

TM DAVY: HORSES

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By Stephen Truax



TM Davy, *horse (xox)*, 2016. Oil on linen. 79 × 99 inches. Courtesy 11R Gallery.

“They were dead at my age,” remarked TM Davy (36) with an honest tone, to his friends Nicole Eisenman and Ellen Altfest in a panel discussion at his current show, *Horses*. Davy looks to great, queer artists, all of whom succumbed to AIDS—Hujar (died at age 53), Gonzalez-Torres (39), and Morrisroe (30)—to give himself permission. Making idiosyncratic images utterly outside current trends (to be expectedly encountered in the Lower East Side), Davy’s work, and its authenticity, are rooted in his sense of his own mortality, and consciousness of a past generation that ran out of time. “I get to be sincere now,” he said.

The current exhibition is at 11R’s new double gallery at 195 Chrystie Street. As Davy was preparing it, his father, while cleaning out his mother’s home after her recent death, found documentation that his great-great-great grandfather had a horse stable at the same address in the 1880s. Davy saw this improbable coincidence to his own family history, in addition to his childhood interest in horses—his sister’s toys (only she was given horseback

riding lessons), and '80s cartoons like Rainbow Brite and My Little Pony—as a sign to make *Horses*, which took over two years to complete.

Repetitive patterns covers most of the seven paintings' smooth, reflective surfaces—some portrait-sized, others the size of a queen mattress. Portraying horses in their stables, grazing, and urinating, Davy's paintings zero in on tiny details: the horse's hair, clusters of leaves, the wood paneling of a stable, grass. Davy was the subject of Altfest's painting, *Penis* (2006). He sat for her for months. During the panel discussion, Davy remarked that the way she faithfully copied the hair on his left thigh, traveling barely an inch across his skin over the course of a single workday, keeping her place from day to day by marking his leg, had a deep impact on his work.

For his 2014 solo at the gallery, *Candela*, Davy made a series of intimately-scaled paintings, each with a life-size candle flame at the center of their compositions. He confessed that the horse, here at 3/4 scale, was selected partially because of its size; Davy wanted to make big paintings, and he needed a big subject for them. While the candle works nod to paintings of Christ—like the Nativity, in which the light at the center around the Christ child fades to darkness at the edges, in *Horses*, light emanates from within the animal. Their flesh is almost transparent, and the environments that enclose them are similarly illuminated, and bend in concentric circles around their central subjects.

Glancing light from a window (like Robert Gober's *Prison Window*, 1992) at the extreme right of the composition of horse (x) separates into a rainbow spectrum across the adjacent gray-white wall and identically colored horse. The rainbow is both Christian, like the halo around the Sacred Heart, and queer. For Davy, it's a symbol of the miracle of human sentience: the ability to see the spectrum and, eventually, scientifically understand it. The horse stares out resolutely, its blue eye stares wide open, intelligent, defiant, full of pride. The horse became a receptacle for all of Davy's emotions.

Thinking about the gallery as a stable assisted Davy with designing the installation. As one traverses the gallery from entrance to back room, as the floor plan dictates, the paintings (all 2016) become progressively more erotic. In *horse (xx)*, a very human penis, engorged and pink, releases a thick rope of golden urine between one colt's legs; a double-helix cord connecting its sex to the ground, as solid as a fifth leg. Two of the horses' heads are

wrapped completely with fly masks—one fabulously, in pink satin, the other more sedately, in ash gray—and evoke BDSM. Barely a brush stroke of pink tongue emerges from *horse* (xoox) to retrieve some grass, while *horse* (xox) tends to its salt lick in the dark. The metaphor of the horse's body as a stand-in for a man's body, the taste of salt, all point to sex: semen and sweat, muscle illuminated in darkness, smelly spaces, the athlete in repose, submission.

Then, intimate: the horse's eyes almost appear to be weeping. Davy does not shy away from sentiment. At the climax of the show, *horses* (xoo), an adult horse and a foal gently bend to graze, as if embracing one another, and in turn are embraced by the surrounding foliage that frames them in a womb-like orb. Fungi spring from dung at the immediate center foreground of the image. Details like this one recall Botticelli, who patterned the forest floor in *La Primavera* (1478) with hundreds of exquisitely painted flowers.

Davy is a self-trained expert on art history, and he noted that equestrian paintings are often landscapes that depict deep space through which horses might run free, as in Rubens. Instead, Davy's horses stand calmly in shallow interior spaces, safe in a horse's stall. For all their power and athletic potential, they are testaments to stalled motion; these interiors become a tool for underscoring an imaginative, psychological space, both personal and specific. As Carl Jung wrote in a letter in 1954, "The dream of the horse represents the union with the animal soul, which you have missed for a long time."¹

Endnotes:

1. Carl Jung, "Letter to E. L. Grant Watson, January 25, 1954," *Letters of C. G. Jung, Volume 2: Volumes 1951-1961*, ed. Gerhard Adler. Princeton University Press, 1976.