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Erdenebayar Monkhor

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Erdenebayar Monkhor, **End of Moving**, 2009, wood, oil paint, 110 x 87 x 56 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist.

Horses Move Into Town

The Mongolian artist Erdenebayar Monkhor's world of horses is deeply informed by his early life on the steppe and personal relationships. His horses, in painting and sculpture, are potent metaphors for traditional Mongolian culture and a changing modern society's complex narratives.

By Ian Findlay

The Mongolian artist Erdenebayar Monkhor—known as Bayar—makes art that speaks directly to Mongolia's traditions, philosophy, and identity. That the horse, his subject matter, remains such a potent figure in both traditional and contemporary art and cultural narratives is uncommon testament to the vigor of Mongolia's uniqueness in this rapidly changing world. The image of the horse touches

every Mongolian's imagination as it carries their national narrative forward into the 21st century.

Bayar notes that he senses people and horses have a unique relationship: the way they move and stand reflects their individuality; their robust attitudes in the face of the world are captured in similar solid postures; their sense of defiance is an ancient one forged in the perpetual struggle for survival; each reminds him

of the other's elemental origins—horses stand erect and alert, and as proud as Mongolians themselves.

Bayar uses these elements to make art that speaks not only to the past but also to a collective contemporary imagination that holds fast to the reality of what the horse helped to achieve in Mongolia and the wider world. Bayar's humble saddle, covered with modern currency notes, speaks to the history of paper

money. The strong personal relationship between man and horse is seen in the combined figurative installation *End of Moving* (2009) and *We 2* (2017); the stoic horse and the man with his traditional saddle (*see Cover*) communicate silently. One senses here a true partnership, an equal relationship, not one of master and servant, timeless in its mutual understanding and its emotional responsiveness.

Erdenebayar Monkhor was born in 1968 in Baruun-Urt, the capital of Sukhbaatar province. His art education included two methodologies: the first in the Soviet era and then the Westernized post-Independence one: from a rigid propaganda-style art system to a freer and more expressive one in which individual vision was encouraged. While his contemporaries at the Fine Arts College (1987) and Fine Art Institute (1996), both in Ulaanbaatar, quickly took to new art styles and genres and fresh subjects and themes in their work, Bayar made a conscious decision to embrace the horse and its world as his core subject and theme.

Some might think that the horse is an extremely narrow subject on which to base one's art career. This is not so. The horse is a symbol of a free spirit. Its primordial past lives within it. While the Eskimo are reputed to have many tens of words for snow, Mongolians note that there are more than 230 names and descriptions for the colors of their horses. With such richness Bayar has never regretted specializing in the horse: it has proven, with its many creative and aesthetic challenges, to be completely fulfilling, professionally, emotionally, and intellectually.

Bayar has always been realistic about the horse: sometimes he sees it, as he said to me in 2010, "as a sentimental icon, and sometimes as a strikingly robust



Erdenebayar Monkhor, Iron Horse, 2015, iron, welding, 200 x 300 x 95 cm.

symbol that speaks not only to the nomadic spirit but also to the Buddhist concepts that permeate Mongolian thinking and culture."

Given the mythologizing and reverence for the horse in nomadic society's traditions his paintings' colors and composition are striking for their lack of sentimentality. One is impressed by similar qualities in his sculptures, which encourages contemplation. Through these it is easy to see the relationship between his sculptures, his relief carvings, and his oil paintings, whose textures, colors, and composition suggest the three-dimensional realities of his horses and the landscape they inhabit.

More than a decade ago, Bayar began to make his horse sculptures, beginning with elegant wood relief works that united his painting and sculptural

aesthetic in graceful line and colors. Although not trained in sculpture, Bayar's interest in making horse sculpture is deeply personal as it reaches far back into his family. As he said a decade ago, "Family tradition and abundant little antique wooden sculptures inspired me to paint horses." Today, as he looks back to his influences, he notes, "I have always collected small wooden horses. My grandfather, who was a reincarnated Buddhist monk, received a small, carved horse from the local carpenter called Buihin Banzragch, also known as Uran Banzai. Later, my grandfather gave it to me."¹

This one horse was inspirational for Bayar as a child and, as he grew, he understood "the horse came to symbolize my grandfather's spirit and desires and hopes. [His] influence on my horse sculptures and paintings has always been



Erdenebayar Monkhor, Horse with Saddle, 2016, bronze 33 x 43 x 12 cm.



Erdenebayar Monkhor, On the Mountain, 2010, wood, pigment, 80 x 60 x 15 cm.

strong. The small object was a spiritual thing from his family. And when I started making art, I felt it was a connection to my ancestors. When I make big horses, I feel as if I am making my ancestors happy.”

Bayar’s recent works continue his sculptural narrative, whose hard- and soft-edged lines, sturdy, naïve geometry, and rough, uneven textures encourage one to run one’s hands over the works, an act which adds much to the personal sculptural experience. Such works are very different in tone and construction from the bronze horse sculptures by artists such as L. Ganhuuyag and Sh. Chimeddorj, whose sculptures’ style and imagery are deeply influenced by their Soviet education with a tendency toward heroic and folk elements found in classical realist works.

The transition from painting to sculpture has been a gradual one for Bayar, for as he noted in 2010, “Painting is no longer enough for me to express how I feel.” He has not eschewed painting as his primary artistic expression, rather he understands the relationship between sculpture and painting is “very interesting as they reflect each other so they give another form for me to work with ...” And at the same time, making sculpture is a challenge. “For me to make sculpture is more difficult than to paint. It is difficult to see sculpture in the round.”



Erdenebayar Monkhor, To the City – 1, 2, 2017, wood, pigment, wheels, each 125 x 35 x 35 cm.

Many of Bayar’s horse sculptures—although he has made other animals such as ox, yak, and camel—seem to have just stepped out of the boundaries of his paintings’ landscapes. Even if they are not particularly animated in their form, they do suggest the unique, patient vitality of the animal. With works such as *On the Mountain I and 2* (both 2010) we see his small black horses moving over

the mountain, free, primordial presences, at ease with their surroundings, whereas his stolid *Mongol Horse* (2006) and his strong wood horses in *Black Horses* (2011) seem to be quite still, perhaps waiting for a change in the weather so that they can move on. Recent bronzes simply entitled *Horse* (2016) and *Horse with Saddle* (2016) capture the sense of patience that Mongolian horses possess. One is reminded here of Bayar’s notions of the subtle relationship between humankind and the horse; easy postures, stillness without agitation or anxiety, and the inner strength one encounters among people and horses on the steppe. For many people, who have gone to the steppe to escape the cacophony of modern life, such calmness can eventually become an irritant, even disturbing, to the point of having to return to the oppressiveness of city clamor.

Where Bayar’s painted horses are brooding symbols of life on the steppe, his sculpted horses are masterful metaphors for Mongolia’s rapidly changing society. Since independence and the new 1993 National Constitution, the country has quickly embraced modernity. Ulaanbaatar, the capital, a skyscraper-filled and traffic-choked oasis of capitalism, retains a number of traditional cultural elements, not the least of which are the nomadic *ger* homes that flow across rolling hills at the edge of the city, reminding people not only of the nation’s nomadic



Above left: Erdenebayar Monkhor, Horse in the Box, 2013, wood, pigment, 52 x 50 x 50 cm. Above center: Erdenebayar Monkhor, Now – 1, 2017, wood, glass bottle, oil paint, 50 x 14 x 15 cm. Above right: Erdenebayar Monkhor, City Horse, 2017, wood, oil paint, 28 x 26 x 11 cm.

past but also underscoring the city's and the country's shifting demographic and social change from nomadic to the settled, a situation that puts great stress on government social policy.

The shift in the population has also impacted the world of horses and other animals. The primordial world of the steppe, across which the dark horse has roamed proudly for millennia, is being squeezed of its traditional lifestyle and the humanity within it. Bayar's two carvings, entitled *We 1 & 2* (2017), show one figure pressing a horse's head to his chest in an act of pure love for the animal, while the other is poised ready to place a saddle on his animal. There is something deeply sad and stoic about these two figures. And there is something equally sad about the loss of horses, as Bayar hints at in his pole of empty saddles in *No Limit* (2015).

Bayar's solitary three-meter high *Iron Horse* (2017) that stands a few meters from



Erdenebayar Monkhor, *We 1 & 2*, 2017, wood, pigment, horse harness, saddle, tie, each 100 x 33 x 30 cm.

his studio in Marshal Town, Ulaanbaatar, suggests something of the emotional impact of change on both animal and human. Even as welcoming countryside can be seen far beyond the towering buildings, there is an eerie feeling of an older, freer world being swallowed by a new, alienating one.

In the past five years with his new works—from miniature to monumental, in steel, bronze, found wood, and other objects such as saddles and wheels—Bayar's sculptural vision has been carefully realized through patient work, which takes him anything from a few days to a month to complete. His bold brush has given way to the muscularity of the hammer, chisel, saw, and axe. The results reveal an artist fighting for his extended identity as a sculptor breathing invigorating life into his *oeuvre*.

As he said in our recent interview, "I have been painting horses for many years. I have long wanted to look at my horses from a different perspective and to see



Erdenebayar Monkhor, *No Limit*, 2015, wood, found saddle, rope, 240 x 50 x 50 cm.



Erdenebayar Monkhor, *Greed and Desire*, 2017, horse saddle, print on paper, 25 x 35 x 27 cm.

a different dynamic and energy from those in my painting. To do this I wanted to experiment with new materials and objects that are linked to tradition, like found wood and old saddles made from leather. I want to see my horses as 'living beings.'"

Bayar not only achieves a fresh aesthetic with sculpture but he also realizes a new social understanding. When I look at Bayar's paintings, there is an irresistible feeling of the steppe and the nomadic world of traditional Mongolia. But in his sculpture there is a different narrative at play, one that might be seen as more political and social.



Erdenebayar Monkhor, **Portraits of Horse**, 2017, wood, oil paint, approx. 60 x 25 x 11 cm each.

“I would not say necessarily that it is more political; rather it is a reflection or an observation of what is around me and how our society is changing. I see *To the City* as symbolic of people moving from the countryside to the city. Here, horses are like people moved by truck and no longer by the traditional bullock pulling the *ger*,” Bayar says. Where once Mongolians had space now they are being squeezed together. Tales of the allure of modern comfort seep across the country moving people to dream different dreams. “People want what they don’t have,” says Bayar. “Now developers control people’s lives. *To the City* represents the new reality of the skyscraper. To live in a beautiful tall building we have given up the freedom of the steppe.

To the City 1 and *2* (both 2017) are lovely metaphors; the miniature horses atop wooden pillars, which are, as Bayar

says, like foreboding skyscrapers now filling large areas of the city. There is a notion here of the free horse becoming caged as modern man is imprisoned in his gleaming towers. This is clear in the work entitled *Horse in the Box* (2013), and others like it, where the open-framed ‘box’ momentarily imprisons the animal. *End of Moving* (2009) has a sense of relief about it; the work’s wood trestles recall the traditional way *ger* were transported, only here it is the horse replacing the *ger*; a reversal of fortune one might say. It is in works such as these that there is a feeling of time being frozen. As Bayar says, when he is with a horse and looks at this work, “I feel that time has stopped.”

Time is also stopped in his lovingly carved series of abstract horse heads with the collective title *Portraits of Horses* (2017) as well as the work entitled *Two Ideas* (2015). The geometry of these heads ooze the power of an ancient heritage;

the colors—predominantly red, yellow, and green—enhance the individuality of each horse. Through his series of carved heads Bayar reaches into the primeval reality of the horse. “The colors of my sculptures have a connection, in one part, to my paintings. The green is connected to the myth of the Buddhist Tara. Red, silver, and gold are more related to my paintings than Buddhism.”

Such works emphasize both the pleasure of carving and its difficulties and challenges, many of which are similar, he notes, with a sculptor working with marble. “Carving seems easy but it is hard,” says Bayar. “It is difficult for me to take my vision and shape it through carving. The general shape of the wood suggests the form of my sculpture. When I see the wood, I see where I should carve and where I should not. But it is hard to find good wood. It is difficult to find flawless wood but at times the flaws are an advantage aesthetically.”

The Mongolian horse with its spirit and energy demands a connection, both collective and individual, as it drives a new national narrative into the 21st century. As Bayar says of his art, “It represents Mongolia and its spiritual heart. This connects to my grandfather on my father’s side.” Δ

Notes.

1. Interviews Bayar at his studio in Ulaanbaatar, on December 14 and 15, 2017.
2. I wish to express my appreciation for interpretation to Gunsun Khurelchuluun.



Erdenebayar Monkhor, **Black Horses**, 2011, wood, pigment, 44 x 18 x 13 cm.



Erdenebayar Monkhor, **Two Ideas**, 2015, wood, oil paint, 55 x 87 x 20 cm.