

Spirit of the Steppe

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Say the word 'Mongolia' and images of nomadic adventure and the great Mongol general Genghis Khan on horseback come to mind. It was the horse that carried the Mongolian warriors to victory, who in turn treasured them over every other animal. A symbol of power, majesty, freedom, loyalty, magic and fertility, the horse continues to inhabit the Mongolian psyche centuries later, deeply ingrained in the nation's soul. It speaks of the country's history and cultural identity, and remains at the heart of Mongolian society, tradition and spirituality, playing a vital role in life and commerce across the Steppe. This deep connection with horses resounds in the semi-abstract oil paintings of Monkhor Erdenebayar, better known as 'Bayar', who has succeeded in capturing the beast's strong physicality and individual character, which inhabit a larger-than-life presence on his canvases.

Born in 1968 in Baruun-Urt, Mongolia, Bayar's art education encompassed both Soviet and Western methodologies, the former based on propaganda-style art and the latter encouraging freer creative expression. Having graduated from the Fine Arts College, Ulan Bator, in 1987, studying during Mongolia's last years as a closed society, he attended the Fine Art Institute, Ulan Bator, from which he dropped out in 1996, for he felt there was nothing new for him to learn. After Mongolia welcomed democracy in the early 1990s, Bayar was able to celebrate his culture and took on the horse as his key protagonist in 1993.

Fascinated by the formal and abstract characteristics of Western art, he shows the horse in all its uniqueness. His semi-abstract style, which lies somewhere between the real and unreal, combines tradition and modernity, using ancient culture in modern art. Red appears to dominate his works, reminiscent of the energy emanating from the earth's belly and of the human life force, while the simplicity of the horses' bodies only serves to enhance their might. Creating in a formal, lyrical, angular and heavily textured manner, his horses are imbued with a sense

Mongolian artist Monkhor Erdenebayar's great love for horses is evident in his paintings that combine the representational and the abstract.



of drama. Though he paints directly onto a blank canvas without sketching, each line, colour, lighting, posture and layer is carefully deliberated. He notes, "I use a large palette knife like a sword. When I am working, I feel free. I do not bother myself about whether my painting would be considered good or bad. I just paint."

Bayar's understanding of the horse is directly linked to his memories. "The horse is an animal that Mongolians keep close to their hearts", he says. Although none of his family members were professional artists, his grandfather and eldest brother used to paint horses, and his first attempt at drawing a horse was an imitation of his brother's artwork of an Arabian steed. A black horse is the family amulet, and Bayar's mother had stashed away a small piece of horse hide in a chest concealed from the Communist government. Since his childhood, Bayar has kept a small collection of antique wooden horse sculptures, a tradition that stretches back many centuries in Mongolia, which provides inspiration for his paintings.

Most of his recent paintings are devoid of humans, whose existence is implied through horse saddles. Sometimes, these riderless horses are boxed in, but never seem trapped, framed for just a second, like a hidden secret brought alive through his art, as in Secret Series or Through the Ger Door. At other times, they may seem motionless in contemplation, but ready to gallop off at a moment's notice. Bayar's horses also reference Buddhist concepts of empty space that pervade Mongolian beliefs and culture. He

comments, "Emptiness is never empty. It seems to me that I have deeper feelings when it is more and more empty. I think emptiness is connected with infinity. I try to embrace the Mongolian vast, endless steppes in my works. Everything diffuses in emptiness, but also everything connects in emptiness."

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showcase

Monkhor Erdenebayar has been painting horses for the past 20 years and is tireless in his research of the fabled beasts, sometimes studying the steeds of his relatives, who herd them on the Mongolian Steppes. He paints with speed and bursts of energy to produce artworks that encapsulate the nation's spirit.

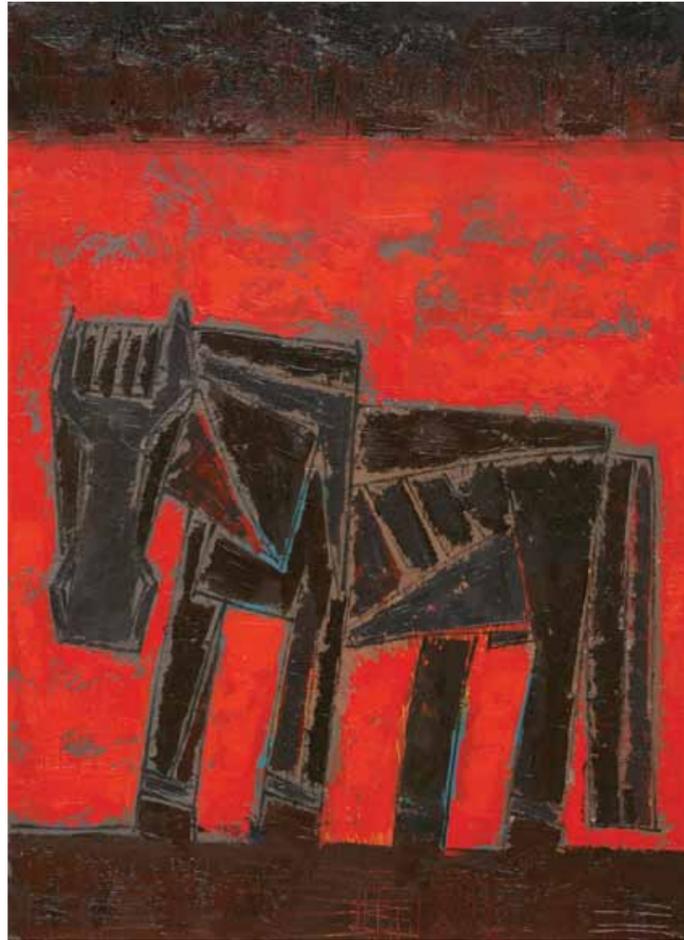
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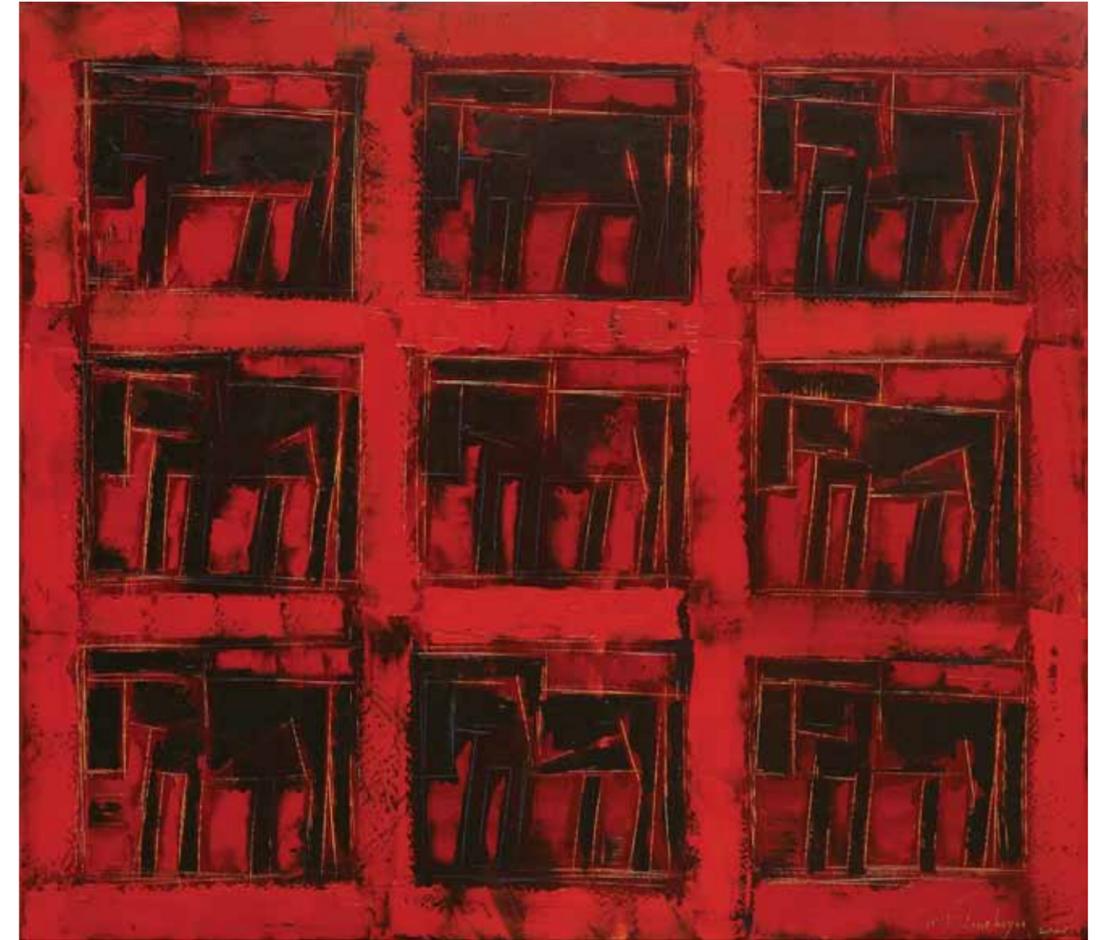
FAMILY COLLECTION, OIL ON CANVAS



MIRAGE IN WHITE, OIL ON CANVAS



AMULET, OIL ON CANVAS



HORSE RHYTHM, OIL ON CANVAS



THROUGH THE GER DOOR, OIL ON CANVAS



WAVES OF MIGRATION, OIL ON CANVAS