

The Art of Equine Architecture

In a recent gray afternoon the artist Jill Soukup answered her door in overalls poke-a-dotted with oil paint that intimated the energetic colors of her two sturdy subjects: muscular horses and structural urbanisms.

For her one-woman show at Denver's venerable Abend Gallery that opened October 10 2008, Soukup drenched 26 canvasses in one or the other of her current obsessions. Horse architecture—with which she is deeply familiar—helps her render the industrial underbelly of the city. And vice versa; one infuses the other with its life and core strength.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the show's two astonishing masterworks, "Bridges in Orange," and the neighboring "Appaloosa." Do not miss them. Anyway, you can't. They are daunting in size and mesmerizing from a distance. Stand too close and you may get dazzlingly lost in their layered hues and leaping textures.

Soukup first spotted the subject of 'Bridges' while walking near the East River in Manhattan a few years ago. She snapped photos, made sketches, and shelved them for later use. Her first attempts in oil were small and true to the bridges' original green color, and a tourmaline gem of 'Bridges' is included in the Abend show. But as Soukup tended the image it grew enormous like an autumn pumpkin and ripened to a harvestable orange.

At first the mathematically determined collared steel arches and welded pillars of the expanded 'Bridges' seem to regress backwards as if caught in a mirror reflection. They repeat like Roman aqueducts or the vaulted ceiling perspective of a gothic church.

But 'horse' also runs through 'Bridges' 'bloodline. The muscular arches derive much from the equine slope of neck to withers, or of the space between the forearms, or of the roundness from croup to dock. Strong pillars are legs that will never buckle grounded in hooves of steel.

In "Appaloosa," which stands 12 hands high Soukup transferred the green

of the Manhattan bridges to a Colorado meadow that is presided over by a steed in tones of machine gray. On the color wheel this is what her preferred palette can become if its elements are brought together. Yet 'Appaloosa' is very much alive as green shadow falls heavily on wild grass, and the powerful edifice of the horse is reflected in just a splinter of blue stream.



photo: John Taff



Bowed Canter, 8" x 8" Oil

With Soukup's long swinging ponytail she reminds you of the girl in your class who was always dreaming of horses or drawing them. "I was obsessed with horses as a child, they were the only thing I drew," she conceded. "I so badly wanted my own horse I loved just to touch one." She greedily read Walter Farley's *Black Stallion* series with their glistening blue-black protagonists, and Anna Sewell's classic, *Black Beauty*. Luckily Soukup grew up in rural Aurora 30 years ago, and could pet and ride her neighbors' horses and took English riding lessons.

But her family was never in a position to buy a horse for her. One Christmas Soukup's father gave her a book about horse anatomy, "which provided a really wonderful drawing foundation," she said. She practiced drawing horses from the inside out, from skeleton to skin, and learned about proportion, composition and balance through her endless drawing exercises.

They made an artist rather than an equestrian of her, and she graduated with a bachelor's degree in fine arts from Colorado State University. Beside Soukup's large canvasses she still looks deceptively delicate in the way little girls often do when they stand next to their overwhelming mounts.

For the last eight years Soukup has painted full-time. "I'm very focused on color," she said. "I am still learning about it, but I think



photo: Karen G. Myers

I've started to get a hold on it." She motioned to a blue water tank in one of her industrial landscapes, and of how it stands away from



Green Corner, 20" x 24" Oil

the orange facade of the building. In her painting "Purple Bay" the angled window box protruding from red brick is a surprising shade of lavender. Soukup loves "triads" of color, and talked of how she likes to "push the relationship between opposing colors."

Like many artists she often turns her paintings upside down and thinks about them that way for a few days before deciding whether they are finished. Indeed, seeing them in the abstract underscores technical and compositional strengths that are independent of subject matter.

Interspersed among the Abend show's statuesque horses, rotund water tanks and the lightning bolts of fire escapes are only a few paintings of another of Soukup's favorite subjects, winter trees. Knowing herself as well as she does, she pointed out for a viewer resemblances to horse and bridge in the gnarled branches of the old cottonwood that once stood in Denver's Washington Park.

It is perhaps a mediation between things living and things structural.

--Dyana Z. Furmansky

