

Mercedes Morgan

“The Potential Chaos and Structure of Horses”

Art and Design

Rick Lostutter

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My Life Narrative Told Through My Horse

Mercedez Morgan

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I am experimenting with large scale, charcoal drawings of my horse to express my personal narrative by combining representations of the horse's physical characteristics with symbols of chaotic and structural events from my life. I will use photography and research into chaos and natural structures within the horse to inform these charcoal drawing explorations in an attempt to narrate the importance of my personal connection to my horse and how it has helped me navigate these life events.

When I began my thesis I had lots of lines of thought about my subject matter. I had thought about the strengths and weaknesses of horses, dreams and spirit animals, companionship in hard times, and finally the chaos and structure within nature. All of those lines converged to a point, which is my current thesis. It is combining fragments of all of those thoughts into this particular concept of chaos and structure, which has always revolved around personal life events and how I have dealt with them through certain relationships.

Throughout my life I have experienced major chaotic changes to which I have had to adapt. The first event was the divorce of my parents when I was around eight years old. This was a difficult event for my entire family. It was an ugly divorce for everyone. The event was especially chaotic for me, not only did my parents not get along at all, my father's schedule was random and unpredictable because he is a pilot. My time with my parents changed from month to month and I never knew how long I would be with either of them, which added to the chaos.

When I was at my mother's house I was at the farm where I grew up. We had horses, and I spent lots of time with them. I particularly spent a lot of time with my horse named Albert (Al for short), and I found stability in his presence. I spent hours with him after the divorce, he was

basically my only companion. We have had many good times together. He has become a literal and metaphorical symbol for the chaos and structure in my life. Horses can be unpredictable, chaotic creatures yet they have undeniable beauty, strength, and structure; just like life.

To explain the nature of horses, at least my experience of their nature, I will tell a few personal stories. One time, my father and I were coming back in the dark from a night ride with our horses. We were all tired from the ride and were almost to the barn. As we were plodding along, I decided that I was going to throw my leg over the saddle and ride sidesaddle because it was something I did for comfort. Normally, my horse is very docile and laid back, but when I threw my leg over his neck he bucked me off in a split second! All I can remember is flying through the pitch dark and landing on my back, knocking the breath out of me. The next moment I remember was my father standing over me shining a flashlight in my eyes asking if I was alright, and the two horses standing over me looking down at me with concern. When I had thrown my leg over his neck I had forgotten that I had spurs on, and I accidentally clipped my horse's neck, causing him to throw me off. It happened so quickly I had no chance to stop it or see it coming. That is how life is, you cannot predict it or see into the future because chaos waiting to happen. However, life has wonderful moments that make all that chaos worth it, just like I have had harmonious and tranquil moments with my horse that made the turbulent moments miniscule. I remember peacefully laying on his back watching the beautiful blue sky while Al munched grass blissfully. I also remember standing silently with him, leaning on his enduring shoulder, telling him my secrets because I knew his capable legs could hold the weight of my world. Those are some of my best memories. I felt so connected to my horse.

There is a song by Brenn Hill about a horse called Mono, and one of the lyrics is, "And by the time winter came, I could honestly say we were one in every way." That is truly how I

felt. He is my calm in the hurricane, and one of the most important and structured relationships I have ever had. Al is one of the last positive memories I have from the farm.

Although I have had those tranquil moments with him, I still have a healthy respect for his power, as any person should have for an animal of his size. I believe that horses are best described in the poem by Joel Nelson. One of the lines reads, “I can be as tough as hardened steel – as fragile as a flower”. The horse scares me sometimes, but I love him and I cannot get enough of his comforting presence. Any second he could decide to kill me and there would be nothing I could do to stop him. However, our relationship is built upon trust and respect. This is a creature with feelings and thoughts which adds to the importance of trust and structure in our relationship. He is chaos and he is structure. In fact, he is the epitome of chaos. He is a flighty, one ton animal with high prey instincts and I am getting on his back, like a predator would, and yet he trusts me and he has never hurt me purposefully. Sometimes his body language lets me know what he is thinking, but even then he could change his mind in a split second. I have witnessed this change of behavior many times with horses.

It is hard to imagine a creature being such a paradoxical being, but I will be trying to visualize that sense of the strength and chaos and gentleness and structure within the horse’s physical characteristics. I normally work small scale and with color to help me achieve realism, but for my thesis I will be using charcoal on large scale paper. This will be a challenge for me because using charcoal will force me to stay monochromatic and more focused on the marks that I am making within the composition. The large scale aspect will also compel me to put my body into the process and really focus on the mark making and the feelings of chaos and structure. I want the viewer to be taken aback by the chaos or drawn into the structure of the piece based on my use of scale. Also, using large scale will prevent me from being as precise with proportions which will, again, make me focus more on the mark making. This medium of charcoal and large

scale material might be a challenge for me, but I will reach my thesis goals with the help of my influences.

My first influence is Georgia O'Keeffe. I chose her as an influence because within most of her paintings she uses shapes and values to create visual movement within the composition. I will be focusing more on movement and mark, so she will be an excellent source for those elements. The fluidity of her marks also brings the viewer around the composition. I will need to use that same method to bring the viewers into a moment of structure or chaos in my work (2).

My next influence, Beth Cavener, is a sculptor with similar fluid and visually moving marks within her pieces. She sculpts large scale clay animals to convey aspects of human psychology such as fear, apathy, and aggression. She uses large scale to confront the viewer with those feelings, I also want my viewers to be confronted by feelings of chaos and structure by using scale (3).

My final influence is Raphael Macek, who is an equine photographer interested in capturing the essence and beauty within the nature of the horse. I will use monochrome photography as part of my creative process to study the way he captures the narrative of horses. In his photographs of horses, he shows the strength and stability of the horse. He also captures the movement of the horse which I will experiment with for the chaotic portion of my thesis (1).

I will start with monochromatic photography to help me frame my composition before translating it into the large scale charcoal drawings. I will focus on the strongest, most explosive, yet stable forms within the physique of the horse. Through this, I will also examine some chaotic or unpredictable angles of the horse such as getting down below the horse or behind the horse. Also, I will look at angles from above the horse or on the horse riding it in order to find some structure and movement. In some of my photographs that I have taken so far, I have found some

landscape-like structures within the back, hips, and withers (part of the spine connecting the neck and back) of the horse that look like some of Georgia O'Keeffe's landscape paintings (4).

Therefore, my challenge will be further exploring these elements of the horse's physical characteristics in order to tell my life narrative of chaos and structure through my process of monochromatic photography translated to large scale charcoal drawings. This will be important because it will show others that life is chaotic, but moments of structure can be found within chaos that makes life worth every second.

My Life Narrative Told Through My Horse

Mercedez Morgan

April 2019

Before my oral defense, I told everyone that my thesis was not life changing and that it was just another project. I was completely wrong. I did not discover this until the night of my oral defense when my advisor asked me, “what did this mean to you, *personally*?” I realized in that moment that this thesis had brought me closer to my companion, my very best friend, when I felt like I had lost that relationship. I also regained part of myself that I thought was gone, I thought for sure that life had smudged out that flame. Though it was not smudged out, in fact it is burning brighter than ever. My passion for horses and my sixteen year relationship with my horse was not broken, only stronger now. I am grateful for this process that has strengthened me as a person and as an artist.

As I mentioned in the essay previous to this, I had struggled with a concept for my thesis statement. It started as my life narrative told through the horse, with the horse being a parallel for my chaotic and structured life events. As I got closer to the day of the oral defense, it became clear that yes, it was a life narrative, but also a relationship between myself and the horse. My thesis developed into the parallel of life’s structure and potential chaos and the horse’s structure and potential for chaos. During my parents divorce and other difficult events in my life, I found structure within the horse to remedy the fear of chaos in my life. After my parents divorce I became fearful of life’s potential chaos. I feel the same way about my horse, I am respectful and I have a healthy fear of his potential for chaos. I also find comfort within his structure, I can lean on his powerful frame for support. I have found little moments in life that I can lean on as well, memories and moments of structure.

To start the process of capturing those moments with my horse, I used black and white photography. The photos shown below are what I used to lay out my composition.







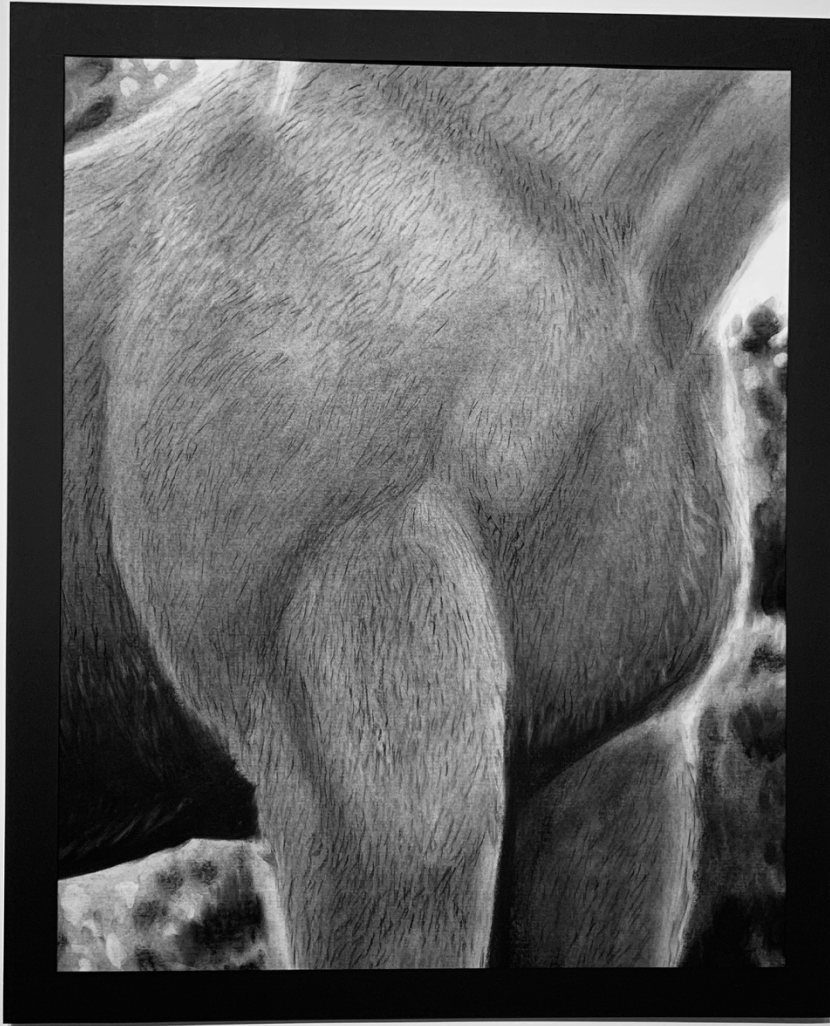


By using photography, I was trying to show the essence and the nature of my horse. My influence for these photographs was Raphael Macek, a horse photographer from the U.K. who is also interested in capturing the essence and nature of horses (1). When I actually began to draw, I used charcoal on large scale paper. This was a challenge for me, I do not normally do large scale because it is much harder to get a precise measurement like I want to do. I chose charcoal as the medium because a colorful medium would have taken away from the concept I was trying to express. Colors can have many different meanings and since my thesis was a two part concept,

structure and potential chaos, I wanted a black and white medium. The photos shown below are my finished pieces that were displayed at my oral defense.



The piece, shown above, was most heavily influenced by Georgia O’Keeffe’s landscape paintings. Her landscape paintings have shapes and values that form structure within the composition (4). I was trying to achieve that same technique within this piece titled, “*Curiosity.*”



“Stability”



“Inquiring”



“Capricious”



“Trust”

My last influence is Beth Cavener, she is a sculptor who uses movement and texture to convey feelings of fear or aggression within her large scale clay animal sculptures (3). I wanted to use texture and movement to convey the potential chaos and structure within my pieces as well.

To conclude, this process has brought me closer to my horse and has helped me heal from some traumatic life events. That is worth its weight in gold to me. I struggled greatly with figuring out my concept, but there is no growth without struggle. I can now look at life and admire the structure and beauty within it and also know that there is potential for chaos just like I look at my horse. I can enjoy those wonderful moments and know that even if there is potential for great chaos, there will always be structure in the storm for me.

Works Cited

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Artist Statement

Artist: Mercedes Morgan

Title: *The Potential Chaos and Structure of Horses*

Date: April 2019

Medium: Charcoal

Horses have been a symbol and a metaphor for the chaos and structure in my life. They are paradoxical creatures, one minute they are calm and the next minute they can have the potential for great destruction. I have found that life can be the same way. One minute life is calm and peaceful, the next minute the rug can be ripped out from under your feet, so to speak.

In these moments of potential chaos, I have experienced comfort and structure from the relationship with my horse. He was my peace during hard times, but he is also an unpredictable creature. The unpredictability and potential chaos of horses has given me a healthy respect for them, and for life. When I am around my horse I am in the moment with him because he could change in a split second. I have learned to live my life the same way; I try to live in the moment because it could change abruptly without warning.

In this series of large scale charcoal drawings I have tried to convey the physical presence and structure of my horse and his potential for creating chaos. The compositions are cropped in close, altering the viewer's reference to the form of the horse. I want to challenge the viewer to confront the animal in a way that reveals that potential for chaos. The angles were captured to convey discomfort and slight unease. Being below or behind a horse is dangerous, they could become flighty and possibly injure someone in the process. I also want the viewer to experience the structure within the musculature of his body while also feeling the comfort within the softness of the fur. I hope the take away from this series is to have a healthy respect for the potential chaos of horses after viewing these pieces, but to also feel a sense of structure and comfort within the horse's form. The angles the horse is captured in may have these elements of chaos and structure, but he is greater than the sum of the parts. He has been a great companion through my life and has played an important role in expressing my narrative visually. I hope the viewer can see into that relationship my horse and I have.