

John B. Aird Gallery

DOOG DAYS

Curated by Matthew Brower

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Curatorial Statement

In June of 2020, the Aird put out a call for dog-themed artworks to be part of a juried exhibition called *Dog Days*. Our call indicated that: “We are interested in works that explore dogs as emotional and physical supports, domestic companions, family members, mythic beings, and cultural symbols. We’re interested in mutts of all kinds as well as pedigreed pooches.” We also indicated that we were looking for work from artists at all stages of their careers.

In response, we received submissions from 87 artists and reviewed well over 100 works. The resulting pool of available art was deep and contained a wide range of dog depictions. I worked with our juror, David Liss from The Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto, to select the works in the present volume. While our top concern was the individual excellence of each piece, I believe the works we selected reflect a broad range of contemporary art practices and contemporary human-dog relations.ⁱ As I see it, the works fall into four broad categories based on the kinds of human-dog relations they present: good dog art, symbolic dogs, packs, and dogumentary.

The term dog days goes back to the ancient Greeks: it originally referenced the rise of Sirius (the dog star) in mid-July and has come to refer to the hottest days of the year. The historical depth of this connection between late-summer heat and dogs parallels the depth of human-dog relations. Dogs have been part of human lives and human art for a very long time.ⁱⁱ The works in this exhibition speak to the persistence of that connection: celebrating, exploring, and commenting on the emotional, cultural, and psychic depths of human-dog relations.

Dog Days is the Aird's second online juried exhibition. In June we launched *Gay Gardens* which explored queerness in garden imagery. The exhibition was expertly curated by Patrick De Coste with a beautiful catalogue designed by Jowenne Herrera. The *Dog Days* catalogue has been designed by Rachel Wong and I've greatly appreciated her insights and aesthetic sense. I chose to work on this project because the theme was deeply meaningful to me and it felt significant to explore it at this time. The physical and psychic isolation of social distancing has been somewhat bearable because of my connection to my dog, Iggy. Getting to spend time with the dogs in the show has been a real joy. I hope that you find them good companions as well. Don't worry, they're friendly.ⁱⁱⁱ

Matthew Brower

ⁱ Sadly, we received no video or sound-based works.

ⁱⁱ For discussions about the deep history of dog art see Catherine John, *Dogs: History, Myth, Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Susie Green, *Dogs in Art* (London: Reaktion, 2019); and Tamsin Pikrell, *The Dog: 5000 Years of the Dog in Art*, (New York: Merrill, 2008).

ⁱⁱⁱ Mostly.

Good Dog Art

While it has been said that all dogs are good dogs, not every artistic depiction or representation of dogs foregrounds their goodness—these works do. A significant portion of the works submitted, and of the works selected, can be understood as what I call good dog art. Good dog artworks focus on celebrating dogs' relations to humans and their capacities to be loyal; provide comfort and companionship; exist in the moment; and fully express and experience joy. Good dog art can present either individuated, singular dogs (named dogs), representations of idealized dog-ness (*the good dog* or *the happy puppy*), or breed archetypes (poodles, bulldogs, mastiffs, etc.). These works express love for dogs (both individually and as a whole) and invite viewers to share in that experience.

The logic of individuated good dog art is perhaps most clearly expressed in this show by Wakefield's two paintings of Great Danes with halos: *Hugo* and *Gloria* are beatified. Rohrbacher's *Wheaton Greetin* gives us a characteristic depiction of Wheaton behaviour inviting us to see every Wheaton in hers. The ideal good dog is quietly at work in Dougan's painting *True* and in Hirschmann's *Friend of My Heart*: both focus our attention on the depth of connection possible with a dog by giving us images that can be read as both specific individual dogs and as stand-ins for any dog.

There are a lot of good dogs in the show and these dogs are good in a variety of ways: there are representations of dogs being useful (Smelters Wier *The Gather*, Martini-Dunk *Ultimate*); lying in their spot (Domitiric *Pepé by the Woodstove*); chasing a ball (Garret-Jenkins *The Ball 4*); sleeping peacefully

Symbolic Dogs

A great number of the works in *Dog Days* present symbolic dogs. These works use their representation of dogs to explore aspects of society, the human condition, or the strangeness of existence and the universe. Dogs' proximity to humanity and their deep embeddedness in human lives and culture lets them stand in for us in ways that are variously funny, ironic, sarcastic, contemplative, philosophical, art historical, trippy, eerie, and autobiographical. In symbolic dog works, the dogs depicted act more as concepts and metaphors than concrete particular dogs.^{iv}

Some of these works use dog imagery to pose questions about the nature of the world. One of the more enigmatic works, Volpe's *Northern Incident* depicts a snowed in drive-in theatre in which a dog is the sole witness to a cowboy film. The dog appears to have stopped on its well-worn path through the snow to catch a particularly fraught moment of the film. However, it's not immediately apparent how we are to read its watching. Presenting as an allegory of social inequality, McClyment's *Won't Go to Waste* places dogs on the dining room table. The dogs' pie eating reads as a violation of social order and suggests a critique of the way society's pie is shared. Di Leo's large-scale drawing, *Unsettled Fidelity*, presents two restless dog figures floating above a writhing male body in a vague space. The dogs in this work act as representatives of the figure's psychic status and metaphors for loyalty.

A number of the symbolic dog works use humour and irony to comment on art and society. Chapman's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* transforms Seurat's most famous painting; changing it from a detailed

examination of bourgeois French social interactions to two dogs engaged in butt sniffing done in the Woodlands style. The work can be read as an indigenous commentary on the European artistic tradition and as a demystification of human social rituals through the more scatologically direct protocols of dog society. Legrady's two works, *Balloon Dog* and *Piggybank Dog*, use art historical references for a different kind of critique. The paintings put Jeff Koons' *Balloon Dog* sculpture in dialogue with a butterfly that appears to reference Damian Hirst to mock the commercialism of the contemporary art world. More directly comical, Duffy's *Dog Walking* reverses the roles of the dog walk to playfully comment on both human-dog interactions and human social norms. In a more whimsical vein, Kasperbauer's *My Nine Lives as a Dog* inserts dogs into vintage postcard imagery to offer a purported self-portrait. Mixing cat thematics (nine lives), a variety of dog breeds, and images of cameras, the work presents multiple facets of the artist's identity while playfully a nostalgia for mid-20th century family life. The symbolic dog artworks in *Dog Days* speak to dogs' deep capacity to bear meaning.

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- ^{iv} Bonfanti's concrete dog sculptures are cast from stuffed animals making them concrete and particular in a different way.
- ^v Elizabeth Legge, "When Awe turns to Aww: Jeff Koons Balloon Dog and the Cute Sublime," in *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness*, 2017, 130–50.

Packs

Pack artworks are a minoritarian element in the selected works. Neither good dogs nor symbols, the dogs in pack artworks are not presented as named individuals but as creatures belonging to a dog life-world. These artworks take up what Susan McHugh describes as pack aesthetics; as becomings that extend beyond human frameworks.^{vi} Rather than the individuated and idealized dogs of good dog art, pack aesthetics speak to dogs' animality. The works present dogs as being for themselves and each other rather than presenting their being for us. The artworks try to represent the ways that dogs occupy the world in ways that exceed and resist us.

Holt's *Six Dogs* is a three by two grid of alternating black and white dogs. The roughly sketched bodies of the dogs appear to be in motion as they push against and out of the framework of the grid. This undermining of the grid's modernist logic suggests that the dogs are arrayed this way less for our purpose than for their own. Abram's *Pack* consists of five pictures of individuated animals arranged on a shelf — the works' pack-ness exists in the in-between spaces of the images. The work needs to be read across each other: the pack disappears when concentrating on the individual images only emerging as we leave the individual works behind and read across. Both slightly out of focus and showing signs of motion blur, Smallwood's *Fang* refuses to hold together as a completely resolvable depiction of a dog.

What the image resolves into instead is something like a biting of the hand that feeds: the image exposes the potential violence and threat inherent in the dog's animality.

Comfort's *Rescue Dog* superimposes a sketched-in dog head on top of a forest landscape. The image is layered and textured: the shape of the dog's head subtly changes the colours of the forest and there are bands of a textile-like pattern across the image. The dog's head is largely described by red horizontal lines giving it a sense of movement which is only anchored by the eyes staring at the viewer. The image conveys a sense of nature looking back at us as we meet the gaze of the rescue dog. Hunter's *Dog Barking* presents a red dog floating on a black background. The dog hovers between a form occupying space and a two-dimensional shape. The blue triangles break up and define the dog's body but alternate between suggesting its volume (in the back legs) and flattening the figure (in the torso). While recognizably a dog, the figure is portrayed more to suggest the energy and spirit of the dog's bark rather than capturing the appearance or structure of any actual dog. While pack artworks explore dogs' belonging to each other and to nature, the works in the exhibition demonstrate the multiple ways that those belongings can be expressed.

^{vi} Susan McHugh, "Video Dog Star: William Wegman, Aesthetic Agency, and the Animal in Art," in *The Representation of Animals*, ed. Steve Baker, spec. issue of *Society & Animals* 9.3 (2001): 229–51. Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

Dogumentary

The final segment of works are dogumentary photographs. Using the photograph's assertion of a this-has-been-ness, dogumentary images take dogs as they find them giving us an unstaged record of dog life. These photographic works capture moments of dog-ness as they occurred in the world emphasizing the particularity of the dog and its situation.

The selected works emphasize different aspects of documentary practice ranging from snapshots to photo-conceptualism. Hannan's *Damballa Dog* offers a Bressonian take on dogumentary.^{vii} The image captures a decisive moment in which the dog and the statue are in a visually meaningful relation to each other. Holden's *Callan Fine Art. 240, Chartres Street, New Orleans, LA 70130, USA. 29°57'15.20" N 90°03'59.97" W Thursday, January 06, 2011. 12:52 pm CST* presents a record of the exact time and location of the image's making. The location and time are described in frameworks (standard time and geographic coordinate system) for making the world legible and knowable. The viewer can treat these recordings as precisely specifying the image thereby helping to secure its meaning or they can see the image's fortuitous capture of the dog in the door as exposing the limits of these systems to determine and define the world.

Referencing post-60s conceptual documentary practice, de Vuono's *Snow Fun* uses sequential images to present the black dog's winter romp. The format of the work places the dog's interaction with the landscape in dialogue with practices like Richard Long's land art inviting us to see both the passage

of time and the marking of the landscape. The gray space above the action hovers between a dull winter sky and modernist abstraction. Using a snapshot aesthetic, Rancourt's *Vacation Buddy* captures a puppy sitting by a curved set of stairs. The grainy quality of the image and its breakdown on the right hand side contributes to its sense of having been made in a moment. Lee's *Family* echoes the structures of portrait studio photography while subtly undermining its conventions. Rather than the mother looking out at the viewer, it is the dog in her lap that meets our gaze.

Dennis' *Guardian 1* draws on the photo-journalistic tradition to capture a herding dog at work. While the photograph has the appearance of a portrait, the image emphasizes the focused attention of the dog as it performs its assigned task. Responding to late-20th century American documentary traditions, Beeber's *After Midnight* captures the back end of a poodle as it sniffs the lush privacy hedge of a suburban Long Island pool. Under the floodlights, the scene takes on an eerie quality and the reflection of the poodle's tufted tail acts a substitute head letting the reflected dog look back at us. The variety of the dogumentary images in this exhibition speaks to both the breadth of contemporary photographic practice and the individuality of a dog's life.

vii Henri Cartier Bresson, *The Decisive Moment*, 1952.