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ROBERT STORR

FIRST THINGS FIRST

For some painters, identifying the image is half the battle. Doing so can mean seeking it out in other art, in photographs, or by observing the world. Alternatively, it may require searching for it in the mind's eye or in memory. *Or* it may entail struggling to recognize an image in, and extract it from, more or less inchoate shapes or shadows that coalesce in painterly marks and gestures—and, all too often, threaten to dissolve back into the formless mass whence it momentarily emerged. Indeed, for some artists the first and the second half of the battle are indistinguishable. Rather than being a question of decision and depiction, plan and execution, their approach to realizing a work is instead a continuum in which bringing a latent image into the sharpest possible focus and preventing it from slipping back into unintelligibility are one and the same process. Susan Rothenberg is such an artist.

In many ways this aligns her, on the one hand, with Alberto Giacometti, and on the other with Willem de Kooning since, like Rothenberg, both were driven by imperative but elusive intuitions. Yet just as the austere, gray, snail's-pace, mist-damp tenor of Giacometti's paintings and sculptures differs utterly from the impetuous sparks of heat and light and slipping glimpses of flushed skin that characterize de Kooning's canvases, not to mention his loosely modeled bronze figures, Rothenberg's way with paint and her feel for the space that forms occupy varies markedly from that of her male predecessors.

One explanation for the diversity of facture and mood, despite the similarities in approach among the three artists—but especially between Rothenberg and the other two—issues from specific discrepancies in aesthetic context coupled with those of the historical moment. For, of the three, Rothenberg is the only artist to have started at zero. Arguably, Giacometti's method of addition and subtraction, mark and erasure, tended toward the ultimate erosion or evaporation of his ephemeral subjects, but he never actually reached that point. By contrast, Rothenberg started with a tabula rasa—one that had been cleared by New York School abstract painting as it was practiced by de Kooning's peers Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Ad Reinhardt as well as by the slightly younger Ellsworth Kelly and Agnes Martin, and wiped cleaner still by "minimalists" such as Robert Ryman, Brice Marden, and Robert Mangold. Indeed, during the early 1970s, when Rothenberg embarked on her first mature works, figuration had, to all intents and purposes, become taboo in the vanguard circles of downtown Manhattan that she frequented. In fact, Rothenberg spent several years seeking her own avant-garde idiom and in that endeavor collaborated with video and performance pioneer Joan Jonas and also worked as an assistant to sculptor Nancy Graves, for whom she made facsimiles of camel skeletons that would subsequently inform the anatomical fragmentation in her paintings of the late 1970s and early 1980s in ways that rhyme intriguingly with Giacometti's truncated legs and arms.

Moreover, given the emergence of experimental new media—chiefly video, performance, and installation—that preoccupied her generational cohort and the ambient noise of critics, scholars, and tastemakers eager to declare that painting itself was dead, the proverbially daunting void of the empty canvas hovered in a still more discouraging ideological and social vacuum.

So it took guts to pick up a brush and try to make a picture in 1974—or an irresistible inner need and certainty. Curiously enough, considering that it was the work of a poor loft-dweller in New York at the twentieth-century nadir of that city's prosperity and self-esteem, the image Rothenberg spontaneously blocked in with pale pinks was the silhouette of a horse. Commentators with perfect hindsight who are aware that the artist now lives on a ranch in New Mexico with her artist-horseman husband, Bruce Nauman, may be tempted to leap backward and ascribe this form to circumstances unforeseeably far in the future for the woman who painted it, and so underestimate the strangeness of the image—and its poetry.

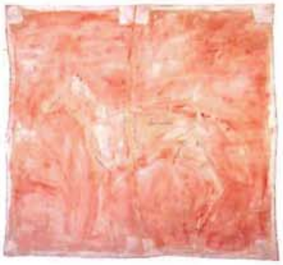


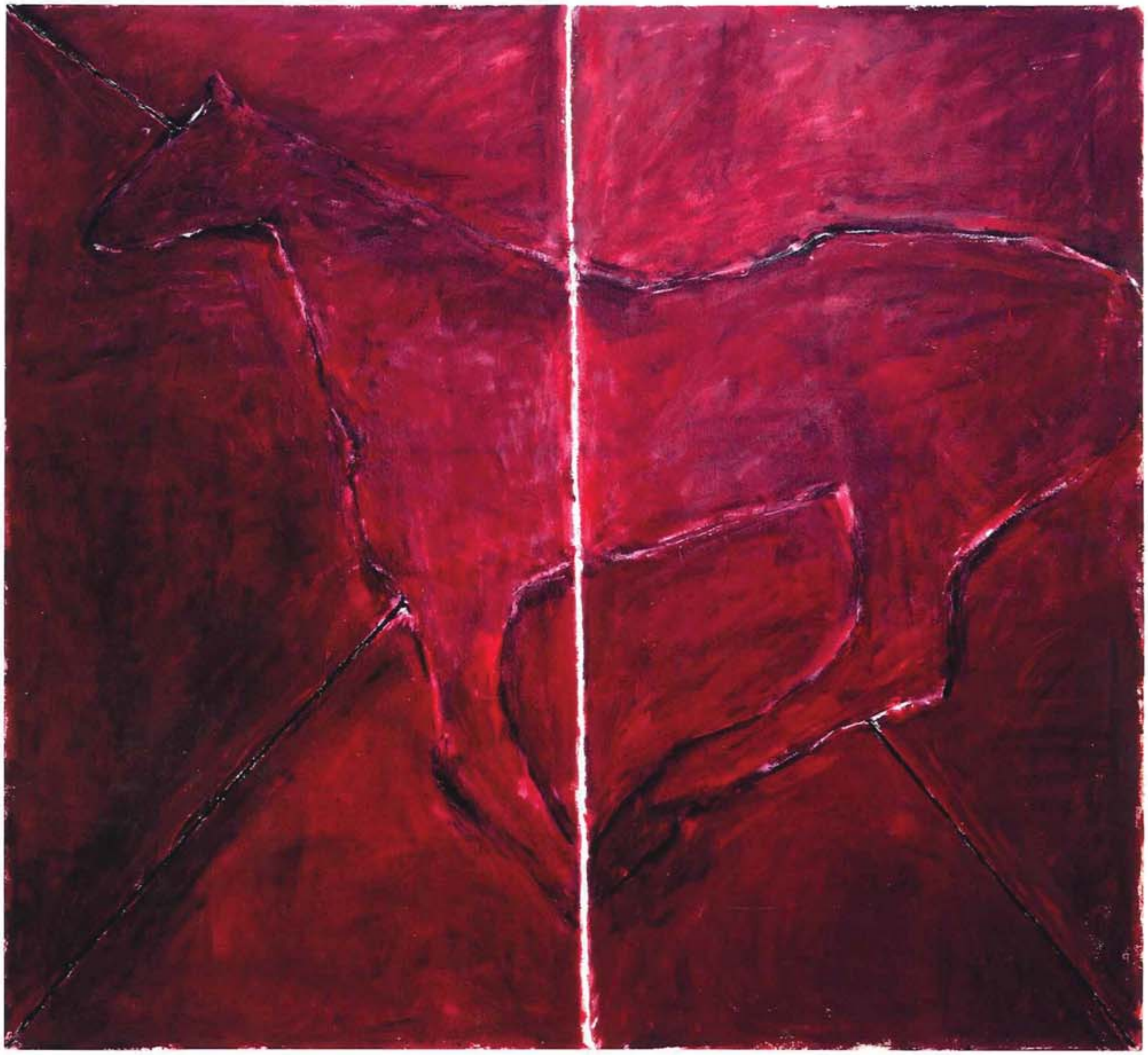
Fig. 1. Susan Rothenberg, *First Horse*, 1974. Tempera, matte, flashe, pencil, and gesso on unstretched canvas, 26 x 28 in. (66 x 71.1 cm). Private collection.

Among Rothenberg's formative works are two rural scenes from 1967–68 that feature silhouetted sheep in the first instance, and a silhouetted goose or duck in the second; so there were antecedents for such animal subject matter as well as for the flat, cutout-like treatment of three-dimensional shapes. However, the potential dynamism of a stationary horse in tension with the unchecked dynamism of a horse in motion opened territory that the early pastorals barely hint at. Furthermore, the correspondences and contrasts between the containment of domestic space—at this point Rothenberg was a single mother painting while her daughter, Maggie, slept—and the relative expanse of the unstretched canvas on which she worked within her unit of the larger gridded matrix of the New York skyline are the formal and semiotic foils for her otherwise anomalous protagonist. Soon, the diminutive *First Horse* of 1974 (fig. 1)—its measurements were well under a square yard—dilated to the nearly mural proportions typical of what Clement Greenberg called "American-type Painting" (as distinct from European easel painting), meaning Abstract Expressionism, the urban tendency that exploded the scale of forward-looking painting from the 1940s onward. Thus by *Triphammer Bridge* (also 1974) Rothenberg had extended her reach—and her horse's room for pictorial maneuver—to almost six by eight feet, retaining the warm tones with which she had started but lending them a red-earth density while closing off the depths of the optical space by eliminating the bare-white or semi-transparent patches of canvas that inflect *First Horse*.

Before turning to the exceptionally fine examples of this series of Rothenberg paintings in the Wexner Family Collection, a few other elements of this pair of template compositions deserve attention. As has been noted, the artist customarily begins by laying down strokes on a canvas stapled directly to the wall rather than already mounted on a strainer, with the result that the exact margins of the final image remain undecided until the very end of the painting process. This allows for a measure of flux in the generally monochrome fields in which the image is embedded. However, to introduce stress points that maintain a necessary compositional tautness as well as to visually establish navigational markers, Rothenberg has also indented the edges or placed lozenges in the interior of this field, as happens in *First Horse*, or divided it vertically, as occurs in *Triphammer Bridge*.

Or she divides the canvas diagonally, as is the case for *1 x 1* (1977) and its near twin, *Three Spokes* (also 1977, p. 73). The latter is the most recent acquisition among the five Rothenbergs owned by the Wexners. It dates to the end of the initial series of flat, contoured horses and, like several other works of that period, features a prominent and quite explicit abstract armature, in this case a single vertical white stripe that runs through the center of

OPPOSITE: **Susan Rothenberg,** *Three Spokes*, 1977 (p. 171)



the canvas like a "zip" in a Barnett Newman painting, providing an axis against which to gauge the tipped, off-center, off-kilter outline of the shallowly modeled horse at full gallop that dominates the horizontal rectangle. Hybrids of representation and abstraction that played upon compressed, often schematic juxtapositions of figure and ground were hallmarks of what became known as "New Image Painting." That label derived from the title of an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art organized by Richard Marshall in 1978 that grouped Rothenberg with Jennifer Bartlett, Neil Jenney, Robert Moskowitz, and Julian Schnabel. The latter's inclusion signaled the advent of Neo-Expressionism—which swept the field, rendering the new category obsolete almost immediately—while Rothenberg's participation launched her into the burgeoning international "postmodernist" art scene, resulting in one-woman shows at the Kunsthalle, Basel; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and the Tate Gallery, London.

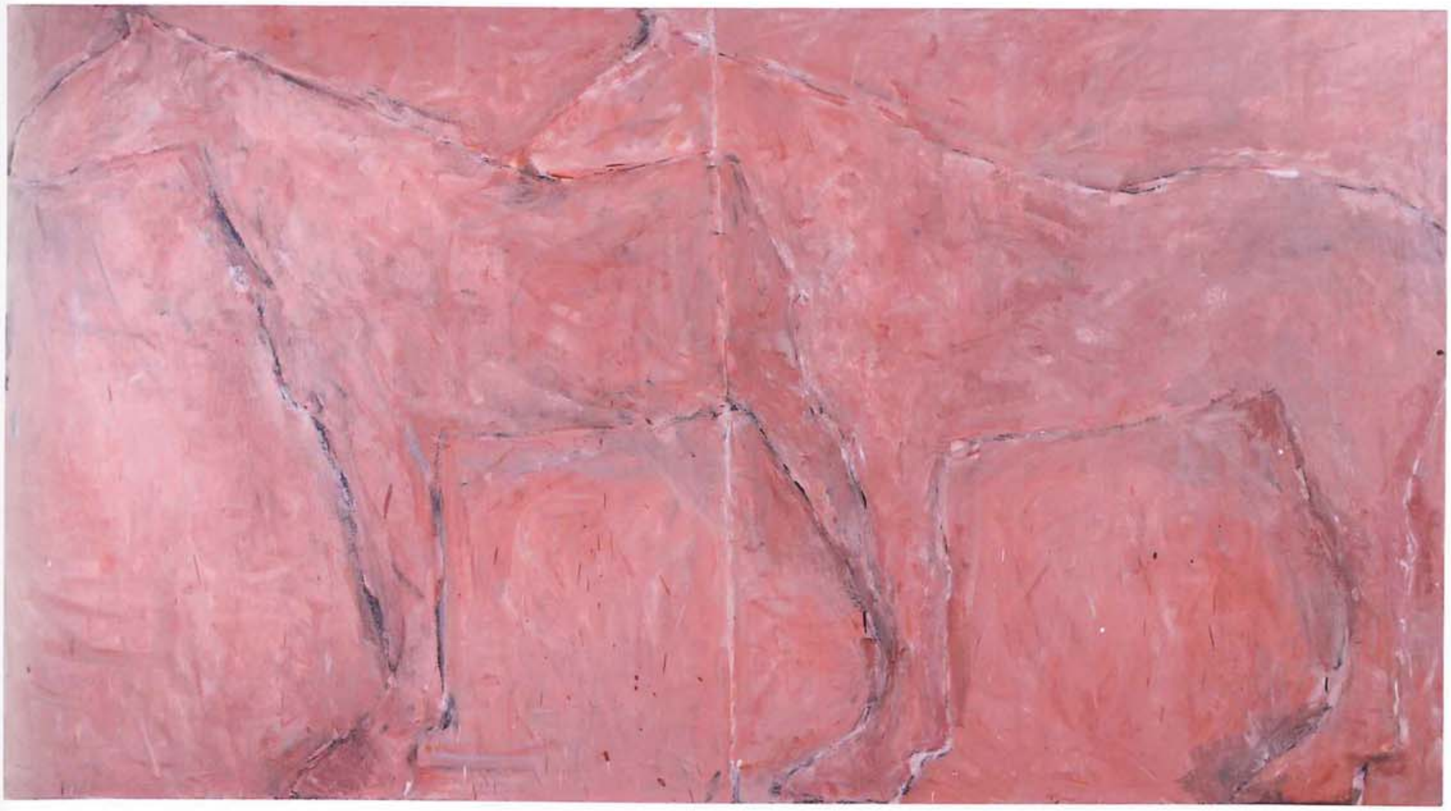
In truth, though, with her constant focus on structuring and restructuring the picture plane and on the integration of organic with geometric forms, Rothenberg was more of a modernist—albeit one unconcerned with and unrestrained by the "dos and don'ts" of modernist theory at any given moment of its disputatious elaboration—than she was a postmodernist paradigm breaker. This is readily apparent in *1 x 1*, but perhaps more pronounced in the remaining four Rothenbergs in this exhibition.

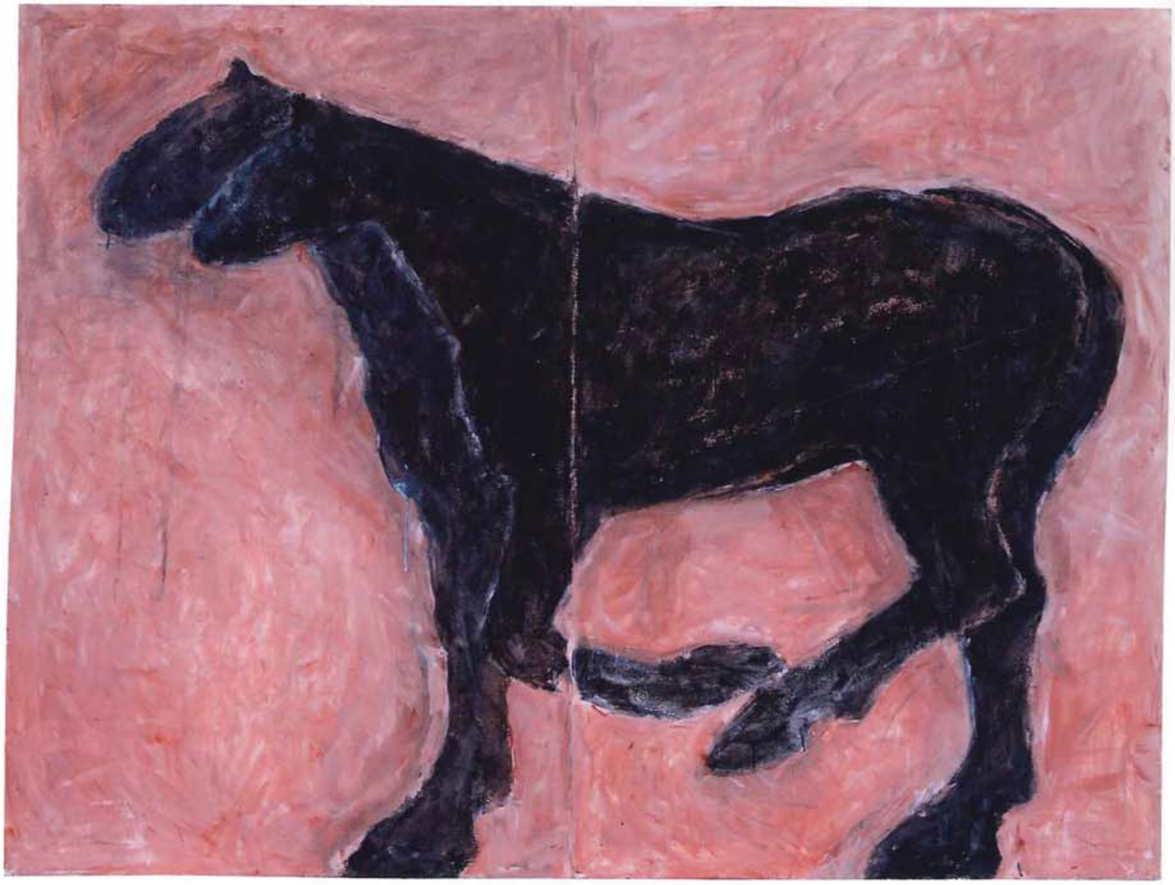
All four—*Stable* (1974, p. 75), *Layering* (1974–76, p. 76), *Hector Protector*, and the somber, rock-solid *Flanders* (both 1976, pp. 77, 79)—center on horses of heroic scale, though not necessarily of heroic deportment. None of them appear to be thoroughbreds, and some are a bit swaybacked. Of the four, only one—*Layering*, with its legs caught in mid-step as if in a frame from one of Eadweard Muybridge's stop-action photographic sequences of animals in motion—shows any signs of going anywhere, while the other three stand stock still. Significantly, all are facing left. And, here again, we catch an insight into the formal sophistication of Rothenberg's superficially rudimentary renderings of a subject that has tested the virtuosity of artists from those who carved the Persian, Greek, and Roman friezes of antiquity to Théodore Géricault, Eugène Delacroix, and Edgar Degas in the nineteenth century. The general scanning pattern of the eye in "Western" culture is left to right—Hebrew and Arabic, among other languages, are in written in reverse—such that any shape that faces in the direction of that pattern effectively speeds the viewer's glance from one side to the other, whereas any shape that faces the opposite direction effectively slows or stops it.

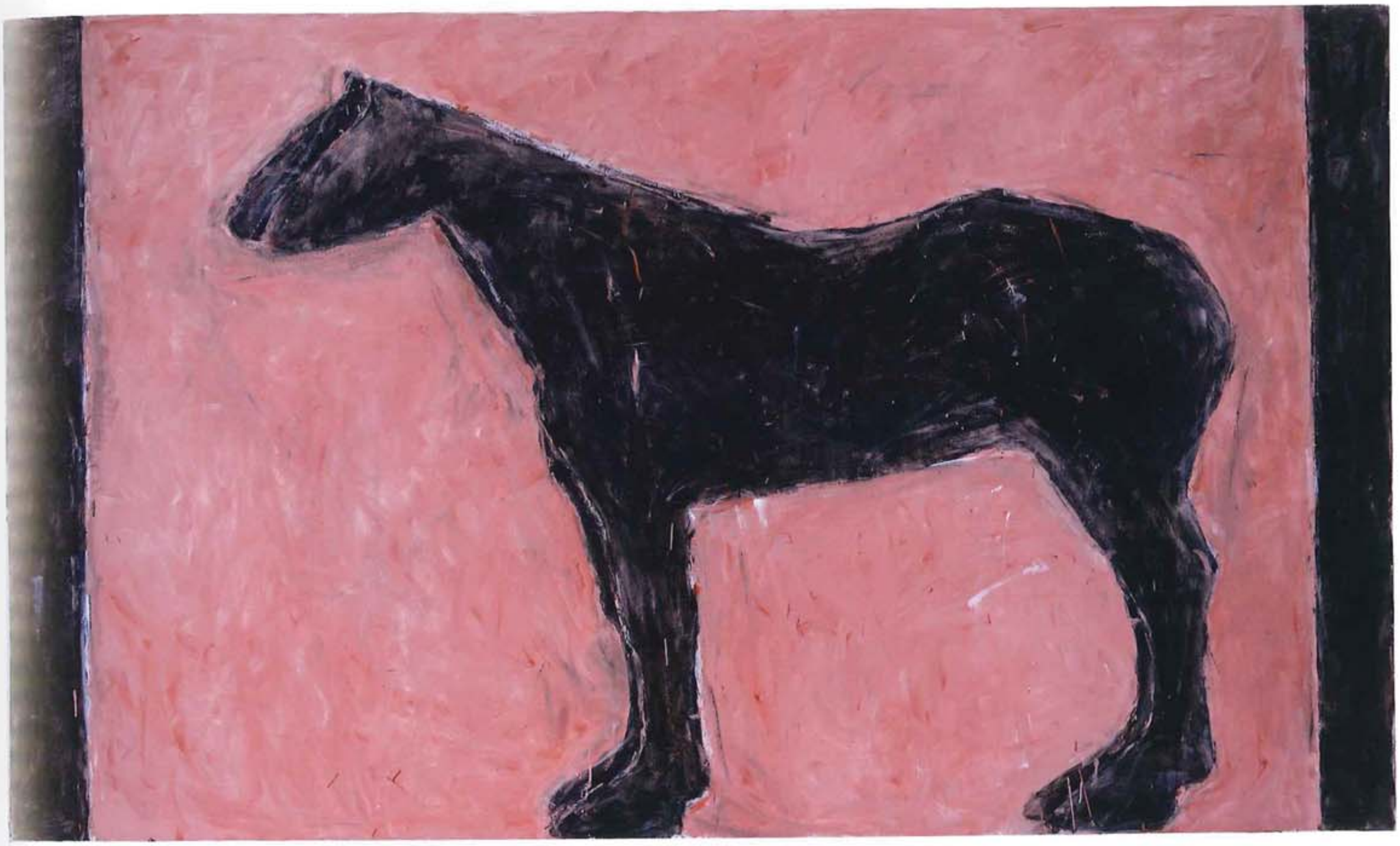
Rothenberg's assiduous calibration of the flickering outline and modulated density of her horses, along with that of the visually active field around them—all being the product of intense mark making and cancellation worthy of Giacometti, though free of the rhetoric of existential doubt—capitalizes on the habits of spectatorship that the public brings to images of this size and apparent simplicity. And it is the imposing, never static presence of her protagonists, whether ostensibly immobile or on the run, that gives these pictures their monumentality. Each is a whole greater than the sum of its bare minimum of parts and, as such, an instantly apprehended and unforgettable Gestalt. Gestalts of this order had been the goal of abstractionists in the 1960s such as Frank Stella and Donald Judd. Rothenberg is, arguably, the only figurative painter to have succeeded in achieving the same memorable concision, the same sudden eidetic impact, thereby managing to have her formalist cake and eat it too—or rather allowing her to nourish her images with it.

Until now, I have emphasized the pictorial logic of Rothenberg's paintings and have been at some pains to downplay their circumstantial connections both to the anguished heritage

OPPOSITE: **Susan Rothenberg,** *Stable*, 1974 (p. 169)
FOLLOWING, LEFT: **Susan Rothenberg,** *Layering*, 1974–76 (p. 170)
FOLLOWING, RIGHT: **Susan Rothenberg,** *Hector Protector*, 1976 (p. 170)







of uncertainty rooted in Giacometti and the overt emotionalism of Abstract Expressionism or the stylized if not frankly ironic "acting out" of feeling found in Neo-Expressionism. I am not shy of either and would speak of them in more detail if it would help to better understand Rothenberg's work; but in reality, discussion of any of these parallels tends to complicate appreciation of the profound but always muted affect of her pictures, the horses above all. Maybe the simplest path to such an appreciation is to venture a guess as to what these horses are, what they symbolize or are intended to evoke. The most plausible answer would seem to be that they are creatures onto which we—and the artist—are at liberty to project a wide range of psychological needs and affinities. In short, they are companionable beings, animals we can trust when all alone with ourselves and with them, animals whose strength we can rely upon, animals that remind us of our own physicality, that inspire us to stand tall or mobilize our entire bodies as if they were choreographic surrogates for a modern dance in perpetual suspension. (This interpretive leap is suggested by snapshots from the 1970s of the artist trying out various poses in the nude and contemporaneous acrylic studies of her friend the actress and Warhol Factory habitué Mary Woronov assuming the same poses.) In the final analysis, though, Rothenberg's horses are emblems of our vital first and second natures, the animal energies and drives we instinctively possess and those that by force of will we attempt to harness. There has been nothing quite like them in modern painting before or since.

OPPOSITE: **Susan Rothenberg,** *Flanders,* 1976 (p. 171)