



HORSES ARE UBIQUITOUS SUBJECTS in the history of art, literature, and mythology. Perhaps more than any other companion animal, they have helped shape culture, serving humans as a means of transportation, cavalry, and in pre-industrial agricultural labour practices where they were exploited as draught animals¹. The first artworks in recorded history—the Palaeolithic cave paintings of Lascaux—feature horses, their visage rendered in black, red, and yellow pigment mixed with animal fat and clay². Today, they still occupy a significant and symbolically potent role in the realm of sport, leisure, and gambling.

Beyond material and practical uses, horses have always shared a special bond with humans laden with psychological, physical, and symbolic implications, serving as a metonym for autonomy, masculinity, or a feminine object of affection. The “species narcissism” of modernity sparked an obsession with the horse as a historical symbol while the phantasmagorical return of the horse in contemporary art reified it as a site of projection and libidinal investment³. Their robust, muscular bodies, and the gloss of their coats and lustrous manes inspire heroic and erotic connotations that are only heightened by their submissive status. Subdued by the leather bondage of saddle and bridle, the horse is a tamed beast of nature—a phallic animal, firmly straddled between splayed legs, their force directed by the rider’s will.

In a haunting recording of an ephemeral performance, Tina Stefanou’s *Hym(e)nals* delivers an abstracted vision of a human-animal bond that counters these exploitative conventions and their associated symbolic grammar. The bonds featured in *Hym(e)nals* are the result of an altruistic horse therapy program. A relationship of mutual care and bonding fostered over years, elderly rescue horses are paired with young women, some neurodiverse. Filmed in low light and then projected into the Norla Dome of the heritage listed Mission to Seafarers (located in Docklands, Melbourne), an eerie ballet of light

and sound plays out in concrete chiaroscuro. Subverting the rigid pageantry of equestrian dressage, a pastime that still preoccupies adolescents of the elite, *Hym(e)nals* presents veiled horses and their riders haloed in light as they navigate the night. Slow, trusting gestures are accompanied by familiar tune hummed in unison.

Indeed, these intuitive and gentle interactions resist the disciplinary and managerial horse-human relationships that are embedded in language and cultural practices. For example, the first examples of chronophotography were a series of studies of the horse in motion by Eadweard Muybridge. These were influential for the future of motion pictures, but also for productivity studies later taken up by the Gilbreths, efficiency experts whose punishing regulation of time management in the workplace is echoed in today’s hyperproductivity ethos and the exploitative expectations faced by service workers under surveillance capitalism. Indeed, the English language is replete with equine references borrowed from horse riding, rearing, and training—all aspects of management, a term that itself derives from the Italian *maneggiare*, referring to the handling and training of a horse⁴.

Hym(en)als is a collaborative gesture against punishing productivity, conveying the bonds of care between the young women and the rescued horses, but also commemorating the unseen care of the volunteers who dedicate their time to housing and tending to the horses.

A form of social documentary meets experimental video art in the projecting fragments of the trans-species performance. In the immersive installation, the dome somewhat obscures the scene. These varied levels of obfuscation elide the potential didacticism of these gestures—revealing the calamity of clichés that abound in the symbolic shadows Stefanou casts.

The title *Hym(e)nals* plays on the proximity between two words: *hymnal* and *hymen*. The former refers to songs of devotion

typically performed by communicants in a place of worship, while the hymen describes the thin membrane of tissue that forms over the external vaginal opening during embryogenesis. This dual reference—to places and practices of worship, and the medical terminology for a thin membrane declaring an internal passage—reflects on in-between spaces: the spaces between private and public, the internal and the external, the everyday and the divine, and the permeability and occasional collapse between the two. This is what great art once attempted to reveal to us—something transcendent, beyond the boundaries of ideology—beauty unsullied by the unyielding and anesthetised perfection of glamour, grasping at the infinite without excess.

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¹Peter Edwards and Elspeth Graham, “Introduction: The Horse as Cultural Icon: The real and the symbolic horse in the Early Modern World”, *Intersections* 18 (2012), 4.

²Ten thousand years shy of the domestication of the horse, their presence has befuddled historians, who have variously attributed the horse’s significance in the Lascaux cave to hunting magic (the belief that one could conjure the horse via iconographic representation), or as feminine symbols of fertility. The former argument was put forward by Abbé Henri Breuil, the latter by Andrei Leroi-Gourhan and Annette Laming-Empeaire. Alexander Lee, “Prehistoric Horses: Exploring the meaning of Lascaux’s galloping herds” *History Today* 70, no. 12 (2020). URL: <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/natural-histories/prehistoric-horses>.

³The phenomenon of “species narcissism” cited in Edwards and Graham (2012), 2; Australian artist Jenny Watson is one compelling artist invested in horses (particularly in relation to adolescent female experience). Georgina Downey, “Becoming-horse: Jenny Watson, *Art Orienté Objet* and *Berlinde De Bruyckere*”, *Artlink* 38, no. 1 (2018). URL: <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4657/becoming-horse-jenny-watson-art-orient3A9-objet-and/>.

⁴To name just a few: horseplay, dark horse, trojan horse—and sexual innuendo—broken in, bareback; Edwards and Graham (2012), 9.

H Y M (e) N A L S

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