

A Magnificent Obsession

British Sculptor Nic Fiddian-Green's 25-year fascination with the equine form

By **ANDREW MCKIE**

Hippomania may not be a common word, but it is not an uncommon phenomenon in the English countryside. Though not quite to the level evident at, say, Newmarket, the home of racing, there are ample indications of it near Guildford in Surrey, an area to which the dual adjectives "leafy" and "affluent" tend to be applied. They go together, since land and money are the basic requirements for keeping horses.



Andrew Testa/Panos for The Wall Street Journal

Nic Fiddian-Green in his studio

It is here, on a hilltop reached by roads that require the driver to back up or mount the verge to allow vehicles traveling in the opposite direction past (but

which seem not to deter the locals from traveling at imprudent speeds), that the sculptor Nic Fiddian-Green lives and works.

Despite the surrounding fields and paddocks, there is not much of the bucolic in the approach to his studio, which resembles a light industrial unit surrounded by piles of rubble, Land Rovers and heavy machinery in varying states of repair; a lot of noise and dust are billowing from the entrance. Their source is the artist, three meters above me on an improvised platform at the front of a fork-lift truck, using a handheld sander to smooth a colossal section of a fiberglass model. He looks like a welder who has bathed in flour.

He is working on an enormous horse's head, the subject to which Mr. Fiddian-Green has devoted himself obsessively, and almost exclusively, for more than a quarter of a century. He was responsible for the 10-meter tall, 18-ton bronze of a horse's head at Marble Arch in the center of London. Last summer, another of his monumental works, "Artemis," was placed on the South Downs and then on the members' lawn at Goodwood for its racing festival; while "Still Water," a piece similar to that at Marble Arch, was installed in front of the main grandstand for Royal Ascot, which starts next week.

Wild Horses



Andrew Testa/Panos for The Wall Street Journal

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It's a surprise, then, when he declares that he is not particularly interested in horses. It is as if Andy Warhol had expressed his abhorrence of canned soup, or Claude Monet had admitted that water lilies left him cold.

"We do have horses, actually, but I'm not much of a horseman," Mr. Fiddian-Green explains, as he tries to get the kettle to work. "It's to do with this particular form. At art college in Chelsea, I had no thought of sculpting; I was trying to paint. But one day we were given this lump of clay; then we were told to go to the British Museum and copy something. That's been it ever since, really."

What seized his imagination was the head of a horse of Selene, the Moon goddess, carved in the fifth century B.C. It is one of the most celebrated of the Elgin Marbles, fragments from the east pediment of the Parthenon, and in it the artist seems to have found a connection with the classical tradition.

This devotion to the Platonic ideal of the horse's head, rather than to representations of, for example, individual racehorses, readily distinguishes his sculptures from the rather pedestrian, often slightly kitsch, bronzes so often found decorating the houses of "horsey" people. And although Mr. Fiddian-Green's work is collected by a number of those connected with the world of racing, as well as the rich and famous from other spheres, he has eschewed an obvious, and potentially highly lucrative, line of work.

"I've quite often been asked to do portraits of particular horses, but I tend to resist that," he says, wandering around the back room of his studio, which is littered with maquettes, plaster casts, photographs and catalogues, all under a fine patina of dust. "Technically, I can do it, I suppose, but I don't find it very satisfactory. The thing is that for me it's not about the horse, it's about the shape, the form, the finish..." He tails off. "I don't know what it's about, really."

He finds what he has been looking for, a photograph of Selene's horse. Mr. Fiddian-Green, who seems always in motion and has a remarkably wide range of enthusiasms, flits from subject to subject. In a couple of hours we touch on, amongst much else, the iconography of the Netherlandish Renaissance, Spitfires, the curves of the human torso, the advantages and disadvantages of different media, the finishes that can be obtained from various methods by chemical treatment, numerous theories of art, self-portraiture and Rudolph Nureyev's foot. But all are connected, in one way or another, with the idea of the horse's head.

As we talk, Mr. Fiddian-Green continues to make adjustments, nailing blocks of foam to extend the base of the neck of his giant sculpture. It will later be clad in lead, dismantled and, next week, reassembled at the Sladmore Gallery

in Jermyn Street in central London. Smaller works will be exhibited at the gallery's other site at Bruton Street nearby.

His insistence on using the techniques of antiquity—he still scales up from small clay models and, when his work is cast, the foundry uses the *cire perdue* method—result in work that is completely contemporary, yet also somehow fragments that could have come from any point in the history of Western art. "Jay Jopling [the dealer who represents many contemporary British artists] recently encouraged me to try something different," says Mr. Fiddian-Green. "But I always find something different in this."

If not hippomania, this verges on monomania. But the more one looks at the curves, the multitude of facets and angles in these pieces, the more one begins to think he has a point, and to see how one subject has kept him enthralled for so long.

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