

# ARTIST PROVOCATEUR

GREGORY DE LA HABA'S EERILY EROTIC ART WANTS NOTHING TO DO WITH SAFE SEX.

Photographed by LINDSAY PASARIN

The contemporary art world is overrun with outspoken, manifesto-wielding artists of questionable talent who love nothing better than to pontificate on the immeasurable intrinsic value of their work. Egotistical beyond belief, most of these artists lack the basic social skills to navigate a decent happy hour, let alone a political town hall meeting. But Gregory de la Haba is definitely not your average contemporary artist. He's a classically trained, infinitely fascinating guy who might strike up a conversation with you at your local bar

or while in line to place a bet at the race track. And he, unlike the obnoxious broker types who chew on oversized Cuban cigars trying to impress you, might even offer you one of the unobtrusive Nat Shermans he occasionally enjoys.

Great art evokes in the viewer an instant emotional — if not physical — response, and de la Haba's work does just that. Unlike his more outspoken colleagues, de la Haba is reluctant to discuss his art, preferring instead for people to experience it and judge for themselves. "One tends to lose the desire to express things



verbally because the job at hand is to express an idea visually," he says. "That in itself is a tremendous task because even if you think you know where you're going and what you're doing inside your head, that will always change once expressed physically on the canvas."

His latest collection, *Between Nothingness and Paradise*, is an homage to David Bowie, Peter Beard and psychostimulants. Several years in the making thus far, the works in the installation are as widely varied as the talents of the artist himself. Undoubtedly, the trio of taxidermic, sexually-aroused horses is both the figurative and literal centerpiece. The chestnut stallion rearing on his hind legs stands over 12 feet high and is as notable for the beauty of his preservation as for the astounding length of his erection. The two female horses are mounted on their backs, legs splayed. Dressed in garters and feathered headdresses made by the same costumers who dress showgirls in Vegas, they display their oversized vaginas and engorged labia, heads thrown back and limbs akimbo as if in orgasmic ecstasy. All three of the horses have two different-colored eyes as if to signal the presence of the amphetamines that might have triggered this sordid tableau.

The more conventional paintings in the installation are testament to de la Haba's excellent technical skills, even if his surfboard canvases, on which he paints portraits of nude women, are decidedly unconventional. His use of surfboards isn't that unusual given his love of surfing the rocky beaches of Montauk, but the graphic transformation of the phallic surfboards into giant vaginas birthing full-grown women is both ironic and downright controversial.

As an artist, his personal quest is to "remain open to new interpretations of an original idea." Driven to create, he doesn't seem to have an overarching plan for the body of work or even a clear end point. "Even after the work is done, I myself am not always entirely sure as to where it stands (or its meaning) amongst the masses of other pictures lining the studio walls," he says. "I don't even want to give it that much thought; I am just grateful that I was able to execute it in the first place and wish only to move on to the next picture." *Between Nothingness and Paradise* is thus far his magnum opus. We will undoubtedly see even greater works from this emerging artist as his compulsion to create drives him forward. "They say in AA that you must make amends for all your past wrongs," he muses. "Well, my paintings are in part my amends for my sins — past, present and future." JOSEPH A. UNGOCO