



FREDERIK MEIJER Gardens & Sculpture Park

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ESSENCE: THE HORSES OF DEBORAH BUTTERFIELD

The exclusive exhibition traces a passion for horses through the sculptor's prolific career. With master craftsmanship and a variety of materials, Butterfield portrays the essence of the creature's spirit and energy, bringing equine sculpture into relevance again.

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich., — January 9, 2012 — Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park presents the landmark retrospective of Deborah Butterfield's celebrated work. "Essence: The Horses of Deborah Butterfield," on display January 27 through April 29, highlights the singular focus of the sculptor's work since the mid-1970s. Known for her incredible craftsmanship and creative use of materials, Butterfield is among the most respected and acclaimed artists of her generation.

"Throughout the history of art, the horse has been the primary subject of painted and sculpted work," said Joseph Becherer, Vice President and Chief Curator of Horticulture and Sculpture. "The horse's role in society was greatly reduced in the 20th century with the rise of the automobile. Likewise, the emergence of abstract and non-representational imagery in the visual arts made equine imagery seem decidedly antiquated, even irrelevant. Until Deborah Butterfield."

Eleven major works spanning four decades of Butterfield's career are the focus of her first major Midwest exhibition in recent years. Both large scale and pedestal-size horses explore the breadth of her career and inventive scope of creativity. Butterfield's willingness to explore a variety of materials is evident: utilizing mud, straw and clay in her early work, and more recently, found objects, wood, welded steel and bronze.

"The first thing that I saw in my life that I remembered looking important and wonderful was a horse; I was just moved by them in a non-rational, passionate way before I even had words to describe them," said Butterfield.

Initially torn between veterinary medicine and art, Butterfield earned her BFA and MFA from University of California, Davis. Although her passion began as a child, she purchased her first horse during her undergraduate work, while she studied ceramics. Horses have been her primary subject ever since.

In contrast to the stallions, warhorses and sentinels of art history, Butterfield largely concentrates on the female counterpart and specific horses with which she has developed a personal relationship. The works aren't portraits in the traditional sense, but representations of the essence of the creature, physically and psychologically.

“It is not merely the physical presence of such noble creatures she hopes to convey, but their spirit and energy as well,” said Becherer. “In concentrating so fully and effectively on a single theme, Butterfield enables one to develop a great appreciation and sensitivity to both materials and form, but ultimately to the spirit and personality of the horse she celebrates.”

This exhibition is sponsored by The Meijer Foundation, Steelcase Inc. and the Botanic and Sculpture Societies of Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park.

EXHIBITION PROGRAMMING

All activities included with paid admission

Deborah Butterfield: Dialogue with the Artist (video)

Ongoing in the Hoffman Family Auditorium

In this short film (approx. 15 minutes), witness Butterfield creating three specific horses while she candidly discusses the creative process, her relationship with horses and her philosophy on living.

Family Art Activities

Saturdays, February 4, 11 and 18, 11 am – 1 pm

In collaboration with GVSU Art Education Students

Learn about the unique horse sculptures of Deborah Butterfield, then create an art project based on the exhibition.

Curator's Choice

Friday, February 10, 2012 at 12 pm

Walk through the exhibition guided by Joseph Becherer, Vice President and Chief Curator, as he discusses theme, scale and innovative use of materials.

Book Talk: My Favorite Horse Books

Saturday, February 18, 2012 at 1:30 pm

Join us for an informal talk about classic books about horses including *Black Beauty*, *Misty of Chincoteague*, and *My Friend Flicka*. Bring your own favorites.

Gallery Walk

Saturday, February 25, 2012 at 2 pm

Julie Wallace, Horse Trainer and Rider

Discover the meaning of Butterfield's horses from a horse expert. Walk through the galleries and learn about horse anatomy, best breeds for different riding disciplines and horse personalities.

Lecture: The Horse in Art

Friday, March 2, 2012 at 12 pm

Dr. Craig Hanson, Calvin College

The horse symbolizes humankind's mastery of the landscape and its romantic yearnings for untamed open spaces. Dr. Hanson highlights Butterfield's work and considers other famous horses in the history of art.

Gallery Walk

Friday, March 9, 2012 at 12 pm

Kathy Ryan, Executive Director, Equest Center with Linda Godlewski and John Agar, Riders

Find out how equine-based therapy can help improve the quality of life for physically, mentally and socially/emotionally challenged individuals.

Gallery Walk: Perspectives

Friday, March 16, 2012 at 12 pm

Hear from staff and learn about their own perspectives of the exhibition. Featuring Wendy Pektunis, Manager of Indoor Horticulture; Dawn Kibben, Vice President of Finance and Administration; and Roger Bleiler, Director of Communications.

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Images available upon request. [View thumbnails](#)

About Deborah Butterfield

Butterfield was born in San Diego, California in 1949. Her passion for horses began as a child. Torn between veterinary medicine and art during her time at the University of California, San Diego, she transferred to University of California, Davis in 1970 where she earned her BFA in ceramics and an MFA. She later taught at the University of Wisconsin, Madison and then at Montana State University, Bozeman. She now spends her time between studios in Bozeman and Hawaii. Butterfield is the recipient of an NEA Individual Artist Fellowship and a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, among other notable honors.

Butterfield has exhibited across the United States and Europe. Her work has been commissioned by many significant institutions including Whitney Museum of American Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art and Walker Art Center Sculpture Garden. *Cabin Creek* and *Small Dry Fork Horse (1978)* are in Meijer Gardens' permanent collection.

About Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park

One of the world's most significant botanic and sculpture experiences, Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park serves more than a half-million visitors annually. Meijer Gardens was recently ranked in the top 100 most-visited art museums worldwide by *Art Newspaper*, the leading publication in global art news. The 132-acre grounds feature Michigan's largest tropical conservatory; one of the largest children's gardens in the country; arid and Victorian gardens with bronze sculptures by Degas and Rodin; a carnivorous plant house; outdoor gardens; and a 1900-seat outdoor amphitheater, featuring an eclectic mix of world-renowned musicians every summer. The internationally acclaimed Sculpture Park features a permanent collection including works by Rodin, Oldenburg, Moore, Bourgeois and Plensa, among others. Indoor galleries host changing sculpture exhibitions with recent exhibitions by Picasso, Degas, di Suvero, Borofsky, Calder and Chadwick.

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