



*separates the man from the horse*, 2015. Charcoal, wall.

All photos by Karen Asher.

*September 4 - October 12, 2015*

# Separates the man from the horse

**ESTHER  
SIMMONDS MACADAM**



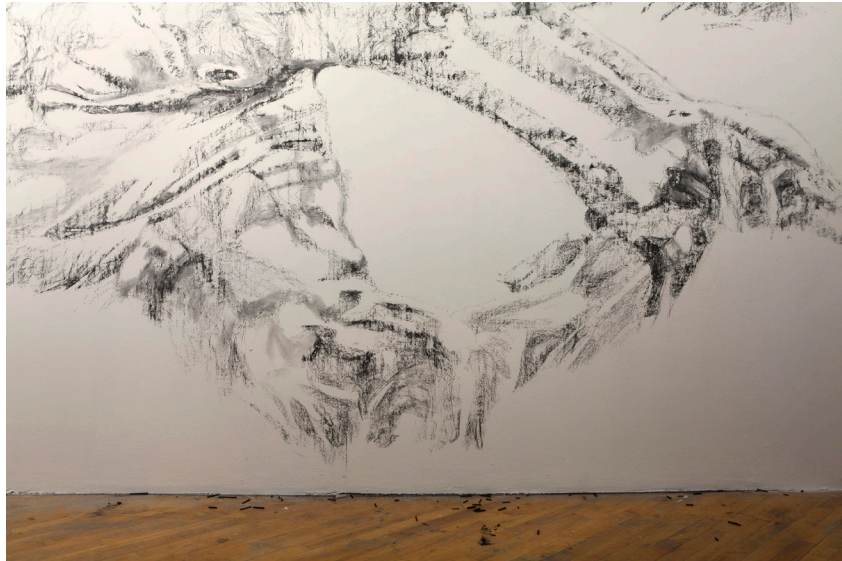
## Esther's Horse

*A response by*  
**Christine Kirouac**

**A**s much as Esther's horse embodies theoretical constructions connected to power, history and gender, it is equally an experience with the subject, material and manner in which it is rendered. MacAdam's exhibition is brave not only in her willingness to pose her horse in a position rarely allowed an audience, but also in her consent to reveal her own vulnerability as an artist. In this she sets up a dynamic where the viewer and the work have nowhere to hide, and it is this lack of a barrier between person and piece that is enticing and even a little dangerous.

The wall is lit by gallery spots, but I am searching for the light within the modeling that describes the details or weight of this horse. If light is what defines form, it is uncertain where Esther's horse is acquiring hers. The





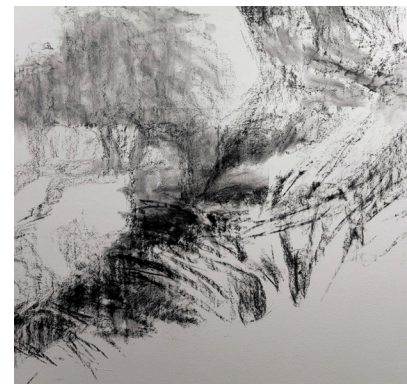
flatness and lack of varying values of the image suggests the artist revealed this giant fossil from within the gallery wall through some sort of rough mining process, as opposed to an in depth investigation of surface quality, texture, and muscles via charcoal.

MacAdam's challenges lie in the very foundations of drawing itself: scale, perspective, rendering, value, and the understanding of negative/positive space. Each decision is laid bare. Her horse lies pushed into the far corner, the head and chest at eye level; the drastically foreshortened anatomy creating an unexpectedly compact shape that dissolves back into white space. The drawing's dramatic scale causes the image to grow abstract. Viewed closely, MacAdam's marks—which have the mysterious quality of being made by an object rather than a drawing implement—break apart into a relief of scars and edge shifts reminiscent of rock faces. The marks made by MacAdam's

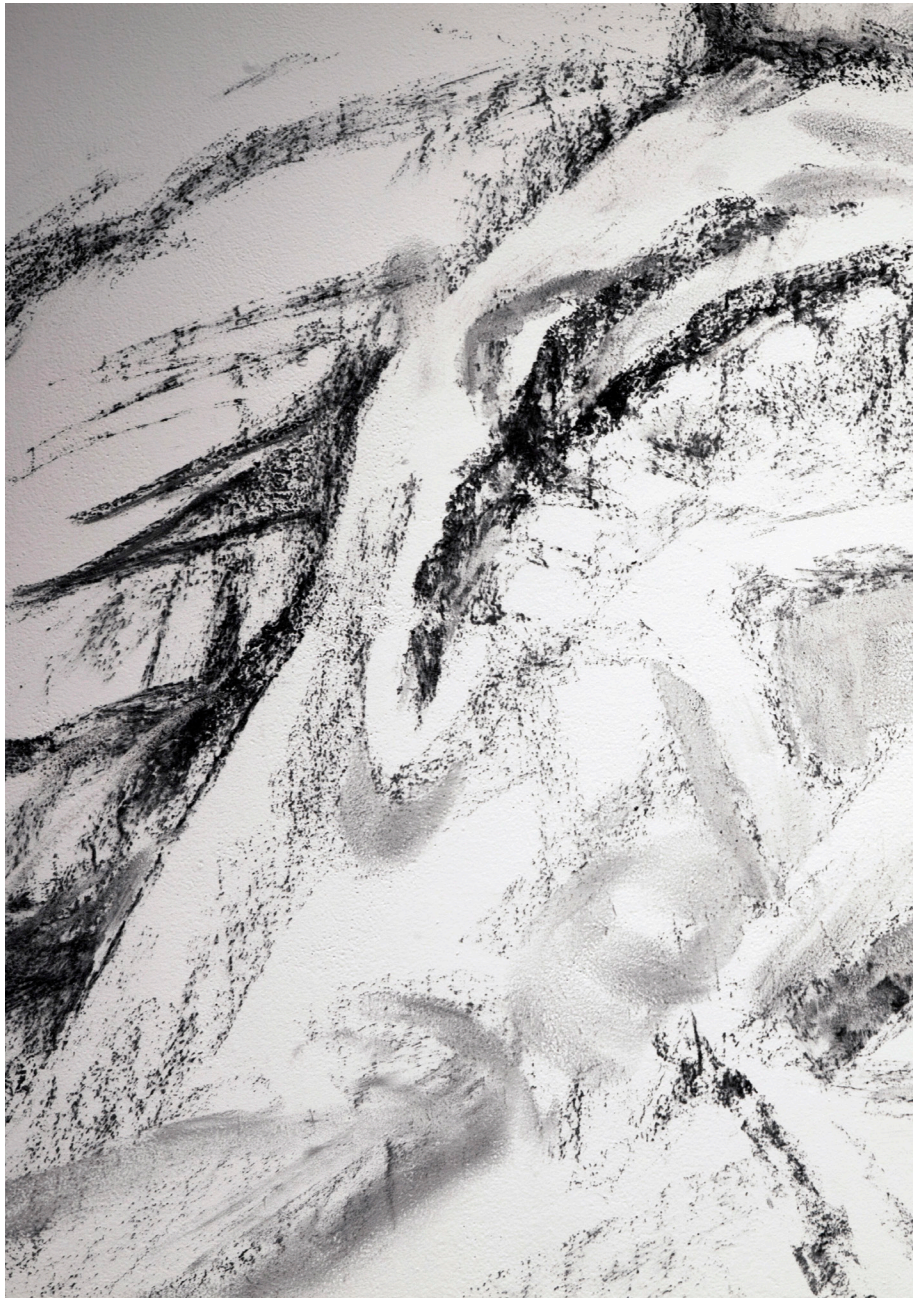
fragile vine charcoal make the form feel chiseled or excavated from the wall. The installation appears to be a series of territories, a landscape, as well as an animal.

One is encountering the qualities of sculpture as much as, if not more than, a representational drawing. Without anchors or contours to the shapes and lines, there is a solidity that suggests bulk through scratch marks echoing planes much like Degas' exquisite bronze horse, which I frequently visit at the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco. At only 12 inches high, *Horse Trotting* (1885) is frozen in full physicality, the available light gently affirming each sinewy muscle and tendon as a small shift in plane. Degas considered his small bronze horses as "sketches or drawings" rather than sculptures, and are far different from many of the representations of masculinity and equestrian culture within historical portraiture and traditional public sculptures that MacAdam cites when discussing her work.

One of MacAdam's previous artworks, *was it me?* (2012), is a tiny, brittle and ultimately gorgeous horse fashioned out of tin foil. Its front legs are elegantly drawn up towards its body, its back legs stretched out. There is a







beautiful relationship between the construction of tortured foil—scrunched and twisted—and the sculptural qualities of her drawing. Although the two pieces differ greatly in scale, their relationship is evident and powerful. My secret wish would be to see MacAdam use this petite sculpture as the source of her next wall drawing.

For his famous paintings of horses, the great 17th Century British painter, George Stubbs, employed an intense observational practice of his equine subject's anatomy using a ready supply of cadavers from a nearby tannery. He suspended these horses in various positions from hooks in the roof, then carefully 'peeled' the creatures, removing layers of skin then muscles until only their skeletons remained. At each stage he meticulously recorded his dissections from a range of different angles. Albeit extreme, Stubbs' process served him well, ultimately enabling him to express in oil what lay behind the 'effortlessness' of a horse's physicality. In contrast, there is something sad and unsettling about Esther's prostrate horse whose speed and movement has also perished. She has intentionally hobbled her horse. Horses often kneel to rest or sleep, their legs folded beneath them or to the side (actually appearing genteel or gracious); they rarely lie down if they are healthy. Many animals instinctively find a quiet place to privately draw their last breath, and the far corner in which Esther lays her horse seems to discourage prying eyes. However, its scale still dominates our visual landscape and there is little opportunity to escape for either the subject or the viewer. Her theoretical references are water tight, and we can all agree that history has loaded her horse with the burden of many layers of theory regarding European and North American colonization, gender politics, historical representations of equestrian culture, fantasy and mysticism—it is no wonder it wants to lie down. MacAdam insists her horse is "sleeping" and this supports her intention to unpack its heavy conceptual saddlebags, so to speak, but it could also be perceived as dead for the same reasons.







This drawing/installation was paradoxically inspired by MacAdam's lack of contact with horses and by an incident that involved her being close to them. Her drawing decisions reveal her own experiences and trepidations as much as the contradictions within the long history informing the symbolism of the horse. And personal experience is an unshakable influence when encountering art. My own mother grew up with horses in rural New Brunswick—one was named May (for her month of birth) and the other June (May's male colt born in his month). Their purpose was as practical as their names but they were loved, valued and cared for. June would wait spiritedly each day at the farm gate for my mother and her siblings to return from school. One day, while gallivanting in the back field, June stepped on a rusty nail and contracted lockjaw. He had to be put down, a devastating event for the family. It is these sentimental memories and stories that accompanied me into the gallery as opposed to colonial intimidation and patriarchal awe.

MacAdam's theoretical support system around meanings of the horse are tangibly present, but what intrigues me is her willingness to reveal vulnerabilities within herself and her practice. The questions I ask myself when formulating projects are often ones I am not always convinced I want the answers to, as they may expose unresolved problems. "Do my ideas live up to the physical work presented?" "Does the physical manifestation support the weight of theoretical interpretations?" Often these are questions an artist is afraid to answer for fear of facing the profundity of failing to marry medium, form and message. The exceptional role of Artist-Run Centres dedicated to emerging practices (like *aceartinc.*) is to provide time and opportunity for artists to play out this daunting process to whatever end. In this case we are witness to the artist's struggle to "gentle" her great beast, using only the most frail of dry media evidenced by the crumbled charcoal twigs on the floor along the length of the animal's torso. Vine charcoal is very delicate, breaking under the mildest pressure, even on paper let alone against rough drywall, but perhaps it is a premeditated burden of evidence that the artist leaves on the floor for us to consider or witness or disregard.







Critical Distance is a writing program of **aceartinc.** that encourages critical writing and dialogue about contemporary art. The program is an avenue for exploration by emerging and established artists and writers. Written for each exhibition mounted at **aceartinc.** these texts form the basis of our annual journal Paper Wait.

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Originally from Winnipeg, **Chrsitine Kirouac** is back from a seven-year stint in the United States as an exhibitor, professor, and serving as art fair director/curator. Her projects have shown in Europe, the US, Canada, Middle East, Asia and span a wide range of media supported by numerous grants. Kirouac explores the "performance" of belonging using personal revelation and social observation.

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