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# Sarah Fox

## Bruisers

written by Kathryn Pearce

Sarah Fox is enacting an intervention of sorts, but not the kind we are familiar with. When we think of an intervention, our minds fill with imagery of illicit drugs, substance-addicted loved ones and the torturous first step on the long road to recovery. In her new exhibition, Bruisers, Sarah Fox performs a visual intervention on society, replacing the ills of substance abuse with the ills spawned by toxic masculinity. In becoming a new mother to a son, Fox began questioning the roles of gender and the ways in which they are unwittingly ascribed to the sexes at infancy. Through her new body of work, Fox contests the automatic associations of masculinity with strength, courage and toughness, encouraging a more nuanced look at gender.

Bruisers begins with a series of collages that introduces the artist's fantastical world, where hybrid horse-boys run amok and embrace their femininity as much as their masculinity. Many of the collaged human body parts are appropriated from work by photographers such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Nan Goldin and Imogen Cunningham. Sharing an affinity for the nude male form, these artists progressed and redefined the concept of the nude in their own singular ways. By combining these sensual human forms with equine imagery, Fox crafts a charmingly hybridized being that only exists in her idealized utopia.



Bruisers Left & Right, Collage, 14 x 18 in.



The Story of the Pony Boys, mixed-media collage, 41 x 21 in.

Proliferating in much of the work, the motif of the horse acts as a cipher for Fox to pose probing questions about the state of maleness and the inherent nature of boyhood. Fox envisions horses as a type of genderless being that encompasses the dualities of both sexes—they are beautiful yet strong, graceful yet tough. In the collage The Story of the Pony Boys, boy-centaurs frolic in a pastoral setting; while one dozes amongst blooms of poppies, another playfully throws flower petals in the air. Referencing the character from S.E. Hinton's 1967 novel The Outsiders, a Pony Boy is portrayed as the more sensitive and innocent counterpart to the aggressive, brutish males that dominate the book. Fox's Pony Boys are depicted with soft, plump bodies with the heads of yearlings attached, lending them a cherubic quality similar to Putti figures in Renaissance art. The art of Henry Darger is an obvious influence on the artist, seen not only in their shared aesthetic sensibility, but also in their thematic kinship expressed as a fascination with childhood innocence. Like Darger, Fox is creating a dreamscape that gives horse-boys the permission and freedom to be as feminine as they wish.



The Story of the Pony Boys, mixed-media collage, 41 x 21 in.

Fox replicated The Story of the Pony Boys using the cyanotype, thus creating an entirely new work from the original collage. Commonly known as a blueprint, the cyanotype is a photographic printing method that was first invented in nineteenth century Britain as a means of duplicating notes and diagrams. To produce the cyanotypes of her collages, the artist enlarges photo negatives of the original work and prints the distinctive blue photographs on cotton. The collage version of The Story of the Pony Boys is transformed into an entirely different artwork by manipulating the scale and producing it in the rich cyan hue. Tufts of hair and blades of grass appear visually sharper, their apparent texture almost as if you can feel them scratching your skin. The subtle variations in the collage are enlivened by the stark contrast of blue and white values, making the most miniscule details appear eye-catchingly distinctive. It is also significant to note the color blue, with its enduring association with boyhood, which adds another layer of meaning to the work.



Crying Colts, cyanotype with ink and crayon, 41 x 59 in.

Fox's artwork grows from boyhood into adolescence, illustrated with found imagery of young men. In Crying Colts the artist again uses the cyanotype process to produce a mirror image of hybrid horse-men with their heads lifted to the sky. In unison, the twin creatures

solemnly cry heart-shaped tears that stream down the surface. As a act of crying, typically designated a female activity, has been viewed as a sign of weakness—that the so-called feebler sex cannot control their emotions.

However, in the artist's alternative universe, she depicts two tattooed and chiseled horse-men proudly weeping with their heads held high. It is a defiant display of strength and unbridled emotion that is rarely seen today.



The Yearlings, tinted cyanotype with watercolor, 40 x 31 in.

The world within Bruisers is one of in-betweens, eschewing extremes and categories: the figures comprise both horse and man while at once having feminine and masculine characteristics. Fox reminds us we do not have to adhere to the blueprint of gender constructs that have been laid before us at birth. We can intervene and adjust as we see fit to be whatever ratio we desire.

*Bruisers is on exhibit at GrayDuck Gallery through December 15, 2019.*

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