



**RULES OF ENGAGEMENT
HORSE POWER LENDS A KICK TO MUNDANE DANCE THEATRICALS**

by Tobi Tobias, November 1st, 2005

JoAnna Mendl Shaw's Equus Projects, which pairs dancers with horses and their riders, lured enthusiasts of both disciplines to a stable for Rules of Engagement. The hour-long show, completed by Janet Biggs's videos of rugged landscapes and animals in the wild, claimed to explore a struggle for power in interspecies relationships. This highfalutin theme was confined to the program note. What we actually saw was an Appaloosa gelding, masterfully guided by Blair Griesmeyer, sharing the turf with three dancers who compensated in courage—and, indeed, engagement—for what they lacked in choreography. Routine gestures and configurations were enlivened by Gina Paolillo's speaking passionately to the horse as they "danced" a tango and Blake Pearson and MaryAlice White's writhing or crouching on the ground within inches of its hooves. The thrill of the performance lay in the danger one sensed—and the erotic undercurrent present—in the close encounters of beast and human.



JANET BIGGS “GIRLS AND HORSES”

The installation not to miss this month, on the subject of identity and gender, is Janet Bigg’s “Girls and Horses,” an investigation into the Freudian tyranny of the ancient attraction between little females and big equines. This is a must-see for anyone who has ever purchased a stable of My Little Ponys for their offspring. The good news is that Biggs hasn’t gone off the deep end, like a few Barbie deconstructors I have known. She immerses us in the material without drowning us in the obvious. Biggs raises serious questions but with humor, the only way to ride this subject.

The gallery is dark and unsettling. One has to submit to this piece right away, which turns out to be a pleasure. Biggs has taped a few of her buddies playing “horsie” with their young daughters at home. There’s no shame in this activity, but under the artist’s lens it becomes a hysterical phallic exercise in absurdity. Watching daddies pretending to be stallions, one can’t help but read this masturbatory gesture as one of the most peculiar rites of passage, as harmless as it is seminal.

The critical image in this installation is a larger video loop playing on the gallery walls, enveloping us, and the eight video vignettes, in a master narrative. In “Amanda Riding Diplomat,” a young girl dressed in proper Pony Club gear is riding a large Arabian in a formal show; we’re smack in the center of the ring as Amanda goes around and around as mechanically as the hands on a clock. Playing horsie on the living room floor is the first step on a path that leads to the upper-crust world of horsemanship. For little girls, holding that crop in their hot little hands is not so dissimilar from the grip that little boys can have on their own anatomy. Is it penis envy? I don’t think so. It’s a way of controlling the beast between your legs called desire—and anyone else who might come too close.

—Elizabeth Hess