



I am the horse

Lise Haller Baggesen and Iris Bernblum

June 3 - July 14, 2018

I am the horse: Lise Haller Baggesen and Iris Bernblum

Curated by Claudine Isé

Essay by Elizabeth Lalley

*I am the thing that most excites you
I am the thing that most excites you
I am the horse that you should bet on
When you put your money down*

--from "I am the horse," by Dorothea Lasky



Iris Bernblum, *Pretty baby*, 2018, Archival inkjet print, spray paint, 20 x 30 inches (Courtesy Aspect/Ratio Gallery, Chicago)

Lasky's poem seems to speak *through* us rather than at us. Almost hypnotically, the repeated lines invite us to linger in our excitement for a moment, contemplating the "thing" that might be prompting it. (It might be a secret.) Claiming "the horse" as a figure for the human psyche seems fitting here, given the popularity of the creature in our collective consciousness, as it gallops through literature, paintings, and film. While horses figure so deeply in

the popular imagination, the living, breathing animal is itself intensely intuitive, possessing an uncanny ability to read human emotions—even those that are deeply hidden. The mirrored act of observing the animal while it, in turn, looks at or even *into* us can be felt in the works of Iris Bernblum and Lise Haller Baggesen. In the independent practices of both artists, the horse—in forms both real and mystical—has emerged as a complicated muse and a manifestation of the artists' inquiries into subjectivity and selfhood. As Bernblum and Baggesen work fluidly through different media—moving in and outside of language, landscapes, and species—their works in *I am the horse* explore the strangeness and beauty of inhabiting a physical body, while finding kinship in other beings.

The colorful, multi-patterned garments known as "Refuseniks" were first realized when Lise Haller Baggesen was completing a residency in the snowy alpine town of Banff, in Alberta, Canada: a period of creative output which happened to coincide with the 45th Presidential Inauguration unfolding back in the United States. For Baggesen, the Refuseniks' emergence during troubled times became a means of tangibly and outwardly resisting the trappings of accelerated capitalism and the political machine, to

insist instead upon autonomy and freedom of mind and body—like a horse who refuses to clear a hurdle or if led to water, will not drink. The Refusenik design, after all, takes its inspiration from a pantomime horse—a jockey shirt and horse blanket combined to form a single costume—suggesting an unbounded, interspecies quality to the garment, while the fabric’s porous, billowing nature exposes a roominess within each piece, an open invitation for collective refusal. Many of the Refuseniks are designed for multiple wearers at a time. Like the horse in Dorothea Lasky’s poem, the “Refusenik” is simultaneously embodied by and manifested outwardly through the garments themselves, gesturing at language’s role in the formation of selfhood, both privately and within a broader landscape.

Baggesen has recently taken up similar concerns in a very different form through her series of “painted ponies,” which are modestly scaled and suggest a more direct exchange between the artist and the animal that has long captured her imagination. Baggesen acknowledges that some might deem the portraits as trivial and “unserious” subject matter for a gallery’s walls. In this way, they might be read as forms of refusal in themselves, resisting certain market-based expectations around art objects and art-making. Beyond this, however, are deeper psychological undercurrents that can be intuited in the ability of a painting to move past mere representation to explore the essence of a thing or being. Through the loose application of paint, which is at times feathered or dripping, the equine subjects of each portrait feel elusive and in motion, as though they’re rushing past the picture plane. In certain works, a pony’s features—the wisp of a mane, an eye, or muzzle—seem to disappear entirely, rendered in such rich, dark pigments they become shadow-like rather than solid creatures. Instead of pinning down a faithful likeness, Baggesen captures a feeling—a wildness—evoked by the animals at hand



Lise Haller Baggesen, *Grown-up Refusenik*, Copenhagen, October 2017, 2017, Digital photograph.

that’s suggestive of an undefined longing. Longing, by its very nature, requires distance, and Baggesen’s paintings give their subjects space to roam beyond the borders of the work.

Like Baggesen, Iris Bernblum works fluidly through different media, from text to drawing to photography, allowing her practice to remain as intuitive and mysterious as the creatures that often appear within her imagery. In Bernblum’s newest body of work, the unicorn becomes the figure through which fictional tales and fantastical worlds rub up against real desires and compulsions. Pursued across medieval tapestries and through fables, the unicorn is hunted

for the healing powers of its horn. Although wild and elusive, the creature of age-old myths can be tamed by a virgin, and is often depicted slumbering in her lap, leaving it vulnerable to capture. But what would it mean if the unicorn, its horn now severed, were suddenly put out to pasture? What would the fantasy look and feel like, this mythical beast grounded in the material world, amidst fragrant grass and fresh air? Born from these musings, Bernblum's photographs present a creature that seems to exist somewhere between dreams and reality. While each image is rendered in black and white, giving the landscapes and figures within them a timeless quality (a little like a myth or fable), the overlain circles of paint that seem either to pierce or radiate from the photographs feel visceral and immediate, suggesting an absence, a hole left behind.¹



Iris Bernblum, *Pretty baby*, 2018, Archival inkjet print, spray paint, 20 x 30 inches (Courtesy Aspect/Ratio Gallery, Chicago)

Projected simultaneously, the two videos that comprise the installation *Pretty baby* subtly, almost silently, call into question real or imagined subjects and scenarios, through the push-and-pull of language and image. As the video of a grazing horse absently swishing its tail loops, a second video flashes text over a depthless black background. The distance between the two videos, and subsequently between the text and a visual subject, heightens the tension between what can be seen and what can only be sensed. While Baggesen's *Refuseniks* are enacted through figures in a landscape, Bernblum's installation turns our attention inward, its ambiguity inviting us to perform the drama internally, with the irregular pauses between each line causing the language to feel natural, as though embedded inside of us. References to touch and to pain (*Did it hurt? Can I kiss it?*) and the line *Flies love filth* ground the piece partially in the sensuous world, while uncertainty lingers in the dark space between each fragment of text. *Come with me*, the final line reads, yet the question of where we are leading someone to (or where we are being led) remains unanswered, leaving us with only the freedom of imagination to take us where it will. Bernblum's and Baggesen's works invite the mind and body to wander intuitively, open to the notion that we are always coming into being. Perhaps, in our wandering, we might glimpse another version of ourselves, free and uncensored—a little wilder, even.

¹ "Mark Jeffrey, the inspiration behind the hole—endless gratitude, magic man."—Iris Bernblum



Lise Haller Baggesen, *Painted Pony, March 6, 2018, 2018*, Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 inches



Lise Haller Baggesen, *Refusenik on the farm (black mare), 2017*, Digital photograph

*Front Cover: Iris Bernblum, *Pretty baby (detail), 2018*, Archival inkjet print, spray paint, 20 x 30 inches (Courtesy Aspect/Ratio Gallery, Chicago)

*Back Cover: Lise Haller Baggesen, *Fort Refusenik, Treasure Beach, March 2018, 2018*, Digital Photograph

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Gallery hours: Fridays & Saturdays 12–4 pm and by appointment

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319 N. Albany
Chicago, IL 60612
goldfinchgallery.org

Design by Nicole Gardner

