parched New Mexico. In *Twisted Tree*, branches entwine upward, creating powerful, mysterious inside/outside compartments. *Untitled* and *Bands + Hands* of encircled areas and hands (perhaps including some holding reins) continue explorations of what juxtaposed, interchangeable spaces can provoke.

The early horses lasted more than six years. “The horse just ran out,” is how Rothenberg puts it, “but I’d like to do one giant horse painting. Sometimes the horses come in to drink at night and it’s all gray. And they whoooooossh, they suck water – they don’t gobble and drink it. They just put their noses in; you almost can’t hear it. And it becomes very quiet, very still around this moonlight water. I’d like to do one huge painting of the sound. I don’t understand how to do that. Yet.” This could be a description of the large oil *Heads at Tank*, 1990.

Rothenberg, a player in painting’s contemporary story, is also a participant in America’s unique collaborative history of poets and painters. *The Brute*, (Little Caesar Press, Los Angeles, 1981) has her fragmented figures dance with Peter Schjeldahl’s lyrical poems. Black Mountain College (1950’s) where Robert Creeley studied and taught, played a big role in interdisciplinary art forms. Creeley was committed to collaborating with artists to create books which have the poetry being inspired by art, a reversal of the then usual process. *Parts* (San Francisco Limestone Press, 1993) places nine Rothenberg mezzo prints and a dry point with his spare poems. Similar to her work, his became increasingly fragmented. Rothenberg’s muscular, body driven ways of working are at home with breath-based “projective verse.”

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Although impacted by location, now joined to the unexpected in rural life, the nature of her paintings as ever-searching and energetic hasn't changed. They also reflect years of engagement with modernist painting and a consistent need to find a point of departure through imagery. She and Nauman do not ride so often. She has said "All the animals are taken care of and petted. They trust me, Bruce and the dog. The animals are fun and funny."

When Rothenberg read Creeley's poem based on her work, she exclaimed, "How did you know I was doing that?" "I read your painting," he replied.

The following is the last stanza from POSSIBILITIES/FOR SUSAN ROTHENBERG:

Nothing's apart from all and seeing is
the obvious beginning of an act
can only bring one closer to the art
of being closer. So feeling all there is,
one's hands and heart grow full.

---Robert Creeley

Susan Rothenberg: Paintings from the Nineties,
Brutvan, Cheryl, Creeley, Robert, Rizzoli International
Publications, Inc., 1999.