Raging Against the Now
Alumna uses horses as a metaphor for freedom lost

Sculptor Kathleen Griffin '97 has a thing about horses. And candy. And butterflies. Each is a subject of her public art. She has filled a rescue boat with 2,500 pounds of sculpted lemon candy and created large words on various surfaces by arranging pennies or digging grass out of the ground in the shapes of letters. She says she has always worked large, even in her undergraduate days.

Griffin graduated from the Hartford Art School (HAS) in 1997 with a BFA in experimental studio. HAS faculty invited her back to campus during the 2012 spring break to introduce a small group of sculpture majors to the transition from small to monumental mold making.

Four students worked with Griffin on the mold for her upcoming installation project, All of This Is an American Dream, a title inspired by the lyrics to “Know Your Enemy” by American rock band Rage Against the Machine. The students received 1.5 credits as well as the experience of working on an actual public-art project. The finished mold of a horse consists of layers of rubber, clay, and fiberglass into which a steel armature will be placed before the mold is filled with concrete.

"It was more of an apprenticeship experience for the students," says Griffin. "In art school you make relatively small molds. The transition to large mold making is something I learned later, working in residencies and foundries. It's not just the scale. The materials are different too. The ultimate skill you are learning in art school is to problem-solve on your feet. That's definitely what I learned here at HAS."

The American Dream project comprises eight white and silver, life-size horses placed at five sites in and around New York City. The “herd” will be placed on privately owned, transitional spaces, such as a lot where a building has been knocked down but new construction has not yet begun. Beginning in October 2012, the horses will appear suddenly and unannounced, stay for a two-week period, then be whisked away to another site. Griffin would like to see the project continue in other cities.

“Seeing these horses in an urban setting is like seeing a ghost,” she says. “It’s there and then it’s not. Viewed by millions of commuters, the horses will strike a tone of longing and loss, beauty and wonder. They represent the collision of the American Dream and the American Ideal.”

Griffin is in the planning and permitting stages of another large project, this one called Butterflies of Memory. With a projected installation date of sometime in the summer of 2013, the project will appear on the southern tip of Manhattan’s Roosevelt Island on the site of the 19th-century Smallpox Hospital ruins as a sculpture installation consisting of 17 giant yellow butterflies, each 13 feet across and made of fiberglass with steel armature. Suspended from 18 to 35 feet above the ruins, the butterflies will appear to be in the process of carrying off the building.

“I was driving down the FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt East River Drive] one day, and I saw butterflies hovering over Roosevelt Island,” says Griffin. “I made a drawing and showed it to some fellow artists, who said I had to submit it. The Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation of New York and the Roosevelt Island Historical Society were very enthusiastic.”

The Butterflies of Memory project is sponsored by the New York Foundation for the Arts and will be fabricated by a team of architects, artists, engineers, welders, and others. For photos and more information, visit Griffin’s website, www.kathleengriffin.com.