



MARI KLOEPPPEL

ANIMALS IN THE DRAWING ROOM

— PORTRAITS BY —

MARI KLOEPPEL

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CROCKER Art Museum

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ANIMALS IN THE DRAWING ROOM: Portraits by Mari Kloepfel

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Mari Kloepfel became an artist because of a horse. Today, the horse sustains her art and is the foremost subject in her phylum of animal paintings that also includes dogs, rabbits, chickens, and cattle, along with less domestic creatures such as ravens, pelicans, and falcons. The species matters less to her than the personal connection she shares with the animal. Most she knows well, having lived with them for years at her rural home in Elkhorn, north of the Monterey Peninsula. Others she has encountered through animal rescues or friends. She finds beauty and intelligence in them all and within them discovers her muse.

Kloepfel's reverence for animals, the horse in particular, is exceptional. For at 26, she was accidentally crushed by Cobahsaan, a 1,000 pound Arab gelding that would ultimately become her favorite subject. Although broken ribs collapsed her lungs, and medication left her temporarily blind, her love of animals was undaunted by the experience. She determined that if she were to recover and regain her sight she would pursue art as an animal painter. She has since done exactly that.

Kloepfel is drawn to paint through sheer passion for her subjects. "I want to make a connection with my animals," she explains, "through a quiet, soulful approach that captures their spirit."¹ In so doing, she has a long history to draw upon. Indeed, the world's earliest extant animal paintings were limned on cave walls for much the same purpose. In more recent times, artists have portrayed animals for their physical splendor, as commodities, as evocations of a pastoral way of life, as biblical metaphors, and because they were important to the family. For Kloepfel, it is beauty and familiarity that resonate most.

Kloepfel lives with her husband, Klaus, in Elkhorn, less than a mile from the slough north of the Monterey Peninsula. Their wooded property is an Arcadian retreat that the artist finds essential to her emotional and physical well-being. Her reverence for nature

Cobahsaan and Blue I, 2007. Oil on linen, 60 x 42 inches. Collection of Michelle and Gary Moore.

began early on, and was in large part due to her upbringing. Although her family, the Russells, lived in south San Jose when Mari was born, it was an area then still surrounded by agriculture. As the city grew in the late 1960s, the family moved to a more remote setting between Aromas and San Juan Bautista, settling on a 40-acre parcel of land. Although her family was Lutheran and church-going, Kloepfel found that her true religion was not to be found indoors, but in nature—and with animals. “It’s the balance of where we fit into the whole picture,” she explains. “And that involves animals and dirt and us. I don’t consider myself separate from all that.”²

Inspired by her mother, an art teacher, and grandmother, a landscape painter, Kloepfel began sketching early on. At ten, she took her first paid painting lessons from Nan Pipestem, who was not only an artist but a founder of the San Benito County Wildlife SPCA. Kloepfel quickly became dedicated to the cause of helping animals, nursing the sick and injured back to health and releasing them into the wild. Although Kloepfel gave up painting in high school, she nevertheless continued to work creatively under Sylvia Rios, who taught her the art of jewelry and ceramic making. In her junior year at Hollister High, she won the Bank of America award for art, which prompted her to first seriously consider an art career.

After graduating from high school, Kloepfel spent five months traveling in Europe before enrolling at San Jose State University. The European trip proved defining. Visiting major museums and drawing inspiration from the masters, she was most taken



with painters of the Italian and Northern Renaissance, as well as with more contemporary artists such as Franz Marc, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, August Macke, and other painters of *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider)—especially with their depictions of horses. “Those were my heroes,” she remembers.³

In her final semester in San Jose State’s art program she took advantage of the opportunity to finish her studies at Sheffield Polytechnic University in England. It was there that she discovered the 18th-century romantic painter George Stubbs, also known for his paintings of horses. She thought of his work often after returning to California, but did not dedicate herself to painting. Instead, she turned her attention to animals, training horses and pursuing other career opportunities—such as the study of veterinary medicine.

Franz Marc, *Die grossen blauen Pferde* (The Large Blue Horses), 1911. Oil on canvas, 41 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 71 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches. Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Gift of the T.B. Walker Foundation, Gilbert M. Walker Fund, 1942.

At 29, following her life-altering accident and recovery, Kloepfel applied for and was accepted into the graduate program at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland (now California College of the Arts). Again, fate intervened. She met and fell in love with Klaus Kloepfel, who was visiting California from Germany. Instead of Oakland, she moved with Klaus to Mainz, Germany, and entered the graduate program at Gutenberg University. There, her instructors fully supported her inclinations toward traditional, representational subject matter. The Kloepfels returned to California in the early 1990s and bought property in Elkhorn.



Following her training, Kloepfel rendered her first animal paintings with a bravura stroke, painterly surface, and expressive color inspired by artists like Marc and Macke, as well as more contemporary California painters from the Bay Area figurative and pop schools. She eventually abandoned these 20th-century influences in favor of Northern Renaissance and 17th-century Dutch examples, finding inspiration in the luminous color and extraordinary detail of Jan van Eyck, the sensitive draftsmanship of Albrecht Dürer, and the dramatic lighting of Johannes Vermeer. She also looked to 18th-century animal portraits such as those by Stubbs, and 19th-century depictions by Rosa Bonheur. In an effort to arrive at an exacting result, she utilized the traditional techniques of these artists, supporting her approach by not only making direct observations of the animal itself, but by referring to anatomy books, photographs, and bones.

Kloepfel’s working method begins with numerous sketches that lead to a highly finished drawing that she then transfers to linen in charcoal or chalk. She follows this with a detailed under-painting in hues complementary to the painting itself and then builds her surface, and her subjects, with a very fine brush. Layer by layer and hair by hair, the painting takes shape over a period of months to as much as a year. She was



George Stubbs, *Rufus*, about 1762–1765. Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 30 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches. Indianapolis Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Eli Lilly.

Rosa Bonheur, *American Mustangs*, after 1885. Oil on canvas, 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 39 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Collection Tweed Museum of Art, University of Minnesota Duluth, Gift of Howard W. Lyon.

given confidence in such fastidiousness by taking lessons from Watsonville artist Tobin Keller, who tutored her in oil techniques and in how to obtain what is now regarded as her signature, sharp-focus resolution and extraordinary degree of detail.



While Kloeppe's technique is certainly traditional, her approach to painting animals is not. That her animals are beautiful is nothing new to art history, but these animals are also heroic. These are portraits. For each painting she studies her subjects thoroughly, looking for just the right pose and expression that captures their personalities, thoughts, and sometimes even their senses of humor. This attitude and philosophy would have found great sympathy with Rosa Bonheur, whose unsentimental, yet sympathetic portrayals of horses, cattle, and other

farm animals differed markedly from those of her contemporaries. Like Kloeppe, Bonheur worked outside the mainstream. She also found companionship in her subjects and elevated livestock, then a lowly theme in the hierarchy of art, to iconic levels.

As in her depictions of farm animals, Kloeppe's "wild" creatures retain distinct identities, although they do not exactly embody nature untamed. In these, there is often a subtle melancholy, for these creatures do not exist in a world that is entirely their own. As in her domestic depictions of horses, dogs, and rabbits, which may sport brands, collars, and other evidence of man's presence, the accoutrements that the artist sometimes includes in her depictions of birds make clear that these no longer symbolize a purely wild, avian freedom, but instead are embodiments of a desire for freedom that can no longer be. Cheruka, the raven, for instance, lives at Coyote Point Wild Animal Museum in San Mateo, having been left half dead in a garbage bag on the museum's front steps. The bird survived and became the favorite subject of animal biologists who continue to try to measure her considerable intelligence.

Also rescued and living at the same museum is the peregrine falcon named Oghab. Raised in captivity as a sport bird, the falcon now offers animal biologists critical data to

Detail of Cobahsaan and Blue II.

Cheruka, 2000. Oil on linen, 24 x 14 inches. Collection of Rami Rubin.



help rescue other falcons. In his portrait, he stands on an outstretched glove. “Oghab acts important because he knows his role is important,” Kloepfel theorizes. “He can fly, but he doesn’t like to. He really loves sitting on that hand.”⁴

Kloepfel’s subjects frequently transcend themselves into realms of symbol and metaphor, embodying feelings and events drawn from the artist’s life. She often thinks of family, which comes through in paintings such as *Cobahsaan and Barbaados*, *Father and Son*, a tender, almost human interaction in horseflesh. In other paintings, an untold story exists just outside the picture plane. Her painting of Cheruka, for instance, acknowledges her grandfather, who shared a reciprocal fascination with the raven. In this portrait, the bird looks down at grandpa, who having recently passed away at age 100, exists not in reality, but in spirit—somewhere beyond the picture plane.

In other paintings, Kloepfel seems to reference herself—her animal portraits serving as self portraits of a sort. Sometimes she is gentle, as in her portrayal of the rabbit Tulip. Other times, as in a feisty portrait of the stallion Barbaados, she bares her teeth. For her, the Barbaados portrait is especially edgy in its confrontational approach—at least by animal-portrait standards. Here the horse, and by extension the artist, establish boundaries that should not be crossed.

Most poignantly, Kloepfel’s depiction of Oghab obliquely references her own story and temporary blindness. Perched on the falconer’s glove, the bird stands determined and resolute, its hood, now only implied, forever removed. Yet the bird’s long captivity has become engrained. It now favors the familiarity of the glove over the unknowns of the sky. As with the artist, the falcon’s experiences have shaped its path and ultimately led it to find security and purpose in that which it knows best.

NOTES

1. Mari Kloepfel, Interview with Scott A. Shields, September 4, 2008.
2. Mari Kloepfel, quoted in Ben Bamsey, “Mari Kloepfel: A Thousand Layers,” *Artworks* (Winter 2005), p. 27.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 24.



Ojhab, 2005. Oil on linen, 20 x 20 inches. Collection of Phil and Sandy Cardeiro.



Barbaados, 2001. Oil on linen, 26 x 40 inches. Collection of Sheryl Root and Bud Hyler.



Tulip, 2000. Oil on linen, 18 x 18 inches. Collection of Lisa Watson.



Cobahsaan and Blue II, 2007. Oil on linen, 24 x 20 inches. Collection of Mike Phillips.



Barbaados and Cobahsaan, Father and Son, 2000. Oil on linen, 72 x 48 inches. Collection of Dr. David Fried.



Brown Pelican, 2007. Oil on linen, 28 x 28 inches. Collection of Richard and Trina Harris.



Molly and Henji, 2003. Oil on board, 12 x 12 inches. Collection of Julia Foster.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Without the support and assistance of numerous individuals and organizations, this exhibition would not have been possible. First, the Crocker is grateful to artist Mari Kloeppe and gallery owner Chris Winfield, who guided the project from start to finish. Thoughtful, creative, and always lighthearted, they were both a joy to work with. The Crocker is also deeply appreciative of Chris Winfield's efforts in helping to secure loans for the exhibition and for funding and producing this publication.

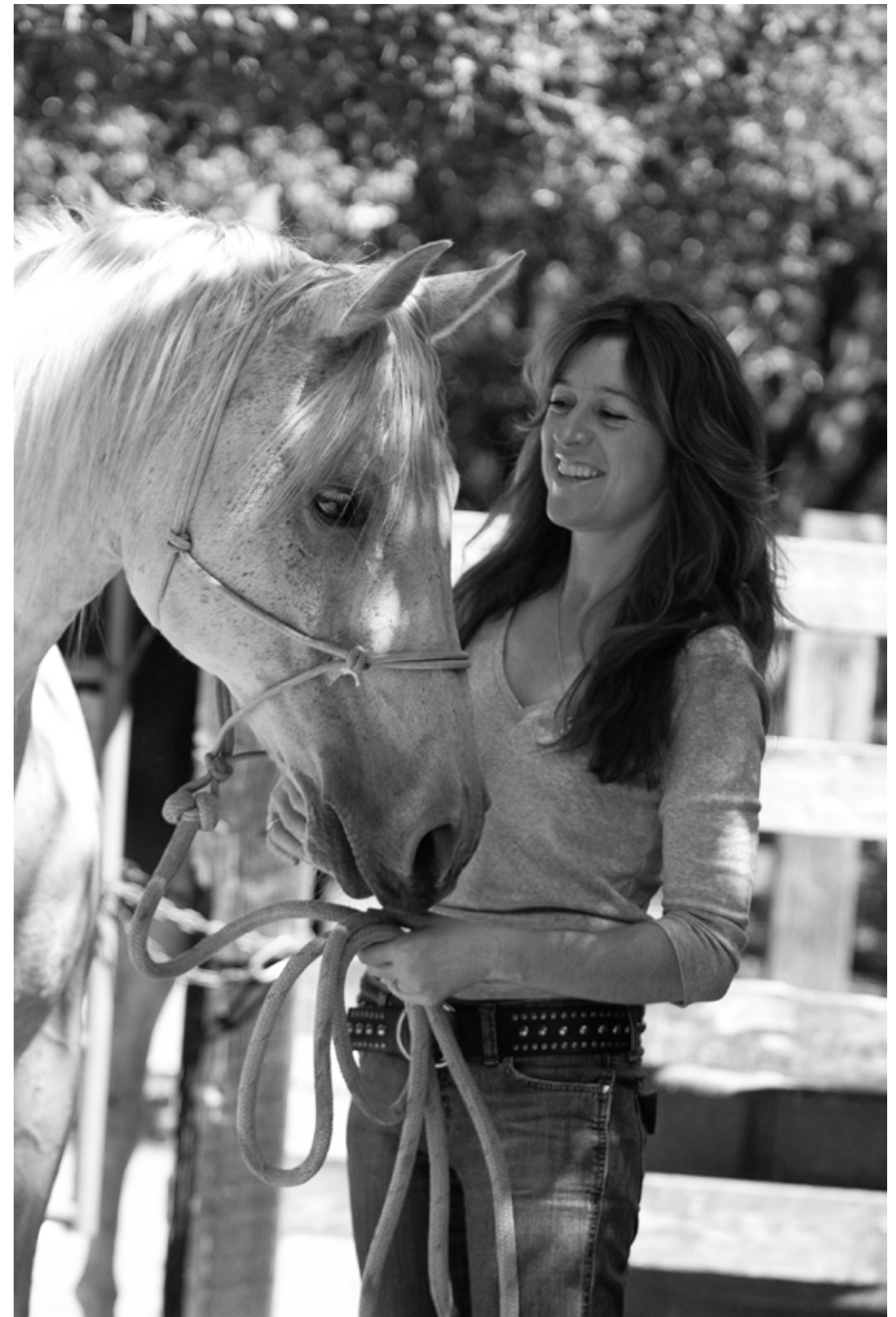
The Crocker wishes especially to thank the lenders to the show, who parted with their much-loved paintings with great reluctance. It was only because of their profound admiration for the artist and her work that they were willing to lend such signature pieces. We gratefully acknowledge the following for loaning paintings to the show: Phil and Sandy Cardeiro, Robert Ellis, Julia Foster, Dr. David Fried, Richard and Trina Harris, Sheryl Root and Bud Hyler, Michelle and Gary Moore, Mike Phillips, Rami Rubin, and Lisa Watson.

The artist would like to thank her husband, Klaus, for his steadfast support and encouragement of her art for more than twenty years. Special thanks must also go to Gina Taro, who allowed us to reproduce her photograph of Mari and Cobahsaan. The entire staff of the Crocker Art Museum is also deserving of thanks, particularly the curatorial staff: John Caswell, William Breazeale, Erin Aitali, Steve Wilson, and, especially, Diana Daniels. The continuing commitment of the City of Sacramento and the Crocker Art Museum Association Board of Directors made this project, along with all others at the museum, possible.

Finally, Mari would like to recognize Cobahsaan, who passed away this past summer. For nearly 30 years, he served as her constant companion, favorite subject, and muse. He will be missed, but his legacy will be forever remembered through the extraordinary paintings he inspired.

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Right: Mari Kloeppe and Cobahsaan. Photograph by Gina Taro.
Overleaf: Detail of *Barbaados and Cobahsaan, Father and Son*.







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Cover: *Cobahsaan II*, 2001. Oil on linen, 36 x 36 inches. Collection of Robert Ellis.

Above: Detail of *Cobahsaan and Blue I*. Catalog design by Victoria May.