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The Natural

In rural New Mexico,
Siri Hollander's equine sculptures
take form as the spirit moves her
By Devon Jackson

MARY CASSATT, THE PENNSYLVANIA-BORN 19th-century Impressionist who spent the final years of her life in Europe, once wrote to a friend, "I really feel as if it was intended that I should be a Spaniard and quite by mistake that I was born in America." Ditto for Siri Hollander. "I feel more Spanish than American," declares the sculptor, who's made herself comfortable in the Old World Hispanic vibe of her rural northern New Mexico home near Truchas. "It's a lot like Spain and Europe here."

She should know. Born in New York City in 1959 to a painter father and poet mother, Siri (her mom named her after Thailand's Regent Queen Sirikit), along with her parents and her older brother and younger sister, caught a one-way boat ride to Spain in 1962 and hardly looked back. The Hollanders still spoke English to their kids at their overseas home—an isolated country house in

LEFT: RISING STALLIONS, BRONZE, 96 X 96 X 66.
BELOW: SIRI HOLLANDER WITH HER SCULPTURE, YAEL.





Andalusia—but the children became fluent in Spanish. They had little formal education in their mother tongue till the parents hired a tutor when Siri was around 10. “It was pretty remote where we grew up, and we had a very hands-on upbringing,” she reflects today. It was also culturally capricious. When the family wasn’t following the matadors from town to town during the height of bullfighting season, they liked to visit Roman ruins, go spelunking in uncharted prehistoric caves, tour the castles of Italy and France, and scour the countryside for old coins.

amid almost as many dogs and horses as she once rambled among, and in a tight-knit farming and ranching community teeming with descendants of Spanish settlers. Many of the families in and around the town of Truchas proudly trace their Iberian heritage back hundreds of years and still speak Spanish the way it was spoken way, way back in the day. “The Spanish speakers here in the mountains speak it cleaner than elsewhere in New Mexico,” contends Hollander. “It’s very classical, and there’s not much of an accent. Which makes it easier for me to blend in. It’s easy for me to relate to these people up here; I feel more at home.”

At the moment, home is bitterly cold. So cold Hollander hasn’t yet been able to finish the huge steel horse inside her studio—a car-mechanic’s-like garage-barn located directly across the dirt road from her adobe home and exposed to every icy wind that whips through these 13,000-foot-high mountains. Her cement-room studio—a little casita only steps from her house—is smaller but warmer; it’s where Hollander applies the cement to her steel sculptures, sometimes painting them, too (iron oxide for red, manganese for black, or a brownish cement paint like the kind used on adobe).

HOLLANDER, NOW 45, settled in New Mexico over 20 years ago, quickly if circuitously. After finally leaving Spain for Goddard College in Montpelier, VT, she lasted all of one semester

before dropping out and moving to Southern California. “I quit college because I didn’t need an institution to figure things out,” she says flatly. “And I was in Santa Barbara just long enough to hate it.” Seeing how miserable she was, a friend suggested New Mexico. She came, she liked, she stayed.

“I grew up a believer in art, that I could make it as an artist because my dad did it and made a living at it,” asserts Hollander. “So there was no doubt.” No doubt, despite her initial desire to become a veterinarian and despite, as she freely admits, having no ability to draw (she’s never so much as sketched out an idea for a sculpture, nor made a drawing of any kind). “I can’t paint either,” she laughs. “But I



OPPOSITE PAGE: PELUQUERA, BRONZE, 16 X 16 X 5.
PINTO, BRONZE, 10 X 10 X 2.
ABOVE: BULL, BRONZE, 9 X 18 X 4.

Hollander and her siblings lived mostly outside among the many dogs and horses on their ranch, and the kids had very little in the way of formal education (save a few years here and there at a school started by the mother of one of their fellow expat playmates). “I spent most of my time riding horses and running around in the outdoors,” admits Hollander, who today lives in a way and a place not so dissimilar from the one she grew up in. She and her partner, Brian, are raising their two young daughters (Hollander also has two children from a previous relationship)

was born with big hands and a strong body," she adds, proudly rolling up sleeves to show off chiseled biceps. She also liked playing with Play-Doh and clay as a child, and by 16 she was given to creating pieces out of chicken wire: string and duct-tape human figures, wild cats, and dogs. She's never really studied art, but she went to plenty of Europe's museums, she saw a show of Giacometti's (whose influence she still shows) in New York at an early age, and she apprenticed some in Spain. "I mostly worked with older sculptors and in foundries, which gave me techniques for casting," she explains. "But I didn't have a very good work ethic—I was just there trying to suck up as much information as I could."

She kept at it, trying to find her place, trying to get her pieces to be strong, experimenting, throwing away some works, giving away others, meanwhile raising her kids. At 23, she bought her first welder for \$100 (she still uses it today); two years later, she was taking care of two babies, setting up 15 pieces at the New Mexico

"I don't use models. I just work out of my head. I'll just start a piece and see where it takes me."

School for the Deaf, and on her way to doing the gallery thing. But life, the nature of her work, and her own creative process tend to limit her productivity. "I work really sporadically," she shrugs. "I run out [to the studio] and work really fast—which is usually where my best work comes from, working fast."

It's demanding, both on Hollander and her sculptures. "I'm totally hooked on the energy it takes," she enthuses. "I don't know if it's the 220 volts of electricity or the strength it takes to manipulate the metal. But it's an intense workout—and a love-hate thing, too. It feels good to be in shape, but it hurts to



ESTRELLA, BRONZE, 60 X 60 X 17.

get there. And the older I get, the more breaks I need to take." She took three months off from the welding last summer—partly from exhaustion, partly from the fumes. Strengthening each sculpture, especially the larger pieces, takes muscle. And time. She finally started training people to help her, although asking for help's not in her nature, and the work is just plain hard. "I love to do the shaping, but I don't have the patience to make it stronger," she says ruefully. "It's easier not to have to do all the reinforcing. And even though the fumes are really toxic, it's harder not to work than to work. I can't imagine not doing anything physical."

Aside from the physicality and the actual work, aesthetics also come into play. "I prefer this," says Hollander, pointing to a large steel horse outside her house that has holes in the strips of the metal that cover it like so much flaking flesh. Because the bigger pieces are usually shown outdoors, she used to give them more of a finish, but that doesn't last as long.

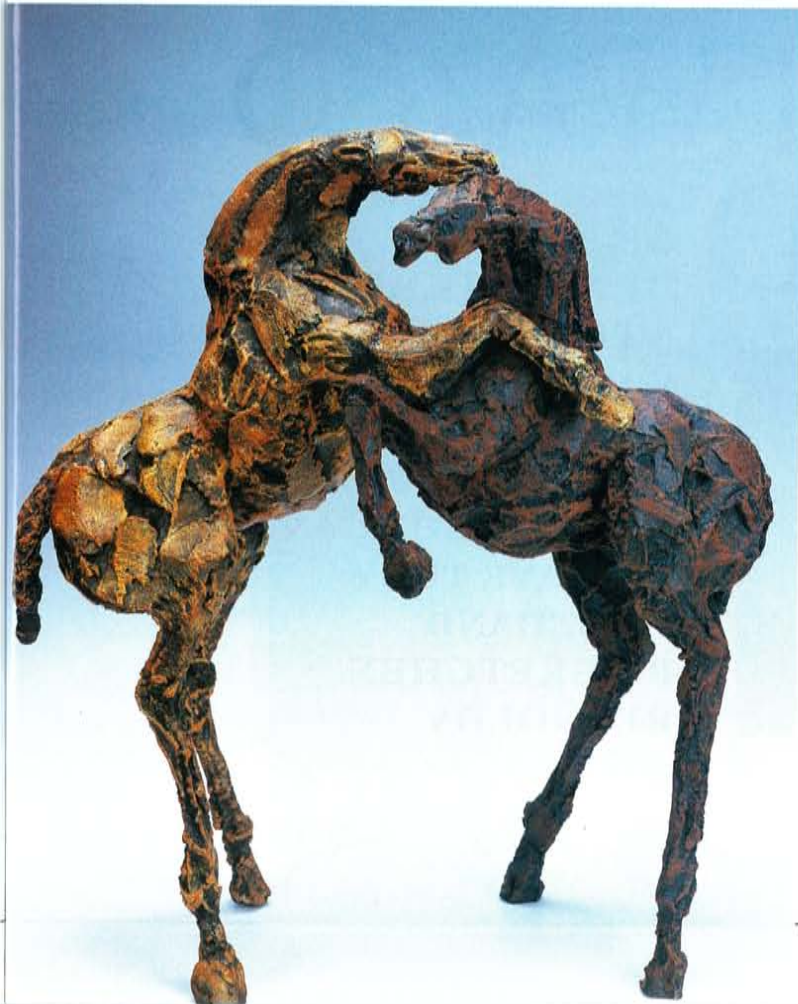
She finds the bigger pieces more satisfying. "Most people make maquettes and if they like it, they blow it up," explains Hollander. "I'm the opposite. I'll work on a big piece and if I like it, I'll scale it down and make smaller versions of it. Size alone can

make a piece more impressive, especially in the right setting, which is usually on a hill.” One of her first supersized sculptures was of a 25-foot-tall rising horse for the airport in Málaga, Spain. (She learned, while making it, that in making something that big the head has to be bigger, too—because of the perspective, because of the horse rising up in the air—otherwise it looks tiny and out of proportion.)

She’s resisted upgrading her studio with the dual reasoning that if she had a bigger workspace, she’d create pieces big enough to fill it; and if it were a really nice space, she’d only want to work in it that much more. It’s an odd logic—one very much at odds with society’s notions of fame and ambition—but one very in keeping with her other quirks. “My horses aren’t perfect,” she admits matter-of-factly of her roughhewn sculptures—tough, but almost ravaged. Aged, handsome, yet not in any way prettied up. “I’m dyslexic. I’ve tried duplicating things exactly the way they are and it’s painful. I don’t necessarily have the things in the right places,” she says.

That’s partly because she can’t and partly because she’s trying “to capture a certain moment, to

LUCHA, BRONZE, 21 X 18 X 4.



have that happen when I’m making a piece—to get that one second, that one flash.” Her “wrong is just as right as right” logic hit her early on when a sculptor she’d been working with looked at what Hollander had been doing and told her, “You’re doing it all right, but you’re doing it all wrong.” No matter to her. “You just start working the piece and it tells you where to go,” Hollander reasons. “I don’t use models. I just work out of my head. I’ll just start a piece and see where it takes me.”

In the beginning, she says, her work was more abstract. Then she went more toward finer details. “Now,” she declares, “I want to mix the abstract with the details. I don’t like too much fine detail, but I am wanting to have some of that now. My sculpture’s semi-abstract. It’s emotional.”

It’s also mostly of horses. “I’ve spent so much time with horses. They were like my best friends growing up—my only friends,” says Hollander, who likes individual horses more than any particular breed, and who currently has four of her own. “I dream of horses. I like them for their personality, for their heart. When you’re watching them you can see everything. Every little movement says so much. They’re in tune with everything and at the same time they’re completely there. They’re very, very sensitive. They’re all intuition and all feeling.”

And humans? Her human figures? “People who like my human figures love them—but they don’t even look at the horses,” Hollander notices, not at all surprised. “Some people see my human figures as burned, emaciated, gross. The horses, though, they’re more general, more public.”

Whether it’s horses or humans, sculpting them gives Hollander that same rush she experienced as a girl riding through the hills of Spain. “The coolest thing about working is that it blanks out the universe,” she marvels. “It’s what people strive for in meditation. And it’s the same feeling I have when I’m on horses. Everything comes out through you. That’s why I work.” □

Devon Jackson has also written for *Sports Illustrated*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *Outside*.

Hollander is represented by Canyon Road Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM; The Hollander Collection, Santa Fe, NM; Smith Klein Gallery, Boulder, CO; Aspen Fine Art, Aspen, CO; Vail Fine Art, Vail, CO; Dill & Spowze, Sun Valley, ID; and Gallery Keoki, Squaw Valley, CA.