

Behind the easel

Meet Carol Santora

Horses are amazing creatures of physical beauty and strength. They are spirited and sensitive companions and teachers. With drips and splashes of paint, their images emerge on the canvases of Carol Santora of Lyman, Maine.

As an expressionist painter, Carol seeks to depict her impressions, emotions, and responses to horses, presenting the subjects through her eyes. It is Carol's goal to break away from reality, distort some elements in her work for emotional impact, to create moods and ingratiate ideas, to filter out superfluous details and portray horses in their clear essence – their spirits and souls, their energy, movement, and physical presence.

In the finished pieces, the horse's image may be obscure, partly obliterated, left unfinished or incomplete. This allows the viewer room for personal interpretation, and offers an enticing sense of mystery.

Carol was awarded Signature Status in the Pastel Society of America (2009) and Associate Status in the Society of Animal Artists (2016), aside from numerous local, regional, and national awards over the last 35 years. Carol is currently represented by The Wright Gallery in Cape Porpoise, Maine; The Sharpe Gallery, in Kennebunkport, Maine; and The Grand Teton Gallery in Jackson, Wyo.





Northeast Equestrian Life: Why are you an equine artist?

Carol Santora: I love animals, especially horses, and an artist should paint what they love, what they are passionate about – and for me it's horses.

NEEL: Can you describe the time when you first realized that creating was something you absolutely had to do?

CS: As far back as I can remember I always loved to draw. When I was a child, on Saturday mornings there was a TV program - Learn to Draw with Jon Gnagy. I gobbled up his show and the drawing kits my parents would buy me as fast as I could get them. My love for charcoal, and working in black and white, began then.

NEEL: What is your preferred medium?

CS: My preferred medium is acrylic, however I am also a soft pastellist, and my styles are equally diverse.

NEEL: What are you trying to communicate with your art?

CS: I have always felt a special connection to horses and animals, and I express those feelings in paint. Horses

are beautiful, graceful, full of personality and energy. They have a warm and perceptive inner spirit. These qualities I strive to portray in my work.

NEEL: What is your process as you create a new piece? What kind of creative patterns, routines, or rituals do you have?

CS: I go through hundreds of photos to select the "perfect" ones that fit my thoughts for paintings at the time. For example, a theme could be running horses (alone or in groups), different body postures –grazing, kicking, looking back), or faces and close-up views. I usually work on several pieces at the same time and the planning and drawing of the composition takes as long as the painting part of creating my art.

After the photos are selected, I crop this and add that, move a head or leg, and make other adjustments. I decide how large a painting I want to do of the particular composition and determine dimensions that suit it. I then draw it on tracing paper in the size the finished painting will be. Drawing it on tracing paper allows me to look at the composition in reverse, which helps with inaccuracies, and it aids in transferring a clean drawing to my painting surface.

Next is to randomly texturize the support (canvas/board/paper) with gesso and a palette knife. I let it dry for 24 hours and then transfer a simple line drawing and am ready to paint!

To begin the painting process, I randomly spray water on the canvas and then brush some of it around with a two- or three-inch brush. Next is the unpredictable, nerve-wracking, fun part - pouring, dripping, and spraying paint. I tilt the canvas to move the pigments and create runs, and with the assistance of a palette knife, I blot and scrape areas to move or remove paint and create texture while the surface is still wet. Whether using bright colors, muted tones, or black and white, the colors are intuitive.

The painting is developed in layers, which are allowed to dry for several hours in between, with this process of addition and subtraction – blotting, scrubbing, and sanding some areas, and pouring more paint to other areas.

NEEL: What is the most rewarding part of creating equine art?

CS: Aside from feeling the "wow" factor myself – when a viewer is blown away when they see one of my paintings, it is very rewarding.

NEEL: What would you tell aspiring equine artists?

CS: Study the horse, its muscles, bone structure, and body parts. Learn about their history in this country, about the different disciplines, breeds, habits, and behavior. Volunteer somewhere that has horses to gain first-hand experience, watch them, take a zillion photos, and keep drawing them.

NEEL: What is your favorite piece you have ever painted? Why?

CS: In 2013, I was commissioned to do two equestrian murals for the renovation of the historic Inn at Rancho Santa Fe, Calif. The larger of the two measured over eight feet wide and was of three running horses entitled "Unbridled." The client asked for a color palette I had never used before, and I hadn't created a painting with my drip painting process in that large a size yet. And more importantly, I needed to complete both pieces in a two week time-frame so they could be truck shipped from Maine to California and arrive by the prerequisite due date. It was one of my greatest challenges in painting. I did it all, met the deadline, and I have to say when it was finished and I brought it outside to photograph, I stood next to it, and I was overwhelmed.

