

Animals,

New York sculptor **Immi Storrs** establishes the basic anatomy of her animal subjects before allowing her imagination to take over. | by **Lynne Moss Perricelli**

Reimagined

In her bronze animal sculptures, Immi Storrs keeps her labor-intensive process exciting and ever-evolving by giving free rein to her imagination and intuition. Instead of rendering her subjects exactly as they appear, she exaggerates or otherwise distorts or edits their forms to create a desired effect—whatever feels right at the moment. “I just decide what animal I want to do, then figure out how I’m going to make it more interesting. It’s a bird, but not just a bird,” she explains. “It’s a bird plus or a bird minus.” The rest of her process concerns how to make that concept work. “Should the wings be up or down? One up, one down? Maybe two heads? Often things don’t work the first time around and I rethink everything, or I just keep reworking,” she adds.

With the exception of a period of study with renowned sculptor Sidney Simon, Storrs is essentially self-taught. She, in fact, trained as a painter, but “I was dreadful,” she says. One afternoon while working with a piece of wax her cousin had given her, she had an epiphany.



ABOVE
Bird on a Nest
2006, bronze, 20 x 17½ x 8.
All artwork this article
Courtesy Spanierman Gallery,
New York, New York.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Future Horses
2005, bronze,
26 x 14 x 20.

“I made a dead bird,” she recalls. “It just came out, and I thought, This is me.” The experience confirmed Storrs’ personal theory that most people, except for true prodigies, see either in the round or flat. Seeing in the round became Storrs’ calling, one in which her unique brand of imaginative realism can flourish.

Although Storrs’ oeuvre includes many figures, animals became her primary subject early in her career. “I did a lot of figures when I was studying with Sidney Simon to practice and learn anatomy,” she says, “and at some point I decided I didn’t want to do that anymore. I got bored with my work. I wasn’t quite ready for pure abstraction, so I just started with animals, and I never looked back.” Occasionally a new idea comes to her in a dream, from an image in a magazine, or from any other source she encour-

ters in her day-to-day life, but more often she simply decides on an animal, then refers to photographs and anatomical books to make a few drawings and explore the idea. “I need to know the right infrastructure is there,”





Storrs says of the reference materials. “I can abstract the form later, but first I have to make sure the basic structure is correct.” Her next step is to make the armature.

For any sculpture, the armature is the structure underneath the modeling material. In Storrs’ case, she establishes the basic structure for a medium to large piece by attaching strong pipes into flanges, which are bolted to a heavy base. She then uses aluminum wire within the structure to create the desired form. “If I’m not sure which direction the work will go, I need to be able to change the infrastructure, which is why the armature has to be made of a pliable material,” she explains. “If everything is welded together, it’s not a work in progress.”

Once the armature is in place, Storrs begins applying and modeling the clay on top. Generally she uses water-based clay because she favors its crisp look and the thumbprints it retains, which help create the sense of texture that is so important in her work. The disadvantage with water-based clay over oil-based is that it tends to dry overnight, so she wraps the clay in damp cloths if she has to return to it later. When she must use oil-based clay, she likes plasticine, which won’t dry or shrink, causing cracks in the clay. Working with a variety of implements—her hands, blocks and wedges of wood, and sculpture tools—Storrs makes as much as she can of her thumbprints,

which yield the softer, more organic feeling she seeks.

Texture is important in Storrs’ work, although she cannot say exactly what her intentions are in a particular piece. She simply follows her intuition. Some might suggest the texture implies movement, but the artist contends this is not so, that “the pieces are grounded on purpose.” The visible modeling instead serves as a key formal element, adding interest and dynamism to the form—a way of animating the subject without being realistic. Other pieces, such as *Small, Smooth Horse*, have no texture. “I wanted it to look abstract,” Storrs states.

Once she has finished modeling the clay, she takes the piece to Ranieri Sculpture Casting, in Long Island City, New York, where rubber is poured over the clay to make a mold. The rubber is then peeled off and hot wax is poured inside to form a positive impression. Storrs then works on the wax to make any slight changes and complete the piece. When she is satisfied, the wax impression is sent to Argos Foundry, in Brewster, New York, where a ceramic mold is made. The foundry can then pour molten bronze into the ceramic mold, burning out the wax. This process is called “lost wax.”

Storrs is generally not present at the foundry but oversees the steps at Ranieri, where the newly-bronzed piece is returned for the patina stage. The artist can choose any color for the patina, from opaque white to red, brown, or

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ABOVE
Young Crow
2006, bronze,
5 x 5 x 13.

LEFT
Bull Box No. 1
1989, bronze,
14 x 18 x 12.

OPPOSITE PAGE
**Eight Horses—
Thirteen Legs**
1988, bronze,
19 x 13 x 14.



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green. "We have a formula in which we stop after a layer, then keep going until it looks right," she says of her collaboration with Ranieri's owner, Domenico Ranieri. Storrs produces most pieces in multiples of eight, and larger works in multiples of five. A collector can commission a piece in a certain color and, although Storrs tries to accommodate any requests, the final patina color is her choice.

For inspiration, Storrs looks to her experiences, imagination, and memory as much as to museums and magazines. "An ad in a magazine can give up a kernel, a nugget of something that could work in a piece. There might be something there, a shape, a design element, that will lead somewhere else," she says. A recent series, Fence Posts, emerged from some animal maquettes the artist had been

working on in which she explored the idea of a long, slender form, where "most of what was happening was happening on top," she describes. These maquettes were each placed on a base and could be moved around like pieces on a chessboard. From these she made sculptures, some of which are six feet tall, that can be displayed alone but, the artist adds, have more impact when viewed as a group.

Another recent series explored animal forms within a box. She used the same process of building an infrastructure, in this case using a Styrofoam box as the armature and cutting away areas to build the animal forms inside. Storrs especially enjoyed this format because it allowed her to explore different imagery on each side of the box. "The viewer cannot see all the sides at once, so these sculptures offered different faces, different canvases to work on," she says.

As a break from the labor-intensive foundry process, Storrs recently turned to plaster for her current projects. She first builds the armature with the same pipes, flanges, and aluminum wire she uses for clay, then applies the plaster, which she chips away and carves. "I file down and chip away at the plaster to get the shape, then cover it with gauze," she



ABOVE LEFT
**Four Horses—
 Three Riders**
 1990, bronze and
 stone, 13 x 11 x 35.



LEFT
Old Horse
 1992, bronze,
 12½ x 7 x 17.

OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT
**Small, Smooth
 Horse**
 1992, bronze,
 14 x 8 x 9¼.

BELOW
**Fence Post
 Maquettes**
 1998, bronze,
 10 x 26 x 18.

OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT
**Man With Bird
 and Woman**
 2005, bronze,
 36 x 27 x 11¼.



explains. Sometimes, as in *Man With Bird and Woman*, she paints a thin layer of black watercolor or thin acrylic over the gauze. “I liked the way the paint made the sculpture look so old, petrified,” the artist describes. Here, as in her bronze pieces, texture serves a central purpose in attracting attention to the surface and creating a more dynamic form.

For all her works Storrs insists on generic titles. “I want the pieces to be seen at the viewer’s discretion,” she explains. “I don’t want to say, ‘This is an old, lame horse.’ Instead I say, ‘Old Horse,’ or ‘Horse Stumble’. I have to be open to whatever the viewer thinks is happening, but if I title things more specifically, the viewer looks less closely.”

Looking closely is precisely the reaction Storrs would like her works to evoke. Each one offers a unique presence, not strictly realistic but undeniably natural, and “grounded,” as she puts it, in feeling. Storrs’ animals demand more than a cursory glance. They suggest all kinds of associations, and Storrs has her own ideas of what they might mean—viewers must find their own. ■

Lynne Moss Perricelli is a freelance writer and editor in New Jersey.

About the Artist

Immi Storrs lives in Southampton, New York, and in New York City. She attended Colorado Women’s College, at the University of Denver. She has participated in numerous group shows, including a survey of 20th-century American sculpture held at the White House, in 1997. Her work is in many prestigious public and private collections, such as those of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York; the National Museum for Women in the Arts, in Washington, DC; and the National Academy Museum, in New York City, where she is also a member of the Museum Council. She is



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