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CALLAN CONTEMPORARY
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ARTHUR KERN

HORSES

OPENING RECEPTION: Saturday, March 5th, 6-8 PM

EXHIBITION DATES: March 5th - April 23rd, 2022



In his first commercial gallery exhibition in more than four decades, artist Arthur Kern presents a suite of hauntingly lyrical cast-resin sculptures, dazzling in their technical mastery and thematic sophistication. While Kern's subject matter has spanned a broad range over the course of his career, this exhibition gathers together his equestrian sculptures, a genre whose elemental forms recall Etruscan statuary, Greco-Roman bas-relief, and the modernist panache of Marino Marini—all channeled through Kern's profoundly individualistic sensibility. "There's such a history between humans and horses," he reflects. "Not only have they gotten us from one place to another, they've also worked our fields, fought our wars, and done so much of our work. There's a richness in that relationship." The exhibition's two life-sized works and many smaller pieces explore this symbiosis while encapsulating Kern's aesthetic, which curator Herman Mhire calls "at once poetic, sublime, disturbing, magnetic, and beautiful."

Born 90 years ago in New Orleans, the sculptor has a unique backstory, which has captured art-lovers' imaginations. After earning his B.F.A. and M.F.A. degrees in painting from Tulane University in the mid-1950s and studying privately at the McCrady Art School on Bourbon Street, he was featured in solo shows at Ruth White Gallery in New York City and was curated into a 1962 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Despite these successes, he found himself called by a different siren—sculpture—and in 1967 took the dramatic step of setting his remaining paintings ablaze in a bonfire, dedicating his remaining years to three-dimensional work.

He also radically distanced himself from the financial and social pressures of the art market, working alone in his studio off Tchoupitoulas Street and avoiding exhibiting for the better part of forty years. (Notable exceptions were his inclusion in the 1984 Louisiana World's Exhibition in New Orleans and a 1996 solo show at the Hilliard Art Museum, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.) Creating work solely for his own eyes allowed his artistic voice to develop with complete independence, organicism, and integrity. Still, his withdrawal from the art scene enveloped him in an aura of mystery, even as he "hid in plain sight," teaching painting and drawing at the University of Southwest Louisiana and Tulane from the late 1960s through the late 1990s.

In 2016 he reemerged with *Arthur Kern: The Surreal World of a Reclusive Sculptor* at Ogden Museum of Southern Art, curated by John Berendt, author of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. This revelatory show caused a sensation and earned praise in publications including *The New York Times* ("exquisite... surreal... striking..."), *The New York Review* ("...a mesmerizing show..."), and *The Advocate* ("...a thrilling sense of discovery... a singular artist whose work deserves to be much better known...") Critics were fascinated by his challenging symbolic imagery, unique materials, and time- and labor-intensive process of casting wax molds with a highly responsive polyester resin. This technique, which he adapted from the ancient lost-wax method of casting bronze, allows wax to be used much like clay, imparting a suppleness of expression that evokes Kern's favorite historical sculptor, Auguste Rodin. Chromatically, the equestrian series's intricately nuanced surfaces result from myriad layers of translucent lacquers, applied as a patina.

The sculptures to be presented at Callan Contemporary are one-of-a-kind, not editions, and range across the length of Kern's career. The smaller pieces are bravura variations on a single original form, their surfaces alternately textural or preternaturally smooth, like marble or alabaster. Although critics have placed these artworks in the lineages of Surrealism, postmodernism, and steampunk, the artist himself feels they spring from a syntax of "my own myths," which bubble forth from the unconscious. "More than one person has told me they think my work is about dichotomies," he relates, "and I tend to agree... Another thing I think influences my sculpture is philosophy, especially Zen Buddhism and the Existentialist idea that existence precedes thought. I feel like the sculpture is an idea that I create as I'm working on it. To have a fully conceived idea before I start a piece would seem wrong to me. I like to explore and be surprised by what I find along the way."

CALLAN CONTEMPORARY hours are Tuesday-Saturday, 10am – 5pm. For more information, please contact gallery owner Borislava Callan at Borislava@callancontemporary.com; Steven Callan at stevencallan@callancontemporary.com or TEL: 504.525.0518.