

ARTFORUM

by Lauren O'Neill Butler
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Gillian Jagger

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In 1997, John Perreault published a glowing review of Gillian Jagger's work: The artist, the critic gushed, will "eventually be seen as one of the great ones." Is there loftier praise than that? This recent exhibition—a refreshing, if too small, sampling of the upstate New York–based artist's sculptures from between 1963 and 2014—signaled the beginning of the reassessment Perreault predicted. It took a while. Jagger and her anthropomorphic output have typically had slippery affinities to past movements. In the mid-1960s the artist famously made plaster casts of manhole covers on the streets of New York City as a method of what she called "fact collection"; throughout the '70s, Jagger cast



Gillian Jagger, *And the Horses Ran*, 2009, latex, plaster, sand, dimensions variable

more found objects with diverse materials, including polyurethane foam, while keeping a distance from ephemeral, photographic, and entropic modes. (Notably, Sol LeWitt's photo-grids of manholes were presented at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1978; her casts never were.) In the '80s, Jagger made cement molds of fractured, parched earth, and began to suspend fifteen-foot lengths of stone in the air, as in *Talahim*, 1987. Indeed, many of the artist's monumental pieces from the past twenty-some years are hung up, as if left to bleed dry—morbid mobiles of trees, chains, and animal bones. Hers is a gloomy romanticism tinged with a pragmatism that resonates strongly today as questions around affect, posthumanism, and animal studies are debated amid urgent concerns about climate change.

Caked with dirt and tucked into the gallery's office, *Yellow Line & Time*, 1963, and *Traffic Impressions*, 1964, two of Jagger's manhole plaster casts (mounted on board and Masonite, respectively), were the earliest pieces in the exhibition. The rest of the show focused on a theme found throughout her oeuvre: horses. Three large works from 2014 made simply of white, brown, and black matted horsehair encrusted with resin hugged the walls near the gallery entrance. Illuminated only by simple floodlights on the floor, these textured, totemic variations are broadly evocative, variously bringing to mind a flayed carcass suspended by a rusty chain (*Swirling*); a spiral spinning both centripetally and centrifugally (*Whirl 3*); and a stout megalith (*Shielding*).

In a second dim and cavernous room, viewers encountered the sprawling *And the Horses Ran*, 2009. Similar to the sculptures in the first gallery, this dusty installation was illuminated with a few floodlights, which bounced off a group of chunky, broken-up casts of hoofprints in plaster and threw craggy shadows. More casts of hooves in brown, velvety latex ran along the wall and resembled a bumpy landscape. This theatrical piece presents a deictic representation of hoof and terrain—of the horse as an intrinsic, essential part of a whole—which has been a component of Jagger's work for at least the past thirty years. In her 1983 book, *Overlay*, Lucy R. Lippard quotes Jagger saying, "A horse in a field is seen as part of the field, a man in a field is not." The artist continues: "We see ourselves without backgrounds . . . and then of course suffer from that awful feeling of disconnection. The price I suppose of narcissism."

Throughout the show, Jagger hinted at this narcissism and its consequences. Her oddly disorienting works allow us to turn away from discourse, textuality, and even technology and confront the oft-unsettling truth that agency and causality are not always connected to us, that nonhuman matter is self-organizing and informational on its own. Throwing off this nature/culture balance, Jagger shows us that humans are not only dependent on the natural world but indebted to it. The non-nostalgic ethics underpinning these works recall those recently expressed by contemporary theorists such as Brian Massumi, who, in his latest book, *What Animals Teach Us About Politics* (2014), proposes a "mutual inclusion" between the human and the animal. With his non-anthropomorphic understanding of thought, behavior, and instinct, Massumi's approach is in line with one Jagger has apparently embraced all along—surely, as one of the great ones.

— Lauren O'Neill Butler