

BALOSSI

in clay

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Inside the huge courts of the Condado Convention Center, Manos Gallery is holding a collective exhibition, "Local Reductions" which are small ceramic works, and an exhibition of beautiful paleolithic horses and female goddesses by sculptor John Balossi who uses clay architectonically.

Balossi used to be a god of metal, using hammer and fire in his iron and aluminum sculpture; now he cuts, pushes and pulls clay slabs and fires them for his sculpture while the poor metals in his workshop glumly develop an inferiority complex. Some are rebellious—his life may be in danger from them—but he can't help himself; he's gone with clay. As can be quickly seen by the amount of work on display: 95 of the 130 pieces he has produced this year.

"I haven't touched metal or canvas and paint in seven months," he says, as if now at 46 he has fallen in love again. "I have touched only clay. Clay is primeval, out of this earth, so alive, so much out there. Even under your fingernails, it's not dirty but earthy. I use the greatest tool there is, the fingers, directly, without any extensions or tools."

When I laugh at his new-found love at his age, he laughs, "Maybe I am trying to come back to earth, return to Mother Earth, ashes to ashes. But actually, I believe with Clive Bell that the primeval forces including erotic energies are behind the beginning of all great art and art movements, and I find clay is quite primeval to touch. My first touch of clay gave me a strange feeling, it was so liquid. I was used to metals. They are hard, dry and strong, not sticky at all as clay is. Aluminum is so nice and clean, especially after I make it go through the black smokes and smoots of fire. Clay was initially wet, slimy, a little disagreeable."

"But you were bewitched by the Manos people, I'll bet."

"Yes, I was. Suarez of the clay-people invited me last March, gave me a lump of clay."

"Didn't you have it analyzed for potions of bewitchment? Serves you right."

"They must have charged it with tremendously potent medicines, and since they asked me to visit them weekly in Caparra, they recharged and recharged the energy. But I am glad."

So, he is gone beyond recall. Let that be a warning to you. If ever you are offered a clay lump, let it be exorcised first or you too will be gone.

"I am glad," Balossi said, "be-

cause clay allows me to find forms as I go. I start with no final vision of the work, just a general idea. Does the work make me or do I make the work? There's a free interplay, a process of give and take. It's the same with the upbringing of my children. They are malleable as clay but I don't push my designs on them too strongly. They have to develop their own design, follow their own duffers and necessarily mine. I don't push art materials at them but I let them see that I work hard and steadfastly, happy with what I am doing as an artist and a teacher."

I point out to Balossi that on bending some of the large single slabs of clay from which he makes the complete figures in the exhibit, the clay did not crack but did fissure slightly, especially on the backs, of a few of the horses. Didn't he feel impelled to smooth the clay over?

"Those fissures are left as they came out, true to the material," Balossi said. "When you love sculpted shapes as you do your children, you love them as their shapes are, naked. You don't want to change them egotistically or gloss over their mistakes. If you gloss over honest fissures in the clay, the sculpture may be weakened. If you overprotect your children, they will expect coupons or to be suckled for life, to be glossed over for life. We have enough of that in Puerto Rico already."

"Architectonic means that these sculptures resemble architectural work in structure, texture and other details. They are of, or pertaining to, a master builder, which Balossi, of Italian descent, is. All Italians seem to take to building. Architectonic also relates to the systematizing of knowledge, which Balossi does as a teacher. When you see his sculptures here, you immediately know that they are made from a single slab of clay curved over, with holes cut out here and there, as in surgery. How about those holes, Balossi?"

"One hole at least, or rather empty space, is necessary in my works," he answers, "to remind the viewer of the existence of this very negative space. The conscience of positive and negative shapes and spaces is necessary for buoyancy and flotation, for liberty. It is not, as in Swiss cheese, produced by gasses. It is a matter of my personality. A release from pressures. Another reason is economy of weight, materials and money. Steel is very high priced, so I build open shapes with it. Another reason, in the case of clay, is a playful or loving pinch, like a loving bite of an ear."

Balossi's horses and goddesses on display can no longer be pinched for the clay is hardened by fire but you can spank or caress them.

"Balossi, these are paleolithic images. Remember those horses and goddesses sculpted and painted on clay in those caves? You are a sham or priest of the tribe, why haven't you done bison and why did you go into horse shapes?"

"I used to ride myself," Balossi said. "Horses are very noble animals. But it started earlier than that. I remember my father when I was about to 9 years old. He was in the Italian cavalry in the Italo-Turkish war and for 9 years roamed all over Africa. He drew horses and zebras for me, not to make me an artist but as a soldier reporting on what he had seen. He also used to talk about the Buffalo Bill show he had seen in San Francisco around the 1906 earthquake. Also, he had seen Indians on horseback in other places. So I inherited those patriarchal values."

"But I didn't invent them. Imagine, at that time women couldn't even inherit property in Italy and they had to change family name as soon as they married. But I do like the idea of Italy as a place to come from."

"I went to Italy in 1964, and called my cousin Hettore who had written a book on art criticism, 'Neonato, or Art as Resistance.' We had never met but he recognized me immediately at the Genoa railway stations. We looked so much alike."

At his home, his mother kissed me saying, You look so much like your father, Francesco. Welcome home! They gave me my father's letters to them. I read them even now. I guess blood does tell. But here I am, and in the Americas. That too was in father's blood, in many an Italian's blood."

Balossi had shown me the sculptures in the show while they were still in his work space, a high metal shed on Barbosa Avenue near the ROTC buildings. In August 1976, the shed was the site of a show of the collective works of Rafael Rivera Garcia (who was then doing wooden "santos"), Augusto Marin, Alfredo Cubina, and Balossi's paintings and small sculptures. It was quite an occasion: 400 people went to see the show.

"The Four Horsemen" I called the review I wrote for the San Juan STAR. But I never finished it, perhaps because the idea of people on horseback should be a thing of the past.

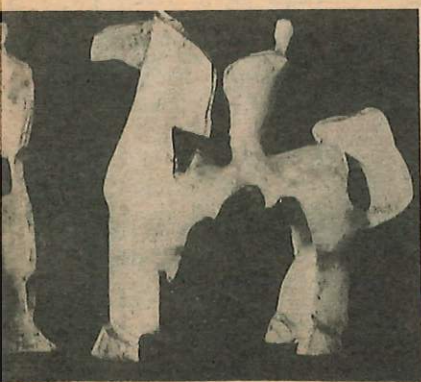
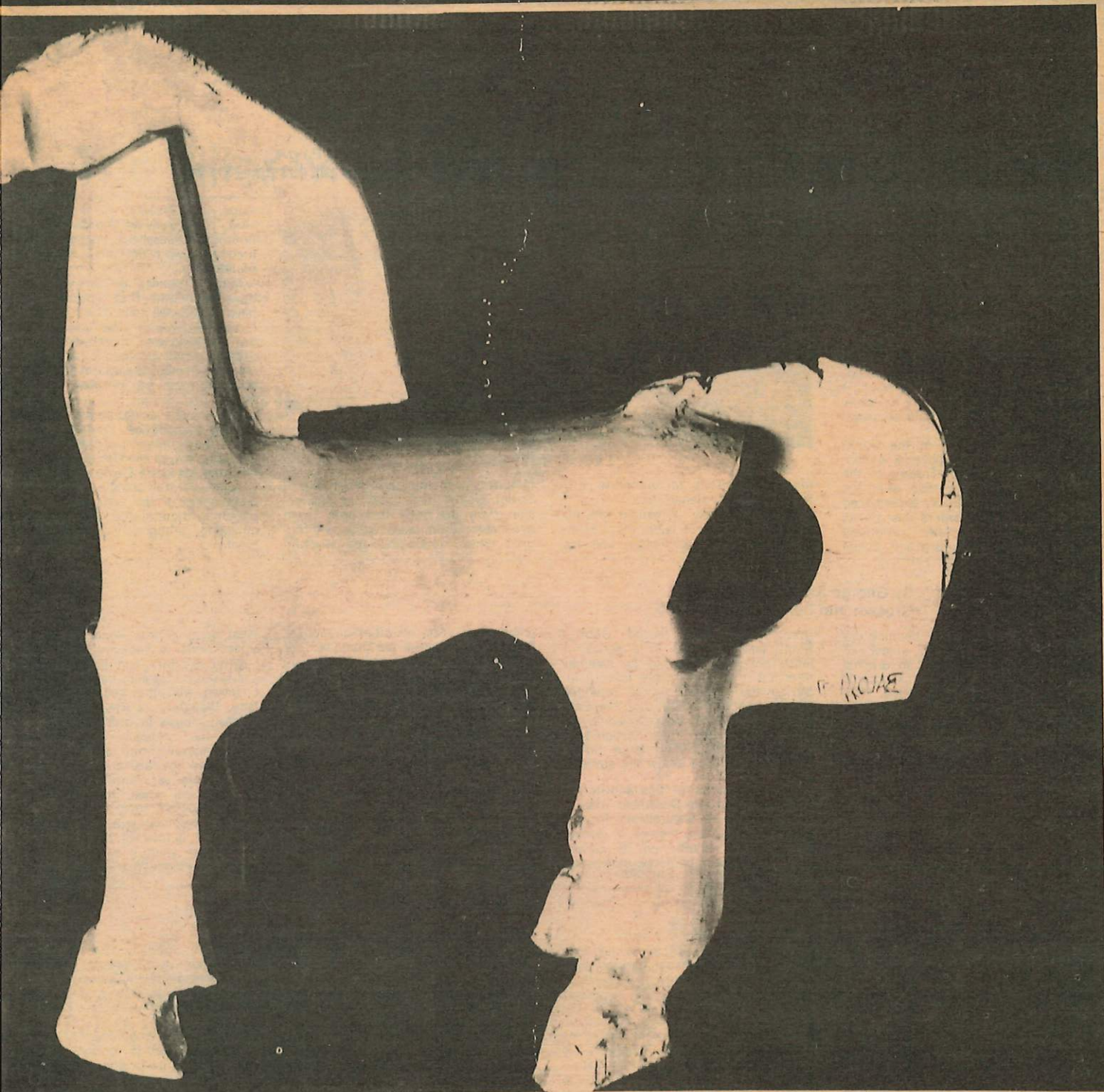
But Balossi's timeless horses and riders, including his small painted plaques, are very much here and now. They are archetypes.

"Caballo" (red clay, 18" high)



"Neighing Horse" (raku)

"Grup



u, 17" high)



"Figura" (detail, raku, 27" high)



"Caballo" (raku, 13½" high)



"Caballo" (raku, 22½" high)