

Deborah Butterfield

born 1949, San Diego, California
resides in Bozeman, Montana and Holualoa, Hawaii

education / professional experience

Deborah Butterfield received a B.A. in 1972 and an M.F.A. in 1973 from the University of California at Davis. She has lived in Montana since 1976 where she raises horses. She teaches at Montana State University in Bozeman and works a part of each year in the studio she shares with her husband, John Buck, and two sons, Hunter and Wilder, in Holualoa near Kona.

NAHELE

sculpture, 1986
assemblage of found metals
located on the entrance lanai

description / design

A life-size depiction of a horse made from salvaged material from the Big Island captures the spiritual power and physical dignity of the individual horse. Deborah Butterfield creates a convincing image from incongruous materials. Soft green smeared with rust from roof metal wraps around old pipes and metal strips to define the horse with a gentle turn of the head. The position of the tail swings out to balance the gesture of the front legs and continue a graceful contour and movement. Butterfield's deft use of recycled materials creates a sculptural mass with a calligraphic flair.

subject / title

"Nahele" means wilderness, forest, vegetation, trees, bushes, weed in Hawaiian. Nahele describes the natural habitat of the artist and of her subject — a horse ranch in Montana, and a studio in Holualoa. She often sculpts her own horses in her effort to describe their personalities. 'I am more interested in how each horse thinks and hope my work begins to feel more like horses than even look like them.'

style

Deborah Butterfield produces 6 to 10 sculpted horses each year. The horse has served Butterfield as the vehicle for inexhaustible explorations of material and form for 20 years. 'I use horse images as a metaphorical substitute for myself — it is a way of doing a self portrait, one step removed from the specificity of Deborah Butterfield... I wanted to do these big beautiful mares that were as strong and imposing as stallions but capable of creation and nourishing life.' The horse sculptures emerge from nature — mud, branches and sticks, from old car parts, outdoor signs, and other discarded metals. Starting with a basic welded armature, she welds, hammers, wires and bends found pieces into place. She uses her body as a measuring device to determine the heights and girth of the animal. Her horses pose as still life or nudes, showing motion as power in reserve, and beauty as in a classical equestrian study.

The First Hawaiian Bank has two of Butterfield's bronze horses grazing on Bishop Street. They were assembled and welded after the smaller found materials from palm trees and local wood and metals were cast in bronze, keeping the assembly and sculpting process simple and direct, typical of her work.

tour anecdotes

Her life and art focus on horses and art. Deborah Butterfield hopes to create a dialogue between one species and another.

"Black Beauty really is one of my favorite books."