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STUDIO VISIT

In the Studio With Sarah Miska, the Painter Reexamining the “Horse Girl”

by **Stephanie Eckardt**
Photographs by Meltem Saricicek



For nearly the entirety of my hour-and-a-half Zoom with Sarah Miska, I have nearly as prominent a view of the artist as I do of what she candidly refers to as a horse’s ass. Elsewhere in the stable in northeast Los Angeles that she’s converted into a studio, there is a work in progress of a rider with a racing number pinned to her back; further afield, a closeup of a traditional equestrian hair net worn atop a sleek bun. For the past year or two, Miska has focused entirely on equestrian motifs, depicting closely cropped vignettes of the competitive horse-racing world that’s captivated her for as long as she can remember. Growing up, she was a stereotypical “horse girl,” she says, aspiring to own a stable and join the professionals’ ranks. She still loves horses, but these days, Miska is coming to terms with her mixed feelings about what has always been an upper-class, exclusive sport.

When Night Gallery, in Los Angeles, selected Miska as the first artist to exhibit at its new space in 2022, the 39-year-old was assisting other artists and getting accustomed to the “pretty gnarly” experience of being a mom. [The show](#) sold out on opening night, and Miska went on to her first art fair presentation at Night Gallery’s booth during the Dallas Art Fair. Now she is opening her second prominent solo show to date, at Friends Indeed gallery in San Francisco. The title, “Tidy,” is both a nod to the rigor of the riding world and the painstakingly meticulous line work that characterizes the paintings.

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Champion, Sarah Miska, 2022
Courtesy the Artist and Friends Indeed Gallery, San Francisco.
Photographed by Nik Massey.



Details of *Champion* (2022) by Sarah Miska. Courtesy the artist and Friends Indeed Gallery, San Francisco. Photographed by Nik Massey.

Miska was raised in Folsom, California, outside of Sacramento. “I grew up on Lisa Frank stickers and horse imagery,” she recalls. “My parents always let me be the little weirdo in the backyard. I was always very shy, very reserved, in my own head.” She used to imagine that a horse was galloping alongside her parents’ car on her way to school, and became obsessed with the idea of owning one of her own. When she was around 10 years old, Miska’s parents made her dreams come true, purchasing two “heavily discounted” (aka old and badly behaved) horses that she shared with her best friend. “We brushed them, braided their hair; we got to live our little fantasy for two years,” Miska recalls. “My parents are middle-class, and they were making shit happen, but then they just couldn't keep up with it.”

Miska studied at Laguna College of Art and Design, a small school she affectionately describes as quirky and weird: “It centered on the figurative, literally, so I just painted nude figures every day for four years.” She then earned her masters at ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, which counts Sterling Ruby, Diana Thater, and the late Mike Kelley among its alumni. Miska devoted herself to sculpture, quietly perfecting her painting skills on the side. “I think sculpture really informs my understanding of form,” she says, “and I like using lines to depict a form. My paintings are essentially just made up of lines—I always choose to paint something that’s going to have a lot of hair or fabric in it—not unlike pointillism.”

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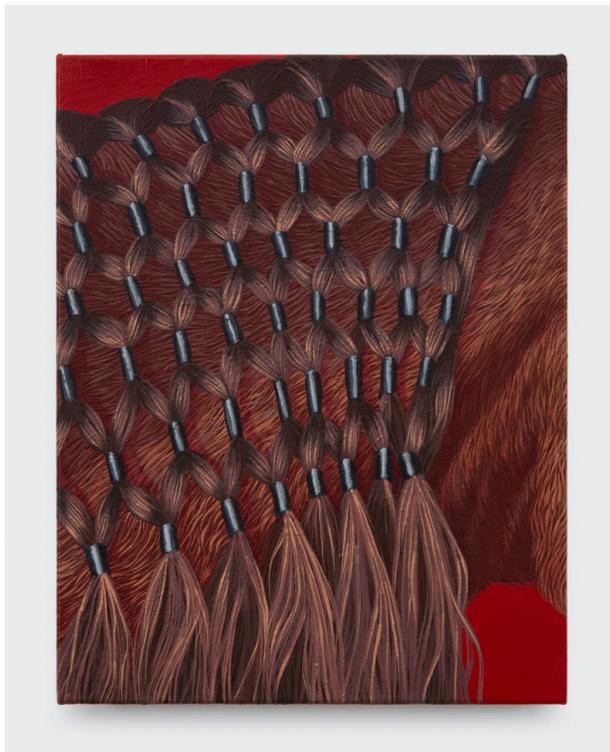
Pearl Hair Net (2022) by Sarah Miska, photographed in the artist's studio.



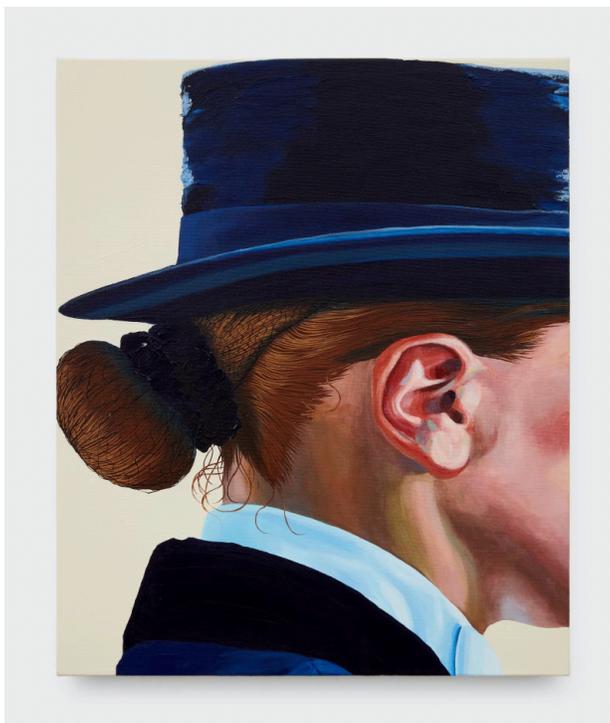
Even though it has only one layer of brush work, the painting of a horse's behind that has been the backdrop during our conversation could easily be mistaken for a photograph. The artist will go on to add five or so more layers of thin lines; no painting of hers is complete until the edges are perfectly clean. "Control" is the word I keep going back to," Miska says. "I control every element of the image." She spends most nights scrutinizing equine photos she finds on Google or takes herself at stables in L.A., carefully selecting crops that are so tight, they border on discomfiting. Part of it is because she doesn't want to steal a photographer's image, and part of it is because of Miska's deep reverence for the late Domenico Gnoli, who also painted rigorously detailed closeups of fabric and hair. In fact, she has a book at the ready by her laptop to show me some of Gnoli's most "epic" paintings.

The similarity between their work is striking, though unlike Gnoli, Miska works from an iPhone; and rather than zeroing in on the details in her source material, she chooses to invent her own. It's not lost on Miska that there's an unmistakable parallel between her approach to painting and the rigors of the sport she captures: "Equestrian riding has everything to do with control, both of yourself and movement. It's truly all about presentation—just this perfect, precise thing." And behind the scenes, it can often be far from glamorous. Miska's paintings of manure and urine bags, as well as the close crops of horses' behinds, are partly a nod to the stable hands who do the labor that allows the showjumpers to appear without flaws. The images stand in stark contrast to those of the riders' neat jackets and the riders and horses' perfectly styled hair.

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Sarah Miska, *Diamond Braid*, 2022.
Courtesy the Artist and Friends Indeed Gallery, San Francisco. Photographed by Nik Massey.



Sarah Miska, *Blue Hair Net*, 2022
Courtesy the Artist and Friends Indeed Gallery, San Francisco. Photographed by Nik Massey.

Right around the time when Miska graduated from grad school, in 2014, her mother, who has since passed away, fell ill with brain cancer. The hair loss that accompanied her mother's chemotherapy treatments prompted the artist to start thinking about hair, which is now a defining feature of her work. "It was so much a part of her identity," Miska says of her mother. "She got a full wig that looked amazing on her, and I made an art piece out of it when she finally grew all her hair back. She thought it was hilarious—because I turned it into a merkin." Miska now regards the work as "such a grad school piece—so bad," but in retrospect, the cheekily titled *Mama's Wig* was a hint of what was to come. "I love the idea of this unruly thing being controlled," she says, as she discusses how deeply hair is connected to identity. "We're always trying to tame our hair or maintain our hair, and I've always been interested in that."

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Miska's next solo exhibition, at Lyles & King in New York, slated for October, will also center on horses, this time with a focus on the tail ribbons that are color coded to signal a horse's temperament or propensity to kick, and can serve as warning signs for anyone around them. "It's just a fascinating sport, and I'm going to keep painting about it until I grow weary of it," she says. And yet, Miska hasn't gotten back in the saddle since she was a tween, and the more she immerses herself in equestrianism from afar, the more she's starting to feel like a voyeur. That may change soon; she's hoping to go trail riding in the near future. But resuming lessons is off the table. "I don't want to relive those traumas," she jokes, noting that riding can be physically painful. For now, she's sticking with the motorcycle that she and her husband have christened "the iron horse."

