



# *Guardians Of The Steppe*

*The horse is central to the cultural and spiritual world of Mongolians and one of their most important art motifs, even from the earliest rock art. For Monkhor Erdenebayar the horse has long been the main subject of his painting. And through this he not only expresses his love for the animal but also uses it as a metaphor for Mongolian national identity and as a way of exploring his own childhood memories.*

By Ian Findlay

Monkhor Erdenebayar, **Guardian of the Next Generation**, 2008, oil on canvas, 90 x 100 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist and Teo + Namfah Gallery, Phnom Penh and Bangkok.



**M**yths and legends that embrace the horse are myriad. Throughout time and among innumerable folk cultures the horse—the stallion and the mare—has been a potent metaphor for power and freedom, life and death, sacrifice and darkness, magic and fertility, and for its ties to the heavens and earth. While many cultures have long since lost their connection to the horse, Mongolians still hold it close to their heart. One has only to witness the essential place that the horse takes at traditional Mongolian festivals across the vast steppe to see just how it speaks to the nomadic soul and history of the nation. The young Mongolian painter Monkhor Erdenebayar understands this very well indeed and uses this knowledge in his recent work to address questions of personal and national identity.

The new freedoms that came with Mongolia's democratic changes in the early 1990s opened the doors for new forms of artistic expression. With the exception of a few older artists, Soviet-style art and its constraints have now been relegated to history.

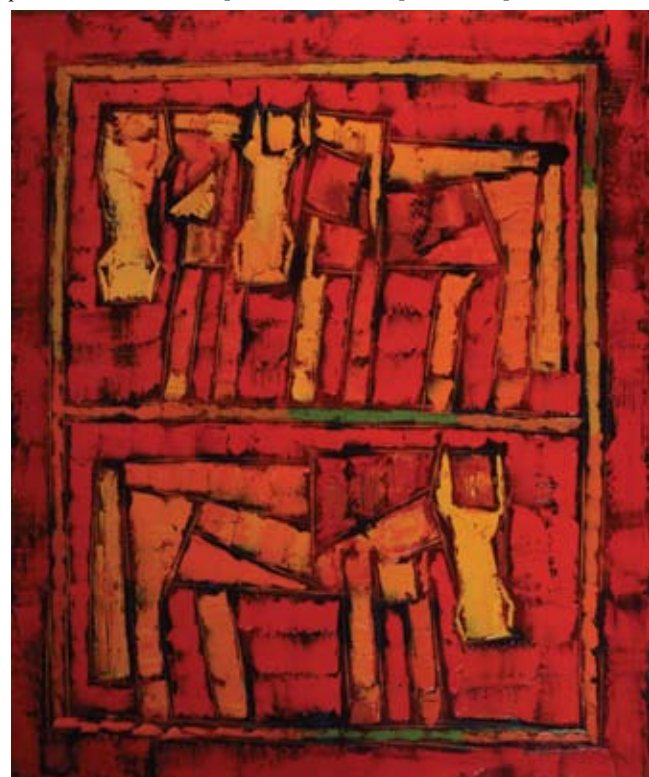
Mongolians seized the opportunities afforded them by democratic change to celebrate their culture with energy and openness: in art they embraced new forms and styles, new subjects and themes. In 1993, however, while his contemporaries turned to more modern subjects and Western-inspired styles and forms, from impressionism to abstraction, Erdenebayar made a conscious decision to adopt the horse as his central subject. For Erdenebayar, or Bayar as he is known, his horses in the vastness of the steppe or in the ruggedness of the mountains are the symbol of free spirits that speak to Mongolian history, ancient traditions, and culture in ways that cannot be achieved through painting scenes of Mongolian life as it is lived in a city such as contemporary Ulaanbaatar. Through the horse Erdenebayar is able to question his history, to see it, sometimes in a somewhat sentimental light, sometimes in an objective



Monkhor Erdenebayar, *Secret Series No.1 Red Line in Black*, 2009, oil on canvas, 150 x 120 cm.

manner that is strikingly robust. There is, too, in his horse painting a deep reservoir of personal memory on which to draw, which resonates throughout his art.

"Family tradition and abundant little antique wooden sculptures inspired



Monkhor Erdenebayar, *Secrets in My Box*, 2009, oil on canvas, 150 x 120 cm.

me to paint horses. My grandfather and my brothers used to draw very fancy horses with pencil on paper. Their horses looked as fancy and as clean as Arabian horses," he says. "But my mother had a small piece of horse hide and some paintings of Buddha, and small wooden horses, which she kept in a chest. She kept these in the box to hide them from the communist government.

"Sometimes, I feel that my childhood is like those precious items that my mother kept hidden in the chest. I had, and still have, a little collection of wooden horse sculptures. I am interested in these wooden horses' physical structures and characters. It is these sculptures that connect my art to real life."<sup>1</sup>

One sees the notion of secrets hidden in boxes, a childhood waiting to be explored and brought to life through art, in such works as the bold, red-and-gold *Secrets in My Box* (2009) and dark, brooding *Secret Series No.1* (2009).

Monkhor Erdenebayar was born in 1968 in Baruun-Urt, Mongolia. He had a formal art education at the Fine Arts College and Fine Art Institute, Ulaanbaatar, from which he graduated in 1987 and 1996 respectively. His art education embraced two very different methodologies: the Soviet and a more Western-oriented curricula. The former taught a rigid, propaganda-style art; the latter, a freer, more personal expression.

The free-flowing works that marked Erdenebayar's early period included horses set within rolling hills, the riders erect, in the style of Mongolian horsemen that one sees across the steppe. The landscape has become impressionistic, brief, or completely abstract through touches of colors such as blue, red, green, or creamy white as in works such as *In the Summer Rain* (2007), *Blue Ocean*, *Red Steppe Series No.2*, *Guardian of the Next Generation*, *Cool Day* (all 2008), *Autumn*, *Force of White*, and *Snoubound* (all 2009).

There is an elegance and control to the rider and the horses' gait that speaks across all horse cultures; man is at one with his horse and its spirit. As Erdenebayar's painting has become sparer in its geometry

and the spirit that he projects has become more contained within it; and even by his removal of any humans in his paintings his art hasn't lost its sense of drama. There is still a feeling of dynamic spontaneity, and he achieves this, as he says, by "fighting my paintings with my palette knife like a sword."<sup>2</sup>

**E**rdenebayar did not suddenly change from one style to another, one aesthetic reality to the next. Rather he has achieved a formal quality and directness beyond naturalism and realism, moving into an aesthetic that has been obtained through careful research and experience. As Erdenebayar says, "Formality is the soul of my work. I am very interested in Western art and its formal and abstract qualities. I like the simplest moves of my horses. And, although they may seem very static, there is also a contemplative aspect in the simplicity. I am trying to express the power of the horse and its confident character. My point is to show that, even without a rider, there is a connection between humankind and nature through the horse's bowed head and its body firmly rooted to the earth."

Traditional views of horses galloping across the steppe ridden by warriors on their way to battle or hunting or raced by fierce nomads are clearly not for Erdenebayar. Such scenes would be wholly out of place in his *oeuvre*. This is not to say that he does not admire some of these scenes since they convey something of Mongolia's vision of itself, one that he is always keen to interpret through his own formal, lyrical, and angular art without making obvious history paintings or narratives. Indeed, besides his attraction to some traditional anonymous *tangka* artists, he also likes the works of Western artists such as the French painter Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985) ("I like his crude style and textures") and Mexican painter Rufino Tamayo (1899–1991) ("I like how he could change ancient Mexican culture into modern art"). But he is also attracted to art of the Russian Nikolai Konstantinovich Rerikh (1874–1947). He points to Rerikh's *The Red Hero with Red Horse* (1927), which hangs in Ulaanbaatar's Zanabazar Museum of Fine Arts, a large gouache-on-cotton work that shows King Shambal riding his horse over the mountains of Ulaanbaatar. Erdenebayar points out that this work, which is *tangka*-inspired, represents the future.

The formal qualities of Erdenebayar's paintings—line, color, lighting, and texture—are striking. Although a prolific painter in recent years, the artist clearly considers each line and color, and angle and posture, carefully. He eschews preparatory sketches or drawings to articulate his subject with an extraordinary energy as



Monkhor Erdenebayar, *Red Moon Series No.2*, 2008, oil on canvas, 100 x 50 cm.



he paints directly onto the empty canvas, which typically takes a few days. With his "palette knife like a sword," he paints quickly. His guide is his knowledge and understanding of the horse that began in childhood in the countryside. By painting directly onto the canvas he feels that he is not so much creating something but sensing rather "that my horses create themselves. Maybe it is because I paint without sketching. I see not only the horses' characters, but also I feel myself. I feel my works in me and the excitement, patience, speed, and power of the horses. The challenge for me is to make big paintings that can represent these qualities of the horse."

At the same time, he notes that there is something serendipitous going on over the time it takes to make a work. "I paint very fast so that I feel that I am competing with every second of my time. When I am inside my work, unexpected things happen and these help me. I can't see the ending of a work while I am painting. I feel that painting governs me. Sometimes the ending is very different from what I had planned. So that is why I do not use sketches. I love to use those unexpected moments to make my art."

The mood of Erdenebayar's painting is a precariously balanced one. His geometry, which reminds one of some of Theo van Doesburg's (1883–1931) drawings,



Monkhor Erdenebayar, *Cool Day*, 2008, oil on canvas, 150 x 180 cm.

lends his horses a solidity, a physical presence and boldness of character that those by modern artists of the American West or by the 18th-century English painter George Stubbs (1724–1806) do not possess. The forms that make up his horses in *Red Steppe Series No.2* (2008), *Red Moon Series No.2*

(2008), and *Ready to Go* (2009) all have a suggestion of cubist geometry. Two of the clearest examples of this are *Red Moon Series No.2* and *Ready to Go*. The artist agrees with this while pointing out "this painting is related to ancient rock carving. I think these works, and many others, have



Monkhor Erdenebayar, *Ready to Go*, 2009, oil on canvas, 130 x 100 cm.



Monkhor Erdenebayar, *In the Summer Rain*, 2007, oil on canvas, 150 x 120 cm.



Monkhor Erdenebayar, *Snowbound*, 2009, oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm.

the look of having been carved from rock and are sculptural."

Growing up on the steppe accustomed Erdenebayar's eye to rich natural colors in the sunset and of the changing seasons as well as in the folk colors of the traditional home known as *ger* (often referred to as yurt in the West). He says that he often spent long periods looking at the mountains, the changing colors of the trees, the turning of the steppe's grass as wind and rain and dryness took their toll, and all the art that he could find. By understanding nature he has been able to apply the rhythms and textures of it to painting by contrasting colors and letting these light his work. This is no easy task. One can see just how subtle his achievement is, which he says is a "game of colors," in works such as *Secret Series No.1 Red Line in Black*, *Visitor in Black* (2009), in which three red horses and a black one crowd together, and *Stallion* (2009), which is a single saddled horse – he rarely uses saddles – looks out at the viewer as if it is waiting to be mounted. But certainly one of Erdenebayar's strongest works is *Cool Day* in which two horses stand side by side, their features enhanced by the artist's use of white, red, and touches of blue and brown.

There are some who may see Erdenebayar's horse paintings and their colors as repetitive, which in their minds diminishes their power. The artist says that he



Monkhor Erdenebayar, *Family Collection*, 2009, oil on canvas, 120 x 150 cm.

sometimes wonders about this but he also notes that in repeating his subjects he finds new challenges. "It is not repeating. I think this is an opportunity to challenge myself, which is difficult but interesting," he says. "Sometimes I am inspired by my old works. I then do a new version, but through my view of art today. Some people are fickle and easily bored: they can't wait long enough to see the process of my work, in line and color, as well as philosophy."

A close look at his work, however, suggests qualities beyond light and color. There is, for example, a lyrical quality about his forms, a hint of a wild music to the geometry, and a timeless quality to be found in such works as *Snowbound* (2009), in which two horses stare out at us from the center of the canvas, their strong yellow faces, white and creamy; *Force of White* (2009), where a pack of sturdy horses huddle together as if to protect themselves, and the *Guardian Of the Next Generation*, with its bold red and patches of green and orange. We ought to look and wonder just how Erdenebayar pours his spirit onto his canvases.

Monkhor Erdenebayar's horses do not prance, or gallop, or canter. They are still, secretive creatures of strength, patience, and independence. They see much and keep their secrets. Erdenebayar's secrets are now open. It is as if he is saying "look, Mongolians, we are free." But, at the same time, he is warning that while the boxes open to freedom, encroaching city culture may well once more constrain and trap people, crushing their hard-won freedoms before they are fully realized. Δ

1. All quotations from the artist, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from interviews done in Mongolia, and at his exhibitions in Bangkok and Phnom Penh in 2008 and 2009.
2. The author would like to thank Ms. Baysaa for her services as interpreter in Ulaanbaatar in October 2009.



Monkhor Erdenebayar, *Red Horse in a Box*, 2007, oil on canvas, 180 x 150 cm.