

David Surman Solo Exhibition: 『Soft Eye, Hard Nose』 26. 5. 2. – 6. 6.

David Surman (b. 1981) is an artist who has explored the motif of the horse over an extended period of time. Rather than being a deliberate choice, this motif emerges from a familial environment and personal experience, where the presence of the horse was deeply embedded. The symbolic significance of the horse, along with a sense of admiration and reverence toward it, forms the foundation of his formal inquiry.

The horse is, first and foremost, a visually compelling form that commands attention and stimulates the imagination. At the same time, it is a recurring image throughout the history of art, positioned alongside enduring themes such as flowers, women, children, and war. From prehistoric cave paintings to contemporary practices, the horse has been consistently represented as a dynamic figure in motion—running, leaping, and evolving within the visual narratives of human history. As an agent that once enabled human mobility and expanded perceptual horizons, the horse played a critical role in extending not only physical distance but also the scope of human imagination. In the present, however, the horse no longer functions as a primary agent of labor or warfare, but has instead shifted toward a symbolic and emotional presence. Within this transition, Surman's work examines the horse as an image that mediates between past and present, function and symbolism, reality and memory.

His paintings move beyond representation, revealing the intersection between the accumulated cultural meanings of the horse as a historical image and his own personal experiences. In doing so, his work expands into a broader inquiry into the relationships between human and animal, reality and imagination, and image and meaning.

Artist Note

I have worked with the horse motif for over ten years.

In some senses I did not choose it, because it was always there in my horse-crazy family, the love and worship of the horse, putting the horse on a pedestal. The horse is first and foremost a beautiful and interesting form that demands attention and triggers the imagination. It is perhaps embarrassing to talk in this way, but that is the truth.

The horse is in almost all parts of the history of art, we often find it alongside other eternal things, like flowers and women and children and war. Where we see cave paintings of women dancing, where we see lions stalking, we see horses running and jumping. The horse changed human life, allowing us to move faster, raising us up from the ground and helping us travel farther. Through this process our imagination permanently expanded.

Now we live in a time where horses do not do as much essential work, they do not go to war, but instead help us to play. They carry our sentiments in their soft eyes and elegant bodies. So many emotions are now reflected in the eyes of these animals, from longing, fear and frenzy, love and affection. They are an animal mirror to our own inner complexity.

I paint horses purely from my imagination, working fast, freely and spontaneously, finding what I need in the eyes, nose, ears, legs. I attack with love and paint the body of the horse in an attempt to unlock some new aspect of its meaning.

The title refers to the desirable traits of a balanced horse in equine culture — 'soft eye' describes a good natured spirit, and 'hard nose' refers to the ability to respond well to instruction and commands. Conversely, a 'hard eye' suggests a mean spirited horse, and 'soft nose' one that responds poorly to instruction. 'Soft Eye, Hard Nose' is therefore a 'good' horse. We live in an age of precarity and turmoil, where past certainties and future plans are called into question. My heart is holding tightly onto those dependable things that can help us in this journey. The horse gives comfort through its familiarity while also expressing the truth of our worrisome moment, in the glint of its eye and the trembling of its legs.