



Susan Unterberg

WHITE HORSE

Susan Unterberg's Floating Worlds

In Susan Unterberg's recent landscape images—photographed as reflections off water—fish swim through skies, clouds and trees in worlds whose mirror flatness conjures casual reveries of painting from the Renaissance to Impressionism. And in Unterberg's new photographs of horses, the reverie continues, shifting the focus from landscape to figure and from evocations of painting to confrontations with sculptural forms. Her horses appear suspended between stasis and movement, captivity and freedom, swimming and drowning. Though these are not underwater scenes, the atmosphere in them is aqueous with green light, floating hair, and rippling marmoreal bodies—like classical sculptures seen at rest beneath the sea. Viewing these images, one feels drawn into their worlds, but at the same time held at bay.

For the artist, her earlier landscapes represented an ideal primordial world. But her horses are different; illuminated by artificial light, rolling and running around on dirt floors, they seem tamed and civilized, functioning strongly as metaphors for the human condition. Even in moments of unrestrained movement and beauty, without riders on their backs, Unterberg's horses appear constrained. And this is a fact she underscores by framing them at a distance, keeping them hieratically in profile, or even breaking them up into fragments—head cut from sight, rear legs dissolving, an equine Babel becoming rubble.

Susan Unterberg began photographing horses almost by accident during the summer of 1997, while in residence at Yaddo in upstate New York, when a friend took her to a stable where he was riding. There she saw a white horse brought into the ring to exercise and it seemed luminous in the indoor arena. She subsequently returned throughout two summers to photograph various white horses. At what moment a photograph is snapped is considerably less decisive for her than the subsequent hours spent selecting, cropping, and printing, in short, creating her images. As an exhibition of the Surrealist photographer Man Ray's contact sheets and prints recently showed, this approach is not unique. But while Man Ray's creativity was engaged in the developing process, Unterberg's is reserved more for the printing process. Perhaps this direction was set when, early in her career, she received a grant from the Polaroid corporation and

began to work on large-scale prints in the Polaroid studio. Unterberg works now in 35 mm, and with the ubiquity of fast photo-processing, she can have the numerous rolls of film she shoots made quickly into 4x6 prints. These function like unbound sketchbooks, notes for her to sift through and select from the relatively few photographs that she will develop into full-scale works.

As a post-modern rendition of the medieval unicorn tapestries of legend, Susan Unterberg's horses encircled by a wooden barrier inside a dirt ring, seem no less pitiful than the mythical unicorn, hunted and imprisoned in a briar enclosure filled with flowers. And like the maiden spectator, the photographer identifies closely with the creature that has been captured in this case on film. One detects in Unterberg's representations of horses a conflict. Their bodies convey a deeply emotional and physical desire for freedom. Freedom from time and history and man. But because of the way they are represented—part concrete memory, part lyrical abstraction—they cannot attain such unfettered flight.

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Susan Unterberg is a native New Yorker. Her shows and installations have included *Mothers and Daughters*, *Fathers and Sons*, *Close Ties*, and *Water Dreams*. She has had solo exhibitions at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the Sarah Lawrence College Library, the Laurence Miller Gallery, the Yancey Richardson Gallery and the Robert Klein Gallery. Among the museums in which she has participated in group exhibitions are The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Wesleyan University Center for the Arts, The Chrysler Museum, The Hyde Collection, and The New Museum of Contemporary Art. Her photographs have been reproduced or reviewed in *Harper's*, *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere. She has lectured widely and her photographs are in public and private collections nationwide. About her horse pictures she has commented, "The horses, no longer wild suggest the sad ordinariness of modern human life."

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