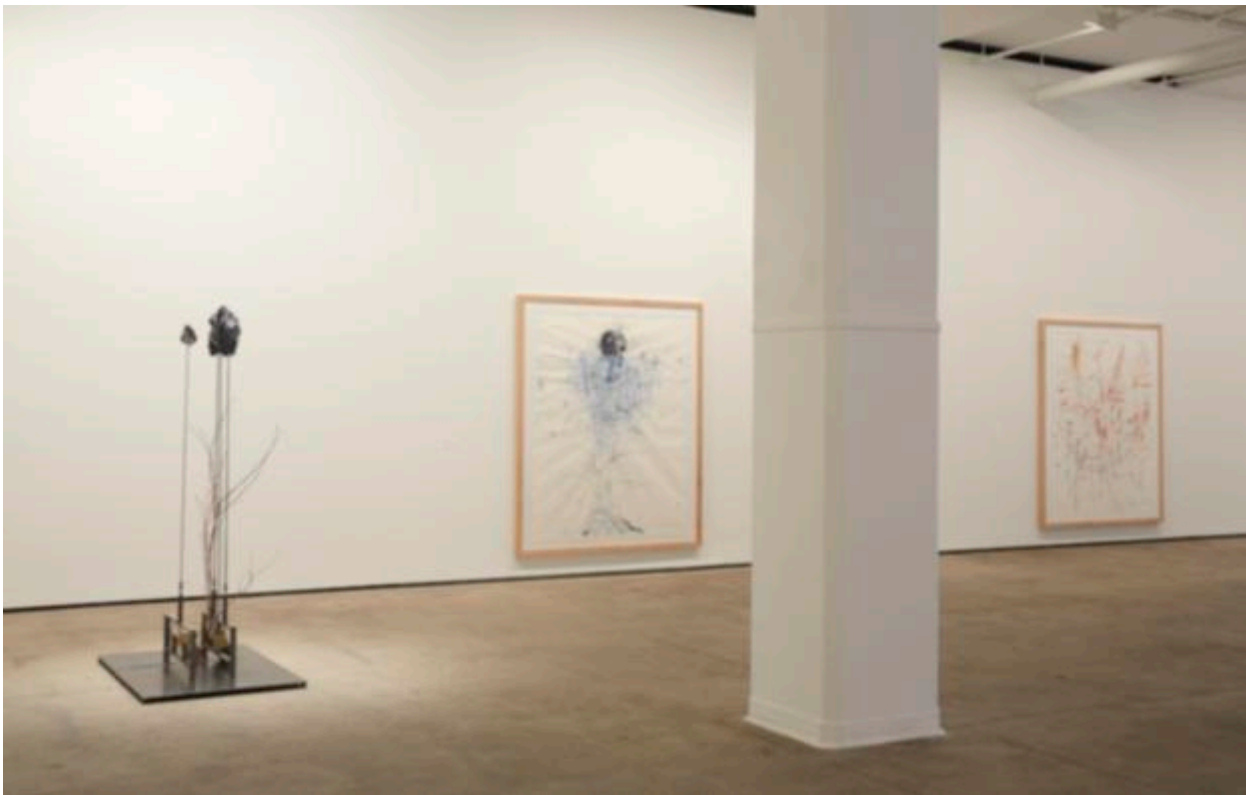


# SEANKELLY

McVay, Kurt. "The Backbone of Rebecca Horn," *Interview*, May 2014.

*Interview*

## *THE BACKBONE OF REBECCA HORN*



Rebecca Horn, installation view of *The Vertebrae Oracle* at Sean Kelly, New York, May 10 - June 21, 2014. © Rebecca Horn. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York. Photography: Jason Wyche.

If you were to imagine Justine, the titular heroine in the Marquis de Sade's late 18th-century novel (also called *The Misfortunes of Virtue*), in a tiger pelt, you would be sharing a poetic vision with celebrated German artist Rebecca Horn. You might also be fantasizing about the late German born-Swiss Surrealist, Méret Elisabeth Oppenheim, to whom Horn's latest exhibition, "The Vertebrae Oracle," is dedicated. Napoleon Bonaparte famously called *Justine* "the most abominable book ever engendered by the most depraved imagination." All hyperbolic compliments aside, Rebecca Horn and Méret Oppenheim's shared enthusiasm for bondage-inspired works—whether it's Horn's *Pencil Mask* (1972) or Oppenheim's *My Nurse* (1936)—suggests not only a mutual appreciation for the Marquis' particular style, but also a shared infatuation with their older female caretakers and eventually, of course, each other. Horn has spoken extensively about her affection for her own beautiful Romanian *gouvernante*, who left her at the age of four to marry a handsome American general. After years of chronic health issues, Horn eventually bounced back physically. It was then that Oppenheim, the dynamic *agent provocateur* and "queen of bees" in an all-boys' club, stepped into the *gouvernante* role for Horn, only this time as a seasoned artistic mentor. Horn, who recently turned a vibrant 70, is now sharing her life long gratitude, respect, and admiration for Oppenheim with the larger artistic community.



Rebecca Horn, installation view of *The Vertebrae Oracle* at Sean Kelly, New York, May 10 - June 21, 2014. © Rebecca Horn. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York. Photography: Jason Wyche.

Rebecca Horn's first New York solo exhibition at Sean Kelly Gallery since 2011's "Raven's Gold Rush," "The Vertebrae Oracle" features a collection of six new sculptures and eight large-scale paintings on paper. These works attempt to break down the earthly and somewhat restrictive constructs of our daily lives in order to make way for a more enlightening exploration of nature and all its ethereal wonders. Though Méret's presence looms large, Horn's exciting new collection is entirely her own. Upon entering Sean Kelly's "front gallery," the first piece sure to catch a wondrous gaze is *Marcel Duchamp's Montgolfière*, (2014), a wall-mounted sculpture that features an original disk (humbly named *Cinéma Vérité* by Horn—also a longtime collector) that once belonged to Duchamp himself. Three featured, unsynchronized components reflect diverse, non-repeating specters of fractal light across the large gallery walls, while guests simultaneously take in an eclipsed image of themselves in two accompanying rotating mirrors. *Montgolfière*, the French word for "hot air balloon," seems to allude to Duchamp's aversion to "retinal" art, illuminating Horn's shared predilection for spiritual transcendence through more conceptual works.

In *Metamorphoses between Rock and Butterfly* (2014), a light volcanic rock discovered by Horn near Italy's Mt. Vesuvius serves as a base for a delicate, mechanized "pocket mouse" butterfly sculpture with holographic, royal-blue wings. This work looks to highlight the disparity between destruction and creation, while illustrating the intimately entwined and ultimately precarious proximity of these particular elements in our world.

The sculptural centerpiece of the exhibit is *Revelation of a Tree* (2014), a Gordian knot of tree branches cast in bronze and displayed in all its vulnerability like an exposed circulatory system. The branches, cut from the tree's roots with timely precision, are "protected" by a series of meter-long, claw-like mechanized brass rods, which converge like Buddha's fingers around a hidden Manipura Chakra, housed deep in the solar plexus of a long-forgotten forest.

It is easy to lose oneself in Horn's work, whether admiring the Swiss engineering of her mechanical sculptures or marveling at her restrained but infinitely expressive paintings. It's even easier, however, to disappear in the artist's impressive four-decade-spanning oeuvre. Highlights include her body extension series, housed permanently in the Tate Collection, as well as her massive, site-specific installations, which alone could solidify her place among the glimmering constellations of art history. *Concert in Reverse* (1997), in Münster, brought new meaning to the phrase "revelation in execution," as the chosen

location for the installation, an old municipal tower, was uncovered to be an execution site used by the Third Reich. *In Tower of the Nameless* (1994), Horn constructed a monument in Vienna that paid homage to voiceless, formless Balkan refugees by populating the space with mechanically playing violins.

Horn is also an accomplished filmmaker. Her 1990 film, *Buster's Bedroom* (featured in a vintage issue of *Interview*), starring Donald Sutherland and Geraldine Chaplin (Charlie's daughter), was well received, winning a German Film Award for Best Production Design. It also features several scenes that place their main characters in straight jackets, another telling artistic choice worthy of the cheeky Marquis.

We sat down with the charming yet undeniably intimidating Rebecca Horn at Sean Kelly Gallery to discuss her diverse body of work, her relationship with Oppenheim, and eventually, the welcomed presence of Francisco José de Goya's ghost in her Spanish mountaintop studio.

KURT MCVEY: You wrote a poem to coincide with this opening, also titled *The Vertebrae Oracle* (Das Wirbelsäulen Orakel), for your friend Méret Oppenheim. It opens with the line, "In the fear-love." How do those two words, for you, correlate with one another? In other words, can you have fear without love or love without fear?



Rebecca Horn, *Metamorphoses between Rock and Butterfly*, 2014. Stone, art butterfly, steel, wood, electronic device, motor, transparent cover, 63 3/8 x 16 1/8 x 16 1/8 inches. © Rebecca Horn. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York.

REBECCA HORN: You know, I met Méret Oppenheim when I was a very young artist just coming to New York. She really liked my early films and showed them in her beautiful old cinema in Bern, Switzerland when I didn't have the money to go back. But, "fear-love," this really means "shy love." It's about holding something back. With Méret, there was nothing oppressive or demonstrative about her affection. It was very soft. I also wrote the poem in French and German. The word in German (Angstliebe) is nicer.

MCVEY: Can you tell me about this title, The Vertebrae Oracle?

HORN: Again, it's very much about Méret. Your spine has these little bones—the vertebrae—and when you are afraid, they squeeze tightly together. I like the idea of sending a calming wind up the spine to loosen and relax these bones. This is also what my drawings are about. In this wind, I'm able to whisper the poem. Can you visualize this?

MCVEY: Absolutely. With Méret, there seemed to be fragility there, but there was also something fearless about her. In her 1975 acceptance speech for the Art Award of the city of Basel, she said, "Freedom is not given to you—you have to take it." That statement is as true now, as it was then.

HORN: Yes, but of course at that time, especially here in America, we were dealing with women's liberation. Things weren't so easy then. Méret wasn't so directly involved in this—she was in her 60s at that point. She found her strength through competing with the great male artists of her time; Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp. These men were her friends. Also, Méret was Jewish—her father was a Jewish doctor—so they had to escape to Switzerland during World War II. She eventually moved back to Paris in the '60s, where she had her studio, but I think a part of her was always hiding. Her fur cup, *Object (Le Déjeuner en fourrure, 1936)*, made her quite famous, but only now, when she would be have been 100 years old, is her work getting the recognition it really deserves.

MCVEY: Meret's 1959 piece *Cannibal Feast* received quite a bit of criticism. Of course today, I don't think people would bat an eyelash. She was really ahead of her time when it came to sexuality and exploring gender dynamics.

HORN: Let's put it this way; she was a very erotic woman. She also liked provocation, and if you could provoke surrealists at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, or similar Dadaist hangouts in Basel, where you could normally get away with these things, you were truly a provocateur.

MCVEY: The Dadaist movement was really the beginning of modern performance art. Méret was definitely a part of that, probably closer to the end of the Surrealist school of thought.

HORN: Well, this idea of the body as a feast, it stems from Giuseppe Arcimboldo, moves to Viennese artists like Günter Brus, and then you have Dalí of course, then much later, Marina Abramović and Ulay, with their nude series in Italy. It's an ongoing conversation. There was nothing cruel about Méret's piece. It was aesthetically beautiful. Drinking champagne and eating a cherry off some tits, this is no big deal really. *[both laugh]*

MCVEY: Let's talk about one of your most famous pieces, *Einhorn (Unicorn, 1971)*. How often do you reflect on what that work did for you as an artist? Also, has the message behind that work changed for you over the years in any way?

HORN: You try not to talk about the past too much as an artist. Instead, you focus on the continuity of your work. I could say that at the time I made that, I was very sick. I was in a sanatorium for nearly a year with lung problems. All I could do was draw and sew. When I got out, I made that piece for one particular girl in a class of mine, Angela. It's dedicated to her. She had a very strange, stiff way of walking. My "Cockfeather Mask," that was also a custom piece. It only worked with my profile.



Rebecca Horn, detail of *Metamorphoses between Rock and Butterfly*, 2014. Stone, art butterfly, steel, wood, electronic device, motor, transparent cover, 63 3/8 x 16 1/8 x 16 1/8 inches. © Rebecca Horn. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York.

MCVEY: Let's talk about the work in your new show. You mentioned your lung issues at a young age. A new piece of yours, *Der Feuerfall* (2013), looks like a pair of lungs at the top of two spires.

HORN: Yes, but only in the photograph. They are two ancient volcanic stones, and they're moving dangerously close to a crystal ball; less than a millimeter away. Behind it is a smaller volcanic stone with gold, which, due to an optical illusion, appears to be descending back into the earth. This is a commentary on the global financial crisis. In Germany, we were looking at Lehman Brothers and the state of the dollar and we were very nervous. The name, *Feuerfall*, implies the volatile and ultimately destructive nature of a volcano, where things jump up, but inevitably fall back down.



Rebecca Horn, Duchamp's Montgolfiere, 2014. Mirror, glass, motor, electronic device, 21 5/8 x 23 5/8 x 24 13/16 inches. © Rebecca Horn. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York.

MCVEY: You work in so many different mediums, how do you stay interested in painting and drawing? What keeps bringing you back?

HORN: I always did drawings. Then, 10 years ago, I started working with large-scale paper. It's an extension of performance, because the pieces are the size of my full body. I use pencils, acrylic, watercolors, and I also incorporate textual messages.

MCVEY: Where did you do these paintings?

HORN: I did most of them in a monastery in Spain at the top of a mountain. I lived there a bit like a monk. I meditate quite often. At night, which is when I like to work, I like to think I have conversations with Goya. He died so many years ago, of course, but somehow, his ghost is always with me.

MCVEY: Does he critique your work?

HORN: No, no, but I do. Sometimes I go to sleep thinking, "I don't like this painting." But then I wake up in the morning, look at it again and think, "Actually, that's not so bad." *[laughs]* Sean Kelly made a great

book that features photographs my son took of me while I paint. He's the only one I'll let sit in on my process.

MCVEY: Well, the only one besides Goya's ghost.

HORN: Right, only my son and Goya. *[laughs]*



Rebecca Horn, *Der Feuerfall*, 2013. Volcano stones, steel, brass, glass, gold leaf, branch, motor, electronic device, 76 3/4 x 47 1/4 x 31 1/2 inches. © Rebecca Horn. Courtesy: Sean Kelly, New York.