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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Susan Rothenberg
On Both Sides of My Line

Gray Chicago | 2044 West Carroll Avenue, Chicago
September 10 - October 9, 2021

Gray New York | 1018 Madison Avenue, New York
October 29 - December 10, 2021

richardgraygallery.com

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Gray is pleased to present *On Both Sides of My Line*, a solo exhibition celebrating the life and work of renowned American painter Susan Rothenberg (1945 – 2020) through key examples of her most iconic series: the profile horse paintings. Organized with the support of curator Michael Auping (formerly the Chief Curator of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth), and with loans from private collections and institutions, *On Both Sides of My Line* brings renewed focus to the artist's oeuvre presenting ten early examples from one of her most celebrated series. The exhibition will be on view at Gray Chicago from September 10 through October 9, 2021, and will travel to Gray New York where it will be on view from October 29 through December 10, 2021.

Created between 1974 and 1977, Rothenberg's profile horse paintings exemplify a shift in the artist's approach to abstraction through the introduction and exploration of figuration. Moving away from the influence of Abstract Expressionism, Rothenberg began this seminal series in response to the contemporary zeitgeist of the 1970s. With Color Field painting, Minimalism, performance, and neo-primitivism at the forefront, Rothenberg employed tactics from various schools to define her own pictorial language. "For all their apparent directness and simplicity, the early horse paintings were unique hybrids of their time," Auping ruminates in his catalogue essay. "Rothenberg was one of a number of women—Jackie Windsor and Nancy Graves were among them—who [were] intuitively defying the machine-made slickness and geometries of Minimalism with a more primitive ethos... [Rothenberg's] blunt, forceful depictions of horses confronted the pervasiveness of Minimalism and Color Field painting, which had cleansed themselves of figuration for two decades. These horses crossed a line."

During this formative period, the horse became Rothenberg's central instrument for exploring expressive gesture and developing her keen understanding of the picture plane. At once subtle in her monochromes and exacting in her compositions, Rothenberg vocalized her prime intent to push the limits of abstraction over rendering the subject's ethereal form, stating, "The horse was just something that happened on both sides of my line." Although Rothenberg's horses appear in a variety of formats – some painted as solitary subjects locked into place, while others are layered as if to suggest phases of motion – all possess a distinctive push-pull approach to abstraction. Rothenberg often bisected her canvases vertically or diagonally as a means to challenge form-to-ground, part-to-whole, and shape-to-edge relationships. "She almost always used a line to divide her horses in half, creating a horse in parts, the front and back end," Auping elaborates. "While the horse profile has figurized, as it were, the abstract space, the two [divided] planes have abstracted the horse. The horse is standing still, but strangely the whole picture seems to be gently moving and flickering on either

side of the vertical line.” Through experimentation and variation, the horse offered the artist a clear yet inscrutable silhouette on which to experiment with formal and conceptual techniques. Rothenberg’s early horses not only tested the limits of abstraction through figuration, scale, palette, and composition, but also through their seriality. “A true iconoclast, Rothenberg set out to find, as she put it, ‘my Jasper Johns Flag,’” says Paul Gray. “As with Giacometti’s intensely layered portraits, Rothenberg contained the remarkable duality of confidence and insecurity that, as with many truly great artists, contributes the tension needed to make paintings that cause us to question what they really mean.”

As is made evident by some of her earliest and most iconic works presented in *On Both Sides of My Line*, Rothenberg’s horse paintings are powerful statements that reverberate beyond their literal description. In the words of the artist, “I didn’t want the horse to be neutral. I wanted it to have more guts... The same way an abstract painter would want their gestures to say something about them or the world. It was never about making a pretty horse. It was something else.”

ABOUT SUSAN ROTHENBERG

Susan Rothenberg (1945-2020) was born in Buffalo, New York and received her BFA from Cornell University in 1967. Rothenberg rose to prominence in 1975 with her first New York solo exhibition at alternative art space 112 Greene Street. In 1978, she was included in *New Image Painting* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Though often associated with this series of work, Rothenberg only painted horses for a short time in her career. Through the 1980s, Rothenberg quickly moved on to explore other subjects including heads, hands and other fragments of the human form, which evolved into a series of figures in motion including dancers, vaulters, spinners and jugglers. Rothenberg lived and worked in New York for nearly 20 years until 1990 when she moved to New Mexico. Inspired by her new physical surroundings, Rothenberg’s later work drew upon imagery from her daily life in the New Mexico desert. Susan Rothenberg died on May 18, 2020, in New Mexico.

Rothenberg’s solo exhibitions include early presentations at Kunsthalle Basel (1981-82), the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (1982) and an exhibition organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art that traveled to seven institutions in the United States and abroad (1983-85). Later exhibitions include a retrospective organized by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo that traveled to the Hirshhorn Museum, The Saint Louis Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Seattle Art Museum, and the Dallas Museum of Art (1992-94); a survey at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Monterrey, Mexico (1996-97), at The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (1999); and an exhibition of drawings and prints at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University which traveled to the Contemporary Museum, Honolulu and the Museum

of Fine Arts, Santa Fe (1998-99). A survey exhibition was organized by Michael Auping, at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, and traveled to the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe and the Miami Art Museum (2009-11). Rothenberg’s work is in important public and private collections, including the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; the Hall Collection; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Tate, London; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

ABOUT MICHAEL AUPING

Contributing curator to the exhibition, *On Both Sides of My Line: Susan Rothenberg’s Early Horse Paintings*, Michael Auping has curated several solo exhibitions of Susan Rothenberg’s work, including her first museum exhibition in 1979 at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, and a touring retrospective which originated at the Albright Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, in 1992. Subsequently, as Chief Curator of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, he oversaw the acquisition of numerous paintings by Rothenberg, creating one of the finest collections of the artist’s work in public or private hands. Auping has also organized major exhibitions of the work of Jenny Holzer, Anselm Kiefer and Frank Stella.

RELATED PUBLICATION

Documenting this exhibition, Gray is pleased to release [On Both Sides of My Line: Susan Rothenberg’s Early Horse Paintings](#), an in-depth volume featuring 44 color illustrations, a foreword by artist Joan Jonas, an expansive text by curator and writer Michel Auping, and a transcribed conversation between Auping and artist Mary Heilmann. Offering a comprehensive record of Rothenberg’s early horse paintings, this publication chronicles the artworks on view in the exhibition alongside notable examples from museum collections.

Pictured: Susan Rothenberg, Layering, 1974-1976.

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