

SHEILA ROCK

It was the English satirist Jonathan Swift who described horses as "the perfection of nature," and it is the strength, nobility, and depth of personality of the equine spirit that photographer Sheila Rock delineates in her series of horse portraits.

"The horses were a personal project to push myself to be better and more creative," explains Rock, a successful London-based editorial and commercial photographer who regularly pursues projects away from the commercial mainstream in order to expand the boundaries of her art and vision.

"I was going through a period where I worked a lot in the studio, and I was looking for situations where you don't have control and have to look and wait for things to happen. I was also doing shamanic work and working on spiritual things in terms of personal growth. The horse photographs focused on the power and anima of horses, which to me reflects something beautiful and spiritual."

Primarily self-taught, the American-born Rock has lived in London for the past 30 years and says her becoming a professional photographer occurred more by accident than by design.

"I had a good friend who was a potter and clothing designer living with Brian Eno, and she asked me to take some pictures of her for a magazine article," Rock recalls. "The publication, which was a style magazine for youth culture, ran the photos and then asked me to do more. That's when I began doing a lot of work in the music business. The magazine encouraged creativity, and that pushed me to



learn more about photography.

"I've been a photographer for 20 years and don't have a set way of doing things," adds Rock. "Things go in waves and trends in photography as well as in one's own discovery of cameras and equipment. When I started out, I only did 35mm work, then I moved on to shooting with a Hasselblad, and then to a Sinar and 8x10 Polaroids. Now that I've been working with many different formats, I have a general feel for what I like and I go for that."

Rock describes her recent horse project as an effort to incorporate the skills and talents learned from her assignment work into a broader and more personally focused application of her craft.

According to Rock, her equine photographs run the gamut from formal and stylized portraits, using painted backdrops and studio lights, to more straightforward documentary images. Rock says she will often just sit in a pasture with camera in hand, waiting for the

horses to approach and interact with her. She characterizes the sessions as evolutionary, as she moves beyond trying to create iconic pictures of the horses to producing images that dig deeper, looking to capture their essence and spirit.

"I approached the project without knowing what I was going to do," says Rock. "I tried to be true to the essence of the horses, and I waited for chance moments in terms of relating to them."

"I'm old-fashioned and have a love of classic imagery that is elegant, strong, and bold. I tried not to be quirky and keep the integrity of the images by not using cross processes."

Rock hopes to see her equine photographs eventually published in book form as an accompanying work to her recently published book from an earlier project documenting Tibetan monastic life. Entitled *Sera: The Way of the Tibetan Monk*, and published by Columbia University Press, the book features a series of portraits done in the same spirit as the horse photos, looking beyond the physical characteristics of the subjects in order to penetrate and record their essential spirit.

Rock's portrait work, primarily of musicians and artists, has been widely exhibited, including recent shows at the National Portrait Gallery and the Proud Gallery in London. A selection of her horse photographs were shown in 2001 at London's Special Photographers Gallery, and in a recent group show at the June Bateman Gallery in New York City in 2002. Rock will also be exhibiting a selection

of her Tibetan pictures at The Photographers' Gallery in London.

Based on her experiences photographing horses, Rock attests to their distinctive personalities and a dignity and grace that often times shines in comparison to her human subjects.

"It's extraordinary how each animal was so incredibly different, so wonderful and funny often, or timid or bold or grand," says Rock. "They were better and in some ways more beautiful subjects than the people I photograph commercially," she laughs. "There's a healing quality about them and they have a truly amazing presence." —Richard Pitnick

■ PRINT INFORMATION

All prints are toned silver gelatin, uneditioned, available in one size (20x24 inches), and priced at \$1,500.

■ SHOW INFORMATION

A retrospective, *Spiritual Beings*, featuring Rock's work on horses as well as Tibetan monks, opens at the June Bateman Gallery on March 10, 2004.

■ BOOK INFORMATION

Sera—The Way of the Tibetan Monk, published by Columbia University Press, is available from the June Bateman Gallery. Hardbound, \$45.

■ CONTACT INFORMATION

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SHAKING MANE, HORSE #1-1999