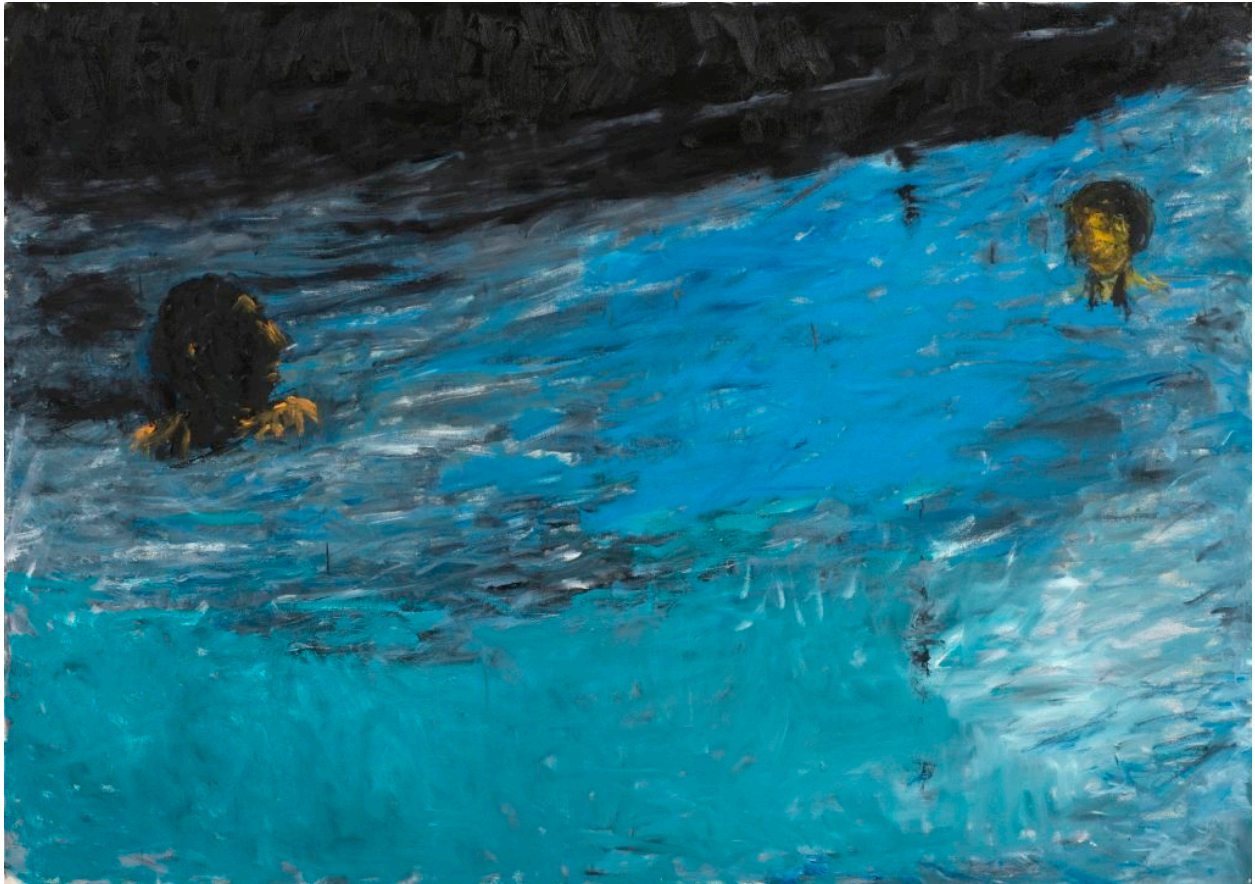


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ARTNEWS



Susan Rothenberg, *The Caribbean*, 2015, oil on canvas, 50 x 72 inches. JAMES HART PHOTOGRAPHY/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SPERONE WESTWATER

Last Friday I got an unexpected call from the painter Susan Rothenberg. It was the early evening, and a few minutes earlier I had been speaking to a representative at her New York gallery, Sperone Westwater, which opens its eleventh solo show with the artist this week. I'd left my number, planning to hear back soon about when Rothenberg was available. It turned out that she was ready to talk right then.

It was late in the afternoon where Rothenberg was, in Galisteo, New Mexico, a town with a population of around 250, a short drive from Santa Fe. (It is remote, but for years it's been a popular destination for art types—Agnes Martin, Lucy R. Lippard, and Harmony Hammond have resided there over the past half-century.) Rothenberg has lived there with her husband, the artist Bruce Nauman, since 1990. I asked her to set the scene for me, and she laughed, and then said, warmly but quickly, "I'm on my ranch, I'm in my studio, my dog is sleeping, I'm about to start a new painting." She paused for half a second. "This has nothing to do with what's in the show."



Rothenberg in 2008. COURTESY JASON SCHMIDT

The Sperone Westwater exhibition is Rothenberg's first solo gallery outing in five years, and the 11 paintings she has made for it are focused and tough—stunning, in a word. One shows a ferocious-looking raven with pale pink feathers against what one might call a classic Rothenberg background—patchy white undergirded by dark blues and blacks. In another, three monkey heads float above a slightly brighter white. These new paintings are a bit smaller than her largest works, and they seem to be even more enigmatic than usual, evincing feelings that range from uneasy love to controlled fury.

Animals appear in many of these pieces. There are more paintings of birds (a recurring subject for the artist), and two that show a dog, each starring the viewer straight on, tenderly, a bit weary.

At her ranch, Rothenberg is surrounded by animals. “They are safe, they are fed every day, and they know and trust me and Bruce and the dog, and they’re fun and funny,” she said. “We have a horse who recently died. We have four horses left. Bruce is not able to ride anymore, due to leftovers from radiology and medications, but they’re here. Everybody’s here. They’re fed, and petted, and taken care of.” (Nauman was recently treated for cancer, which his moving show earlier this season at Sperone alluded to obliquely.)

During the mid-1970s, when most vanguard artists in New York were pursuing conceptual art, through videos and performances, Rothenberg made a name for herself with intense, scrappy paintings of powerful horses. They are still the works that everyone associates with her. Figurative painting has made a big comeback over the past few years, and Rothenberg's early paintings, which buzz with energy, appear to be increasingly prescient.

“The horses made an impact against my”—Rothenberg cut herself off—“I never would have guessed that they would ever even be shown. They were big. I think I’ve lived with that for a long time, along with being called ‘a damn horse painter.’ ” She laughed, and added, joking, “I never did anything else! But that was a fun run, and they were mostly invented on the back of Con Ed bills and what not. I just did one after another, thinking, ‘This is fun, I’m not an abstract artist.’ So that’s that.”

There is one painting in the show with a tiny bit of a horse. It's called *Horse Running/Dust Devil* (2011–16), and it has the leg of a horse floating on its side near one edge of the canvas, almost kicking out at the viewer. Chunky, fiery orange hunks of paint form the hoof, which hovers in front of two huge pale melon forms, the dust devils, spiraling in place. It is a touch imposing, and absolutely exhilarating.

One work feels slightly out of place in the show—*The Caribbean* (2015), which is the only painting that includes humans. Two heads bob above aquamarine water, just beneath a sloping field of black that sets the painting off its axis, that makes it spin.

“That’s where I got into a health problem,” Rothenberg said, when I asked about the work. She was vacationing with her daughter on an island when it happened. “I walked into the sea and a wave knocked me down,” she continued, “and it was freezing cold and the sun was freezing hot, and when I came out, I was close to shore, I sat on my butt, and I couldn’t figure out the difference between water and sand. And

I lost my balance. I lost my ability to put on a tank top. I got back to New York, the same, falling down. It was a sodium deficit called hyponatremia, and that wrecked my life from February to”—a pause—“May. Crashed my car.” The event was even more troubling since it came not long after Nauman’s treatment.

She is mostly doing better now. Has it changed her work? “It’s certainly affected me,” she said. “I’m not a critic, and I don’t like to crit my work, except to see if it satisfies me, so I can’t answer that question.” Then she thought about it for a second and said, “I’m not exactly the same person I was before this happened.”

Rothenberg said that she has been destroying more of her paintings over the past few years. She doesn’t toss them right away, though. When one is not working for her, she first sets it aside, then comes back and gives it another look, she said. “And then I think, ‘I don’t want to come in here and work on this thing again!’ And then I do the deed.”

One work had to be abandoned for a few different reasons, she told me. “The last painting I did was meant to be a copy of a drawing in my yellow legal pad, where all my drawings happen, and I knew it should be big, and I knew that I didn’t have the mental or physical energy to go up and down the ladder like I do, so I made a version of it that was only seven by five feet.



Susan Rothenberg, *Pink Raven*, 2012, oil on canvas, 62 1/2 x 48 inches. JAMES HART PHOTOGRAPHY/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SPERONE WESTWATER

“I decided to make a painting of exactly that page,” she continued, “but I chose the wrong proportions. I made it smaller, and it was meant to be kind of 8 by 12, so I gassed it. I did not do the thing I meant to do because there was time constraints, there was not understanding the color gray well enough—I wanted like ten grays in there and all of them to come together. But it didn’t work out. But it’s in the back of my mind.”

When I asked about exhibition she has liked recently, Rothenberg told me that she and Nauman haven’t been in museums and galleries in a few years. “I’m 71 and I don’t know the names,” she said, “and I’m not anxious to see who Gogo or whoever is picking up and hoping thrives. I just don’t think there’s much stuff going on of the kind that I’m interested in, which is really just about painting. It’s not about issues, it’s not about politics, it’s not about process, it’s not about technology. I’m just a painter.”

It’s of course true that Rothenberg’s paintings are not explicitly political art, but they do embody clear and potent ethical positions: they are alive to the world, concerned with the minds and feelings of animals, and committed to expressing moods and emotions that can be expressed in no other way. There are two paintings in the show that I keep thinking about. One is a very strange, and very funny, painting of a snowman caught in a snowstorm, big hunks of snow flowing over the picture. It is about as far from the desert as you can get, and it’s the one work that Rothenberg made in a studio she and Nauman still keep in the East Village. While making it, she said, she felt like she was a child back in Buffalo, New York, where she grew up, a place that knows snowstorms. She wavered on the painting quite a bit, uncertain whether it was worth keeping, uncertain whether it was done. “Actually, it’s a little under-finished, but I decided to

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leave it alone,” she said. “I’m not so interested in making things—I don’t know what the word is—finished looking, as I used to.”



Susan Rothenberg, *Snowman*, 2016, oil on canvas, 40 1/4 x 56 1/2 inches. JAMES HART PHOTOGRAPHY/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SPERONE WESTWATER

The other painting stuck in my head is the one of the pink raven. Its talons just barely touch a thick line, which may be a branch, and its sharp beak with its little black eye is hunched down, as if it’s talking or chomping on something. It is deeply frightening. “I didn’t mean it to be menacing, but it’s interesting that you said that, because it’s making a landing,” Rothenberg told me. “It’s trying to make this landing on a fence.” Though her birds feel remarkably real, she doesn’t use photographs to study them. “I just see what I can see when I see them up close,” she said.