

The Firing and Misfiring of Human Powers

by Linda Weintraub

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By capitalizing on the uncanny resemblance between a horse head and a crude oil extraction pump, *The Rising Tide* by Jason deCaires Taylor evokes two mythic symbols of human might. Both horses and pumps have long, pendulum like necks that culminate in an ovoid head. This visual correspondence generated such slang terms as 'nodding donkey', 'oil horse', and 'pumpjack.' as they are sometimes known. It is augmented by a material convergence between 'horsepower' (mechanics) and 'firepower' (crude oil), conveying the ironic truth that a physical structure that evolved for quiet grazing on pristine planes has been engineered for the noisy lifting of submerged dirty oil. Their concordance is reinforced because they are also neighbors. Crude oil pumps have infiltrated the planes where horses graze. Taylor augments these correspondences by positioning all four horses that comprise this imposing life-sized sculpture so that they stand rooted in place, assuming the posture of crude oil pumps. The only implied movement is the parallel up-and-down motion of muscles and pistons.

In the 12,000 years since 'tool' referred to a stick used for prying roots, humanity has added great depositories of brawn power to boost its brain power. The horse contributed super-human strength, speed, and stamina to perform the work of humans. Meanwhile, until the mid 19th century, the impact of humanity's 'firepower' was constrained by the available stockpiles of flammable materials gathered on the planet's surface. People burned renewable fuels like oil wood, reeds, vegetable oils, and animal fats. All this changed with the advent of fossil fuels, withdrawals from the planet's ancient storehouse of fossil fuels underground. Humanity's ability to harness the forces of the planet escalated, along with its ability to desecrate the planet. Taylor juxtaposes the magnificent physiology of horsepower and the ungainly intrusion of the firepower of fossil fuels to issue a plea for constraint in humanity's assertion of power.

The Rising Tide expands its significance by juxtaposing human powers with overarching forces that humans cannot dictate. Twice-daily, the river's tides submerge and then reveal these sculptures. In this manner, these embodiments of human power are overwhelmed by the rhythmic crescendos of normal tidal fluctuations, but also by the threat of abnormal rising sea levels and threats of flooding.

Social forces are equally prominent. The four Shire horse-and-rider sculptures are situated at the epicenter of power wielded by politicians, financiers, and industrialists. Their location on the banks of the River Thames is directly opposite the Tate Britain. Lavish living quarters of multi-millionaires line the surrounding streets. Shell Oil headquarters are in close proximity. Most significantly, the Houses of Parliament are close enough to allow elected officials a full view of the consequences of ignoring impending climate change.

Two of the horses are ridden by men clad in business suits whose eyes are closed, evoking the complacency of consumers, the greed of industrialists, and the hubris of politicians. The

consequences of their pretensions suggest an unsettling forecast. Taylor states that the work poses two questions: "Who is in control?" and "Where are we heading?". He answers these questions with a bleak reference to the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, each foretelling a form of disaster: The work's title applies this well-known harbinger of the Last Judgment to a contemporary doomsday scenario. The Rising Tide warns of rising oceans, warming global temperatures, massive human displacement, and disastrous species extinctions

Still, the riders perched on the other two horses suggest these scenarios are not foreordained. Two boy riders offer hope. Their flexible postures suggest awakened ecological consciousness and the possibility of attending to the planet's fragility and the disruption of its unfolding rhythms.

In all these ways, The Rising Tide serves as a powerful emblem of humanity's precarious future.



Linda Weintraub is a curator, educator, artist, and author of several popular books about contemporary art. She has earned her reputation by making the outposts of vanguard art accessible to broad audiences. The current vanguard, she believes, is propelled by environmental consciousness that is not only the defining characteristic of contemporary manufacturing, architecture, science, ethics, politics, and philosophy, it is delineating contemporary art.

"TO LIFE! Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet" was preceded by the series, Avant-Guardians: Textlets in Art and Ecology (2007). It includes EcoCentric Topics: Pioneering Themes for Eco-Art; Cycle-Logical Art: Recycling Matters for Eco-Art; EnvironMentalities: Twenty-two Approaches to Eco-Art. Weintraub established Artnow Publications in order to apply environmental responsibility to the books' material production. Linda applies these environmental concerns to her personal life by managing a sustainable homestead where she practices permaculture.

Weintraub is also the author of In the Making: Creative Options for Contemporary Artists and Art on the Edge and Over: Searching for Art's Meaning in Contemporary Society. She edited ANIMAL. ANIMA. ANIMUS with Marketta Sepalla; served as the director of the Edith C. Blum Art Institute located on the Bard College campus where she originated fifty exhibitions and published over twenty catalogues; and held the position of Henry Luce Professor of Emerging Arts at Oberlin College.