

Spirited: Australia's Horse Story, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 11 September 2014 – 9 March 2015

Reviewed by Isa Menzies

Australian National University

<http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/spirited#bc=Home-spirited>

It is both a physical and a conceptual challenge to represent an animal – any animal – adequately in the museum. However horses are burdened with the additional cultural baggage of being viewed by many Australians as almost sacred, part of our national iconography. As I enter the exhibition, I find myself musing on whether – and how – these challenges will be addressed by the *Spirited* exhibition. ‘Australians have lived with, loved and exploited horses for more than 200 years’ begins the introductory text, and this reference to exploitation raises my hopes that *Spirited* will go beyond the usual celebratory narratives, and attempt a deeper and more nuanced exploration of horses in Australia.

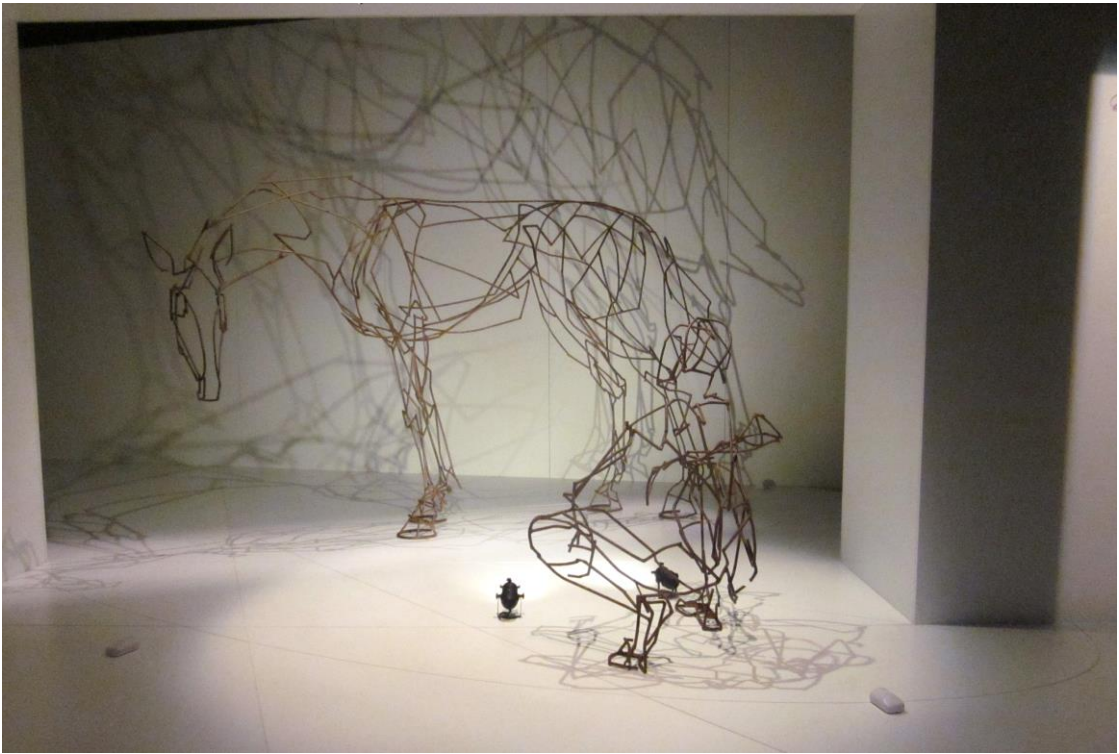
This hope is supported by the first exhibit, which addresses the dichotomous position of the brumby as both heritage icon and environmental pest. Unfortunately, the text panel acknowledging the challenging nature of this issue is somewhat overshadowed by the eye-catching footage, at almost-life-size, of brumbies galloping majestically (and at times in slow motion) over 15 large-format television screens.

The exhibition is organised thematically in a roughly chronological layout, which creates a coherent sense of the overall narrative. Themes include ‘On the Station’, ‘On the Farm’, ‘On the Battlefield’, and ‘After Death’. This last theme demonstrates the many uses for horse remains, both historical (for example, horse hair ligatures) and contemporary (such as the production of horse meat for human consumption). Objects include a horse hoof remade as an inkwell, inscribed with the words “‘Rainbow’ Died November 13th 1913’, and the cross-section of a chair padded with horse hair.



*Silver inkwell set into a horse's hoof, inscribed "'Rainbow", died November 13th 1913'.
National Museum of Australia. Photo: George Serras.*

The exhibition is strongest when horses (as opposed to the humans associated with them) are centrally positioned; for example, both 'On the Farm' and 'Through the City' ask the audience to consider how accommodating horses has physically influenced the layout of these places, such as Melbourne in the 1880s when the city was home to around 20,000 horses. Horse-human bonds are also addressed, most notably in the form of Harrie Fasher's life-sized sculpture depicting a horse and human in mutual contemplation.



'Silent Conversation'. Artist Harrie Fasher. National Museum of Australia. Photo: Isa Menzies.

Titled 'Silent Conversation', the work was commissioned by the National Museum, and is positioned at the centre of the gallery, functioning to reinforce the links between human and non-human. However, anthropocentric narratives are never far away, and occasionally eclipse the horse completely. The 'On the Station' exhibit, for instance, is largely taken up with the story of a local farming dynasty, the Faithfull family, and the exhibits showcasing equestrian competitions focus more on the human, rather than non-human, athletes.

On a more positive note, many of these anthropocentric exhibits incorporate alternatives to the discourses of white masculinity that traditionally dominate equestrian narratives in Australia. The exhibition includes stories and objects from twentieth-century female stockriders such as Vere Moon and Leona Lavell, and the record-setting show-ring jumper of the 1920s, Emilie Roach. Further, the pivotal role of Aboriginal horsemen and women in the pastoral industry is recognised and interpreted through a range of objects,

including nineteenth-century breastplates (a type of military gorget given by white settlers to particular Aboriginals, singled out for distinction), and an Akubra hat belonging to Luritja stockman Bruce Breden.

Spirited's animal-centric approach is most clearly evinced by the emphasis on equine welfare, incorporated into almost every exhibit – with one notable exception. The ‘At the Track’ exhibit remains conspicuously silent on the issue of racehorse welfare, despite having ample opportunities to draw visitor attention to the darker aspects of this sport. Jumps racing is mentioned, though its banning in all but two Australian states is attributed only to ‘safety concerns’, and there is no discussion of the controversial practice of two-year-old racing, though a 2012 Golden Slipper trophy and hat belonging to successful female trainer Gai Waterhouse are displayed.



Can of 'Horsielicious: the racing industry's retirement plan in a can', 2014. Donated by the Coalition for the Protection of Racehorses. National Museum of Australia.

Photo: Jason McCarthy.

Any content that may be construed as critical of horseracing is instead found in the ‘Body and Spirit’ showcase. This exhibit includes a tin of ‘Horselicious: the racing industry’s retirement plan in a can’, a mock product created by the Coalition for the Protection of Racehorses to raise awareness of the number of off-the-track thoroughbreds slaughtered each year (an object that has prompted complaints from the racing community¹).



Ward Young, Coalition for the Protection of Racehorses communications manager, at the Magic Millions sales and racing event in Brisbane on 9 January 2014. Courtesy: Ward Young.

¹ See guest post and comments, titled ‘What happens to all those racehorses?’ on the Museum’s People and the Environment blog, accessed 1 October 2014

<http://pateblog.nma.gov.au/2014/10/01/what-happens-to-all-those-racehorses/>

There is also a video featuring equine vet Professor Paul McGreevey discussing the impacts of the use of the whip on racehorses. McGreevey describes the use of the whip as ‘probably the most visible form of violence to animals’, and his findings are quite disturbing. These include that 83% of whip strikes left a visible indentation on the horse, while in 64% of strikes the knotted binding beyond the padded section of the whip also made contact with the horse.

McGreevey also features in another audio-visual component, where he elucidates on equitation science, a field which he has helped pioneer. This method emphasises ‘foundation training’, rather than ‘breaking in’, and the film shows McGreevey going through this process with a two-and-a-half-year-old filly. Notably, Mc Greevy’s reference to the filly as ‘only a baby’ creates a stark counterpoint to the practice of racing two-year olds.

Ultimately, an exhibition is about more than just intellectual content. It relies on good design to integrate key concepts with the objects on display, and in this respect *Spirited* is excellent. The emphasis on physicality and embodiment that the exhibition strives for is particularly evident in the sculptural horse ‘models’ created by Fasher. These have been used to mount saddles, harnesses, and riding gear, artfully revealing their intrinsic functionality and overcoming their status as otherwise lifeless museum objects. This is also true of the archival footage incorporated throughout the exhibition – grainy black-and-white projections effectively articulating the motions of farm equipment, carriages, and wagons.

The hands-on interactives interspersed throughout the gallery encourage a more embodied experience of the exhibition, inviting the visitor to touch the components of saddlery, smell samples of different horse feed, and try their hand at plaiting a horse’s mane and tail. There is also the small pile of preserved horse manure, tantalisingly positioned where successive waves of visiting school children can dare each other to touch it, squealing in delight and disgust when one of them inevitably does.

Spirited aims to challenge mainstream understandings of animal representation in the museum context by positioning horses as central to their own narratives. In this respect, the exhibition is most successful when considerations of the horse precede the human, such as in the 'In Body and Spirit' showcase. Though it does occasionally miss that mark, the attempt itself is noteworthy. While a greater level of curatorial courage in tackling the controversies of horse racing would have been appropriate, the inclusion of female and Aboriginal histories provide a refreshing change from the usual discourses of white masculinity that traditionally dominate equine narratives in Australia. Overall, the exhibition's emphasis on embodiment, and the strong design, combined with curatorial vision, delivers a show worth seeing.