

IRONWORKS

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CRISTO'S SHIRTSLEEVES ARE rolled up, tight against his biceps. Years of hoisting the anvil in and out of his truck and swinging a hammer have honed his muscles, as well as his skills. Red-hot sparks scatter in the air as his hammer makes contact with an iron horseshoe, hot as molten lava. The sharp ring of metal slamming against metal echoes in the small valley in northwest Ocala where Cristobal Castro has set up shop.

Cristobal Castro is a farrier. He is a blacksmith and an artist. His shop is his truck. He carries all of his equipment in the bed of this dusty steel wagon: forge, anvil, hoof picks, shoes, hammers, tongs, vices, nippers, leather apron... prepared for anything while making "farm calls."

A farrier prepares the horse's feet for shoes, then fits the shoe and finishes it. It is critical that they know horse anatomy, proper gait and confirmation. They also deal with the health and comfort of the animal. To excel in his field, a farrier must understand normal and defective feet. The ability to shoe a horse and compensate for gait defect or poor confirmation, is what makes the distinction between a good farrier and a master.

Reared in Colombia, Castro has ridden since he was a child. "I love the horses," he tells me, arms folded across his chest as he speaks. His legs are apart; he stands firm, like a burly tree with a deep taproot.

"I always knew I wanted to be around horses and wanted to work with iron. My father is an architect and graphic designer, and I wanted to create as well. I became a farrier to combine my desire to work with metals and my love for horses."

Cristo attended an elite blacksmith school in Brussels. "The European blacksmithing schools have an incredible reputation," Cristo explains, as he unloads his iron anvil from his truck. "The school in Belgium is over 100 years old, it is highly respected as a training ground for smithing. They teach the traditional way. And, in many cases, the old ways are still the best ways."

Cristo received a degree in fine arts and a Professional Blacksmith degree in 1985, when he graduated as a Maître Maréchal Ferrant, a master farrier. Over the next five years, he worked in Belgium, Ecuador and Panama City. Throughout the 1990s, Castro shod hunter/jumpers and competition dressage horses for the Colombian National Training Team. While with the team, it "took home the gold" in the Central American Games in Peru, and won a silver in Winnipeg.

"It's all art — I don't separate shoeing from sculpture; my shoes are my work and my shoes are my art." —Cristobal Castro

CRISTO CUPS THE front hoof of Lady Jane, a four-year-old gaited horse, in his hand. She is motionless, at ease. He cleans her hoofs with a curved pick and prepares to replace her shoes.

“Jane has a problem gait,” he tells me in his accented English. “One of Jane’s hoofs ‘interferes’ with the other, meaning it has a tendency to hit the other front leg.”

Jane’s owner holds her halter. “Before Cristo, we tried everything to correct it. When Cristo came, he looked at Jane’s gait, her confirmation, and the shape of the hoof. Cristo has a good eye. He corrected the problem and restored her natural gait.”

Cristo finishes shoeing Jane and packs everything back in his truck. He will return in about six weeks, depending on several factors, including the growth rate of the hooves.

He is intuitive around the horses. He has expert handling skills, making his job easier and the shoeing process a better experience for the horses. “In most cases, young horses are skittish and need to be sedated before they are shod,” Cristo tells me. “However, I like working with young horses, and especially the difficult ones. I have learned to handle them without the medication; I work with them to correct their behavior.”

It is clear the commitment Cristo has for his trade hasn’t dimmed in the 20-plus years that he has been working. He slides his hand down the back of the leg of a 1,200-pound, 17-hand Thoroughbred. The horse lifts his leg so Cristo can scrape caked mud from the horse’s hoof.

“Are you ever afraid of being kicked?” I ask. He looks at me from his position near the hind end of the horse. His brows furrow and he shakes his head. “No, not really. When I’m working, I’m confident about my relationship with the horse. I always establish a relationship first and take control of the situation and the surroundings, the horses sense this.”

WHILE STILL IN Bogotá, Cristobal began experimenting with sculpture and quickly made a name for himself. “Art is the solution of a problem,” he tells me as he shows me his wire sculptures and forged iron pieces. It is clear that he integrates his blacksmith training and natural talent to create his art.

“My art is abstract, even these horse sculptures. They are not figurative,” he explains. “They are about the material.” Cristo has a minimalist sensibility. His work, featured in galleries in his native Colombia and in New York City, garnered attention from critics and the likes of Art in America and The Art News.

Visualize a sculpture, molded from 25 tons of moist, black dirt in a tony Manhattan art gallery. Created to exemplify impermanence, the massive sculpture was a direct contradiction to the solidity of his metalwork. As the piece dried in the gallery, the sculpture evolved. Crumbling clods of dirt lay on the polished wood floor. Meant to symbolize the decay of art, the decay of life; it was illusionary, as, while the soil dried, a new dimension sprang forth — the sculpture

sprouted life and rebirth in the form of tiny green plants which had been dormant in the soil.

A more playful side of Cristo is his “wall of horse shoes.” He arranged and hung hundreds of horseshoes on a long wall in a gallery in Bogotá. The objective was to reveal the art of the shoe, not to alter them at all, or to make them into what they are not.

IRON WIRE SCULPTURES of horses and cows hang on the walls of his home in Reddick. Once again, a different facet of Cristobal Castro, the artist. They are light, open, and seem grounded only by the metal medium. Can iron fly? I expect these three dimensional horses to sprout Pegasus wings.

“It is all about passion. I have passion for the horses, passion for my trade and passion for my art,”

Today, like most days, Cristo is creating. Heat pours from the mouth of the forge; the temperature is climbing to over 2,000 degrees. He grabs a flat rasp with tongs and pushes it partially into the blasting heat. His eyes reflect the fire of his forge as he bends to inspect the progress of his art. Moments pass and he extracts a molten-lava-red rasp and sets it on the anvil. At this temperature, iron can be flattened or bent, cut, or drawn out to make it longer and thinner.

Cristo is silent. He is intense as he forces and forms the rasp, a normally unyielding substance. Only through extreme heat and hammering can he coax the iron into malleability. With several well-placed blows, he folds the rasp flat. He works quickly as the heat dissipates in the cool air. Within a minute, the rasp is back in the forge. This process is repeated until the iron relents to the will of the artist, and conforms to the shape he envisions. Finally, he submerges the iron into a bucket of water called a slack bucket. Steam rises, the water hisses and boils. He takes it out and at the end of his tongs is my gift.

The simple iron rasp has been heated, pounded and manipulated into a curved sculpture, an elegant little beauty. I am grateful, and wonder aloud how I will best put it to use.

“Alyce, Alyce,” Cristo laughs. “This is not anything. There is no need to use it — it is art.

Art for art’s sake.”