



*First White*; Stoneware and Shino Glaze, 20" x 25", 2005

## Horse Sense

Artist and educator Peggy Zask shares her love of all things equine with her students.

By Michael Giltz

STUDENTS AT the Mira Costa High School in Manhattan Beach, CA, do not have to struggle to figure out how to create a project that pleases artist/educator Peggy Zask. If the subject includes a flowing mane and about 1,000 pounds of pulsating muscle, chances are they are on the right track.

"I battled the horse stigma for a long time," relates Zask, who lives on the edge of a nature preserve overlooking the Pacific in Rancho Palos Verdes. "I draw horses constantly. Then I started sculpting them and I decided: This is what I need to do. I keep trying to figure out what is this symbolizing? Why am I doing this? I just crave the perfection and expression and the beauty and spirit of a horse."

Zask, who seems fated to teach in a school where the mascot is a Mustang, appreciates the resurgence of funding for the arts under Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. "We're getting huge amounts of money from California because Schwarzenegger decided to bring the arts back, so we're fighting over [our share]. It's allowing us to hire elementary school art teachers, which makes a big difference."

Always firing up a clay sculpture and inspiring her students over the possibilities of art, she has worked with students to create a massive mural (10' x 50' feet wide) decorating one wall of

the school and adorned with countless stallions. Her love of equestrian art has also driven her to found and curate the annual Spirit of the Horse exhibit every spring in her town.

It is only fitting since Zask grew up around the animals. "My dad was a real estate agent in the '70s when it was a good thing," the artist explains. "My mom had the Rolling Hills General Store—a little country store—so I helped her with that. We owned three horses and we had a half acre and corals and a barn. My first horse was Poco. He was about 30 years old and *really* slow. When I was seven they put me on him, and I went on from there."

Now her love for the creatures has been passed on to Zask's daughter. "My daughter has a thoroughbred named Mikey [named after Mikey Way from of the rock band My Chemical Romance] and she's into jumping. She's on the equestrian team at her high school and she's taking it to the next step. Oh, it's scary," the proud mother laughs, "especially jumping. I can barely watch. We're right on the edge of a nature preserve so we have a lot of land. There's a barn that's parent-run, but the teenage girls keep their horses there and do all the care and maintenance and management.

"Are you familiar with the Pony Club? It started in England but it's here in America too, and we belong to the Portuguese Bend Pony Club. They compete against each other, but it's more of a nurturing, responsibility, growth and goal-oriented [group] than competing in big shows. These girls, when they get to the top ratings, they know as much as any veterinarian about caring for these animals. It's a good organization; my daughter loves it."

Zask prefers to draw from memory instead of photographs or live models when creating her sculptures. "I just finished



A detail of the mural *Mustang Surf* by Zask and students; 10' x 50', 2003–2004

one today," details Zask, who maintains a website at [peggyzask.com](http://peggyzask.com). "It's maybe three feet tall by four feet long. I built it in pieces, and I'm wiring it together. My first horses were really cautious because I didn't know if I could do their long skinny legs. They're a challenge. I love the challenge of getting them to survive. I feel like my attitude must come through these horses. This [new work] has the legs of my daughter's horse because I love his legs. He's the first thoroughbred I've ever been around as my own horse. He's a jumping horse, and he's got these really thin, thin legs."

Whatever horse Zask is around informs her sculptures. And whenever you are around Zask, images of these creatures are never far behind.

"If you look by the phone, you'll see drawings of horses," admits Zask. "I draw compulsively." ♦