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EXHIBIT REVIEW

COURTESY OF CHARLOTTE DUMAS AND GALERIE PAUL ANDRIESSE, AMSTERDAM/JULIE SAUL GALLERY, NEW YORK

Art challenges unbridled emotion

Charlotte Dumas's photos examine our complex bonds with animals

END OF THE DAY: **The artist's subjects include horses at Arlington Cemetery, at rest after pulling funeral caissons.**

BY PHILIP KENNICOTT

One of the saddest and shortest of Anton Chekhov's short stories, "Misery," is about a horse-sledge driver in St. Petersburg who tries, with no luck, to engage his passengers in conversation. One by one they enter his cab, and one by one they fail to see his humanity, his suffering, his desperate need to talk. And so, at the end of the day, he unhitches his horse, puts her to stable and begins to talk to the only ears that listen.

"That's how it is, old girl," he says, telling his horse about the death of his son. "Now suppose you had a little colt, and you were own mother to that little colt . . . and all at once that

IMAGES COURTESY OF CHARLOTTE DUMAS AND GALERIE PAUL ANDRIESSE, AMSTERDAM/JULIE SAUL GALLERY, NEW YORK

CREATURE COMFORTS: The Corcoran exhibit includes a series of specially commissioned photos of the horses used in funerals at Arlington National Cemetery and older photos of wolves, racehorses and stray dogs. It is the first solo exhibit that Dutch photographer Charlotte Dumas has had in the United States. She probes not only the relationships of humans and animals but also the conventions of portraiture.

same little colt went and died. … You'd be sorry, wouldn't you?"

There is something tremendously sad at the core of our relationship with the animals that serve us or keep us company. They are mute, we cannot thank them, and we can never really know whether there is any kind of reciprocity of the love we feel for them.

Charlotte Dumas's photographs of the horses that draw the funeral caissons at Arlington National Cemetery have some of the same intense emotionality as Chekhov's story. On display at the Corcoran Gallery through Oct. 28, "Charlotte Dumas: Anima" is the Dutch artist's first solo exhibition in the United States, and perhaps because the subject is so local and so fraught with emotion, her images push at the boundaries of sentimentality. The large white horses are seen against inky backgrounds, captured at the end of a day pulling coffins, and the photographer depicts them almost at the point of lapsing into sleep.

One image, "Peter," shows the beast with his nose just touching the ground, his front legs tucked under his body. He looks as if he is praying. "Amos" captures the head of another animal from the side, with one eye facing the viewer, filled with what seems to be sadness. In "Repose," the horse is on the ground, its head facing the viewer, its entire body a study in exhaustion.

Dumas has done everything possible to photograph the horses in the liminal state between wakefulness and sleep, so the suggestion of fatigue may have nothing to do with work or overwork. Rather, it's a strategy for heightening their vulnerability, a dreamlike suggestion of death as they pass out of consciousness and into a defenseless but restorative oblivion. Without the wall text to explain the photographs, one might well think these horses are dying, rather than relaxing after human burial rites.

It is almost too much, almost cheap, like the little lambs that used to be carved atop the headstones of dead children. Grief is so potent, so universally felt, that artists risk exploitation anytime they tread this ground. But Dumas's photographs challenge the viewer to think about our anthropomorphizing of animals and the conventions of portraiture. Rationally, we know that these animals' lives revolve around hay, oats, water, sleep and the repetitive (and to them utterly meaningless) task of pulling heavy objects. If they are aware of the human grief all around them, it is in a very minimal, impressionistic way, rather like dogs may sense you've had a bad day.

Yet the beauty with which they have been photographed, the way in which they seem to emerge from darkness into light and the canny decision to capture them as they fall asleep all contrive to make us believe they are feeling what we would feel if we had to do the work they do. Just as human portraiture often is carefully constructed to be an analogy for religious suffering, Dumas's horse portraits invite you to believe that these animals are suffering for us. Fortunately, they also invite you to work past that conceit, to put the horses back into the category of animal.

In several cases, Dumas gives us only part of the animal, as in "Rise," in which we see the back and neck, or "Middle," in which we view part of the torso. The latter image isn't obviously of a horse: It could almost be a carcass. By juxtaposing these photographs with ones that invite a more childlike connection — simple adoration of the horse as human proxy — Dumas emphasizes the complex middle ground that animals occupy, more than brute but less than human. And that allows her images to float free of the purely human, grief-laden associations of their work at the cemetery.

The Arlington series was specially commissioned by the Corcoran and involved repeat visits by the photographer to Washington. It is part of a larger overview of Dumas's work that also includes a 2005 series devoted to wolves ("Reverie"), a 2006 series about racehorses ("Palermo 7") and a 2008 series depicting stray dogs. The photographs invite and resist an immediate emotional response before resolving into something more abstract: studies in how small details

of portraiture affect the impact. In her images of racehorses, one is struck by how "dehumanizing" it is to wear things on the face. The less gear the horses have on or around their heads, the more they seem to emerge with dignity and individuality, echoing the way uniforms (especially service uniforms) often diminish the dignity of people wearing them.

The stray-dog series, shot in Palermo, Italy, pushes many of the same buttons as the horses in "Anima." The special bond of dogs to humans, by now far more familiar to most people than the special bond we once felt to our horses, is easy to exploit. Dumas seems self-conscious about that danger in many of these images, which often present their subjects as if detached, indifferent to their surroundings, even haughty. In "Nivero, Palermo, Sicily," a black dog is draped over the stone steps of an old building, alert but lazy, holding his turf with something like condescension. Not all of the dogs look so well-fed and robust. The sadder images in this series will pierce even the most self-disciplined dog lover.

That seems to be the point of this work, forcing us to be more rational in our relationship with animals. Often, the love of animals can seem like an inferior version of what is styled "real love": If you can't find a spouse, you can always have a cat. The emotional tie is a substitute, and a pathetic one.

But Dumas's work — and Chekhov's story — change the status of these relationships. The sadness that runs so deep in our relationship to beasts isn't about the inferior status of that connection; rather, it's a reflection of the disappointment we often feel in our relationships with humans. Our love for an animal will always be existentially less significant than our love for a person. But our love for animals may be more perfect.

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