

The Laborer

by Mona Majorowicz

Sweet Smells

As I write this, we are in the frigid grip of winter. This has been the coldest season that I can remember, since we moved to Iowa well over a decade ago. As a result, the much cherished time that I usually spend with my horse every day, has been cut down to a few short minutes of feeding, breaking the ice out of the waterer and perhaps a quick curry or scratch before my fingers go numb. The sweet smells of drying hay and sweaty horse seem like a long forgotten memory.

It is equally difficult to recall the searing heat of last July, when I attended a Thresher event where I photographed the model for my painting of *The Laborer*. I remember it being as unusually hot then, as it is cold now. He was part of a matched team of Percherons which I photographed at two different events last summer. Though both horses were interesting, it was only just the one that kept drawing me back time and again.

Whenever I attend horse events, I am always on the lookout for artistic inspiration. And if I'm really lucky, I have at least one horse that stands out and demands to be painted. I'm not sure that I can put my finger on what made this guy so special. Perhaps it was just that he was, in fact, stunningly gorgeous despite being rather overweight. There was also something about his head shape that fascinated me. It conveyed size and power; yet his eyes were soft and expressive. A horse with good eyes always gets my attention.

Equine Paparazzi

One of my favorite things about being a horse artist is meeting people and hearing their stories about the animals they love and who share their lives. That being said, sometimes I like the anonymity of photographing horses where people don't know who I am. So often when I'm shooting reference photos for a portrait, people try to set up their horses in the best possible pose. Of course it just makes sense that if you're having a portrait done, you want your horse shown to be the best example of who he is.

However, it is the random quiet moments that go on behind the scenes that hold the most allure for painting. It's in these moments that occasionally, if I'm very lucky, I catch a bit of magic that will later work itself into art. I wander the barns breathing in the heady aroma of fly spray and horse. The sounds of creaking leather, chains jangling, and whinnying horses fill the air. For the most part, people are so busy bustling about in preparation for the event that they take no notice of me.

Then, when I see something interesting, I pause and take a few pictures. Occasionally I stand around and wait to see if more

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interesting things will happen. Only when I find a horse that just really grabs me by my "artistic juju," do I begin to follow him around like a groupie.

This is also the point where it tends to "weird people out" a bit. I mean they are used to having photos taken when they participate in these things. But when I find an animal that I think I want to paint, I take an obscene amount of photos, wildly snapping pictures as if I were some sort of strange equine paparazzi.

In this instance, I have photos of this horse being unloaded, tied up, tacked up, hitched up, and doing his thing. I have photos of the team pulling, plowing, resting, and interacting with one another. All in all, I probably have about 300 photos of this team.

The thing is, often at the time that I'm taking the photos, I have no idea what I'm going to paint. I just know that I will do *something*. So the best way to cover all possibilities is to take hundreds of photos of them doing absolutely *everything* and hope that some of that magic has been caught on film.

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Impressions of Reality

For *The Laborer* I combined two reference photos. I liked the idea of him being tacked and ready to go but I wanted more face showing. After all, it is his best feature. I chose to roach the mane (shaved close to the neck) because it strengthened the image of the iconic working horse.

It's the simple-looking portraits that rely heavily on composition to make them interesting. Often it becomes about form, pattern and line. Negative space (the area that isn't a horse) plays just as important a role in how I crop an image, as does the main focal point of the horse itself.

Usually my horse portraits are set in pastoral or outdoor-looking backgrounds. (Sort of how I picture equine utopia.) But for this piece I chose to go with the trailer as the backdrop. I liked the cold compositional elements of the geometric shapes of the trailer, set against the soft warm curves of the horse.

My goal as an artist is not so much to recreate reality, but to show you a snapshot of the beauty of reality as filtered through my senses. A draft horse standing by a trailer getting prepped for a demonstration



may not be something that catches one's interest. But often the point of art is to get people to really *look* at something, and perhaps *see* it in a new way.

Mona Majorowicz is a professional working artist. She and her husband, Mike, own and operate Wild Faces Gallery in Rolfe, IA.
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