



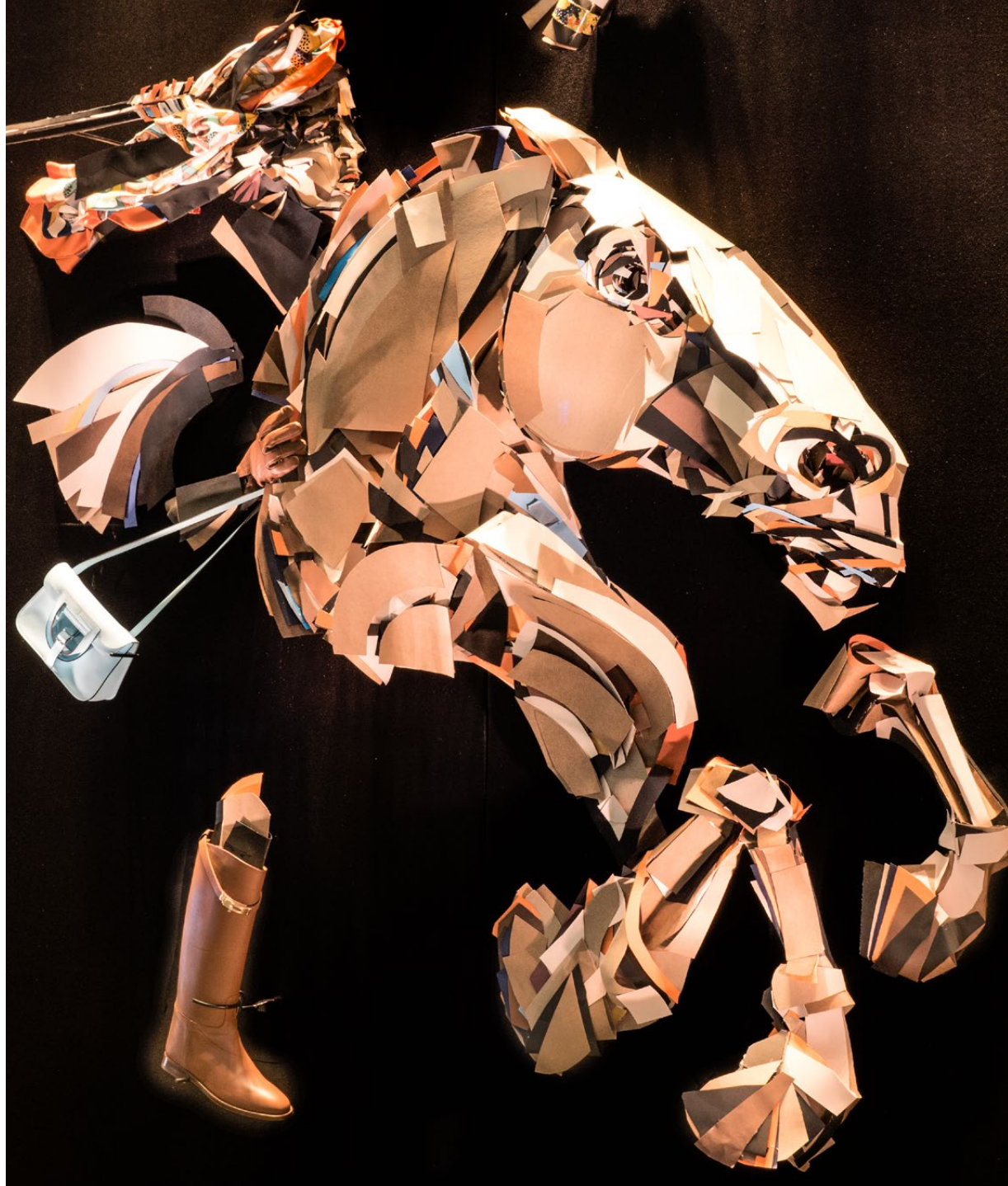
BEAUTY & THE BEASTS

ARTIST ANNA-WILI HIGHFIELD HAS ENJOYED A STELLAR PRACTICE FROM HER SYDNEY STUDIO FOR THE PAST DECADE. FROM ART-MAKING HER WAY THROUGH A 200-PERSON WAITING LIST TO LUXURY FASHION COLLABORATIONS AND HER FIRST SOLO SHOW IN NEW YORK, THIS MOTHER OF TWO IS SOARING TO THE HEIGHTS OF CREATIVE ACCOMPLISHMENT WITH ALL THE SPIRIT AND GRACE OF HER SOUGHT-AFTER ANIMAL FORMS, AS CECILY-ANNA BENNETT DISCOVERS.

Pablo Picasso said, "All children are artists, the problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up." It's something that's never troubled internationally celebrated Sydney-based artist Anna-Wili Highfield, whose desire to create art has evolved into a successful career.

Highfield's sculptures made of paper-like cotton rag are painted, ripped and sewn together to create creatures bursting with spirit. They're at once delicate and powerful, lifelike and ethereal, evoking the immediate affinity that exists between humans and animals.

It's no surprise that collectors the world over are clamouring to acquire her works.



Going with the flow

The daughter of a puppeteer, Highfield grew up surrounded by creativity. “I was dyslexic, late to read and write and I could never do maths, so art is what I was encouraged to do. I was lucky that I was encouraged in that; it made me confident [in my ability] from an early age.”

After studying painting at Sydney’s National Art School and finding work as a scenic artist for Opera Australia, Highfield became pregnant with her first child and went on maternity leave. She’d assumed she’d go back to her job, but fate had other ideas. “Friends of mine have a second-hand clothing store

in Stanmore and they asked me to create a piece for their window, so I made this huge copper-pipe horse for them. They have these great nights where they sell clothes, have a DJ and a band, and I went along with my friend [Australian fashion designer] Bianca Spender. Bianca asked if the horse was for sale. I was like, ‘I don’t know,’ and she was like, ‘Can I buy it?’ So she bought it then and there, and commissioned another piece for her store in Paddington,” says Highfield.

“I started getting all these emails — people would go into the store, ask about the sculpture and get my email address. I got a website. ►

From top left: Anna-Wili Highfield in her Sydney studio, courtesy of Robin Hearfield; and One of Highfield’s sculptures for Hermès at Sydney Airport, courtesy of Hugh Hamilton.

ANNA - WIL HIGHFIELD'S INSIGHTS

On creating success

"You can't wait for things to happen; you have to make it happen. I always quote this Picasso line I love, which is, 'When inspiration strikes I want it to find me working.'"

On the power of music

"I've listened to Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds since I was 16 and recently I've been listening to a whole lot of Ennio Morricone, who composed music for spaghetti westerns. He has that mix of virtuosity and playfulness. Film soundtracks allow for a visual component that allows me to take that drama and energy from the music into my work."

On her art-making process

"I always have an idea of what I'll make but I like the material I'm using to dictate the forms. I like materials that have a bit of resistance to them; that have their own push and pull. I never draw beforehand because there's no point, it's not what I'll make in the end."

On motherhood and art

"As a mother, so much is given to your children; you've got all that burning stuff that's hard to find an outlet for. I'm lucky: I've been able to channel all of that into my work – my frustrations, energy and all my desires. It makes my work better because there's a lot of that internal life in it."



It was a time when the internet was really flourishing and people were sharing images. I remember going, 'Oh my god, I think I've gone viral!' All of a sudden, I was booked out with commissions and it went crazy. I had a waiting list of 200 people," she says.

Highfield's cousin stepped in and offered to manage her admin – not a moment too soon. "I was standing in Marrickville with my baby when my cousin called to say, 'You have about three million emails from *The New York Times* asking why you're not getting back to them.'"

Collaboration with the universe

"You could call it a defining moment. Since then, I've just worked through it; I've sustained being a mother and a full-time working artist. I have clients dotted around the world, which means I've been able to sustain a practice for the last 10 years through international interest," she says. "I've had some really wonderful collectors who've been following my work from the beginning. There's a collector in Melbourne who has my work next to a Tracey Emin. It's wonderful that a proper collector takes me seriously enough to present me in that way."

And collectors aren't the only ones who've sat up and taken notice. Highfield has been approached by – and has collaborated with – some of the world's most luxurious fashion brands. "In 2009 I did a collaboration with Anthropologie in New York, and for the last nine years I've worked with Hermès," she says. "I've done windows for them all around Australia – in Melbourne, Brisbane, Sydney and the Gold Coast. It's a really wonderful collaborative relationship."

Next stop is *Spirit Faces*, Highfield's first mixed-media solo show, which "gathers a celebratory melange of animals, body parts, and self-portraits." Curated by the Olsen Gruen gallery in New York, it's a very different experience for Highfield, who has been working solely by commission for the past decade; less a collaboration with a specific client, more a collaboration with the universe.

Channelling wild spirits

Highfield's fascination with the animal world stems from a deep and long-lasting fascination. "I've always thought animal representation feels more immediate, as a kind of reference to spirit – a sacred spirit that humans relate to – than another human. An animal really references spirits that we know, like wolves are wily and parrots are humorous. Horses are everything we want to be – they're dignified and graceful, gentle but powerful. I feel like whatever animal I make, I'm channelling that side of myself. In this show there are also self-portraits, but I address them in the same way: as spirits we can all relate to."

Her materials have also evolved – from 'paper' and copper pipe to a tactile juxtaposition of semiprecious stones, man-made materials and found objects from nature. "It started with brass sheets and I also use spray paint, chain mail, feathers and shells, onyx and freshwater pearls – all these relaxed but also luxe materials, with this rock'n'roll spattering and spray-painting to give a softness to the hard edges," she says.

So where to for Highfield after the anticipation of her solo exhibition? "I'd love to make some public art – big sculptures. I'd also love to have more gallery shows now because my work is challenged by that, which is what I need," she says. "This feels like the summit I have to look out over and I'll know what's next when I get to the top." 🍷



From top left: Detail shot of one of Highfield's entrancing sculptures from her recent *Spirit Faces* exhibition; and An elegant, intricately crafted bird, also from *Spirit Faces*, both photographs courtesy of Silversalt Photography.