

Hungarian University of Fine Arts  
Doctoral School

**CHANGES OF APPROACH WITHIN THE APPEARANCE  
OF THE HORSE PORTRAIT IN (POST)CONTEMPORARY ART**

Theses of Doctoral Dissertation

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2016

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*I doubt, therefore I think, I ride, therefore I am, I am, therefore God exists*  
(Veszely Beáta, 2016)

The primary aim of my dissertation as a completion of document is to position possibilities of interpretation of the horse/equine portrait within art today, as I could not find literature in this regard. I would like to create a bridge across the gulf between equine culture and fine art which was created in the 20th century in both international as well as Hungarian art.

My dissertation is based upon three larger parts, three chapters:

- I. The art of riding – rethinking art history
- II. The place of the rider in (post)contemporary art
- III. Portrait of the centaur

I. For my research it was crucial to investigate an art historical overview of the subject matter, an observation of different occurrences of equine portraits from past centuries.

The most important results of my art historical research:

**1.a.** The art of riding is to be understood as that which is taught, the academic art of riding which is based upon the “production” and practice of school gaits. School gaits are not only developed by and practiced as a kind of ballet in dressage, from the Spanish riding school or of 20th century equine sports, but these are ancient gaits used by the military, by the cavalry and come from inherited knowledge dating back thousands of years.

**1.b.** A crucial part of the representation of horses by artists and artisans in their works was to have correct knowledge of the particular gaits, as they profiled them precisely. I would like to traverse the common statement that we can only know the correct movement of the horse through the photography series of Eadweard Muybridge, Étienne-Jules Marey, Ottomar Anschütz, or of the Hungarian artist Székely Bertalan. In other words photography decided what phases are possible in the horse's movement.

In riding high school, canter movement has a higher level variation, which also has a floating phase and we call it *carrière*. There exists a moment, a phase of the movement in *carrière*, when all four legs of the horse are almost stretched in the air. Because equine portraits often represented kings, princes and heroes and because the symbolic meaning of the gait was important, artists usually represented their models in high school gaits (*redopp*, *terre à terre* or *carrière*) instead of *campagne* canter. This could also be a social expectation. Therefore equine portraits drawn in *carrière* canter, are not some kind of naive representation of the defaults of photography and moving image, but such a movement of the horse exists in high school, moreover within the practice of the highest level canter. This kind of gait is very rare these days, but in earlier times, such as the baroque age or even back in Hungarian ancient history, in my supposition, it must have been an elemental part of equine culture, it must have been an integral of the practice of the ancient Hungarian cavalry and a significant element of military strategies.

The abovementioned observations are interrelated and the result is important background information for reading art historical equine portraits, as well as in an anthropological, war historical context.

**II.** After the abovementioned work, in the 2nd chapter, the dissertation focuses on the equine portrait in today's art and additionally I try to place my own practice within this present process.

The most important results of my work:

**2.a.** Art thinking in regard to horses and the horse portrait in general is basically influenced in a historical manner. In other words, it is not possible to deal in a comprehensive manner with horses, independently from historical processes.

**2.b.** It is not enough to make observations of the horse from a distance, as a theme of art history, as an inheritance, theory or concept but one has to become part of equine culture to be able to gain understanding of this relationship. I have been working very hard to this end in recent years. I changed my studio practice, so that I moved art's space to the theme of my works, I wrote my thesis from right next to horses. I was lucky enough to be able to learn from the biggest masters in Hungarian equine culture and I try to deepen my equine knowledge continuously. My works were often shown for equine spectators, so that the interpretation of art spaces and the art audience can and should be expanded, broadened.

**2.c.** On the one hand the equine portrait is an existing art form, on the other hand thinking about it is also relevant. The horse portrait (equine portrait) can be positioned in Hungarian art history today and where there is living representation – beyond myself too.

**2.d.** Art has changed a lot in the last two decades and the animal-human theme has never been so common in western art history as today. Art theory is dealing with the non-human as part of a kind of movement called animal studies. In this dynamic and sparkling period of contemporary art, the horse portrait is appearing as a kind of enduring fossil.

**2.e.** As a result of my studies I had to realise that the horse portrait has a basic crucial quality which is based upon its connections with time. This is

the reason why it is absolutely necessary to break through the abovementioned margin, to open up and free up artworks and artistic processes. Contemporary art has actually closed itself down to some extent and the horse portrait is breaking through and opening up a way towards post-contemporary art. Post-contemporary is significant, because it is able to solve problems, which either the contemporary or the postmodern are not capable of doing.

**III.** In the center of my discussion in the third chapter of the dissertation, the highest kind of formation of the human-horse relationship, the centaur is placed. I find the significance of the work made here, the rethinking and observation of the horse-rider collective and of the centaur all took me closer to God. This cannot be considered a scientific result, nonetheless it is important from the point of view (beyond personal experience), that the boundaries of scientific thinking are outlined and we can also take the viewpoint that although science and theory are unable to give answers, they are still an important part of human life. Therefore we have to deal with it. In this chapter I experiment with how to write about the beyond-academic in an academic dissertation.

A few important points from this chapter:

**3.a.** The centaur is not only a mythological figure from antiquity, not just a speculation, nor only a representation of a concept, but in some respects it remains an existing symbol today.

**3.b.** The symbolic exists in the imagination, however the focus of my interest is how the imagined becomes a real image, and that the image (the symbolic body of the centaur) itself is real. Therefore the horse – rider compilation is not only a representation or a didactic illustration, but rather the melting together of bodies and meanings. A kind of transformation is coming into being. One of the basic assumptions of art

is metamorphosis and the centaur is a concept which incorporates that which art theory tries so hard to theorise about.

**3.c.** The centaur is a symbol for interdependence, as life (all life) depends on others. Human life and animal life on Earth is interdependent and this is a kind of game which we have to answer to and has to be held in deep respect.

**3.d.** The religious quality of human experience – that there is a deeply religious side within us all, regardless of whether one is an atheist or not, also comes from art's performativity. Conceptual art, and especially performance art brought a significant change, because they washed art and religion together again. Riding is a performative event, which has a sacral dimension (as it is dealing with the invisible). The horse portrait of postcontemporary art, therefore is a religious experience. Because questions appear, for which theory is unable to give satisfying answers, nothing else is left for us, only belief and love. The horse – rider compilation carries all this and defines the place of man in biology, and at the same time opens up the way to postcontemporary art.