Cultural Daily

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For the Love of Dogs

Arya F. Jenkins · Wednesday, November 27th, 2019

An Interview with Artist/Illustrator, Mish

Do not underestimate the power of the dog—in life as well as in art. A strong love of the canine has influenced many artists. Andy Warhol's Dachshund Archie was an artistic subject. Charles Shultz's beloved Spike became the model for the inimitable Snoopy. Artist Franz Marc dedicated himself to painting dogs after painting his dog Ruthie. The Mexican artist Frida Kahlo prized dogs and animals in general. The hairless Izcuintili is featured in many of her paintings. The history of artistic infatuation with the pooch is long and enduring.

A love of dogs is clearly at the heart of the winsome and captivating illustrations by award-winning artist Mish (born Eileen Murphy) in *Phoebe and Ito are dogs* (Epic Rites Press 2019), the latest book by poet John Yamrus. Mish took her favorite dog Mishie's name and has used Mish as a screen name for years.

Using a sharpie when drawing in her notebook, and a stylus when on the computer, Mish, a woman of many talents, came to illustration and art after poetry and photography. Her poetry and colorful prize-winning photographs of geckos and other natural subjects have been published in many journals. She also writes book reviews–for this publication, for instance. A Florida resident, Mish teaches fulltime in the Department of English at Polk State College in Lakeland.

In a recent interview, Mish discussed her love of art and dogs and her lively contribution to Yamrus's latest book, which is also a tribute to canines. Mish's website is http://mishmurphy.com.

Do you recall the moment that catalyzed your interest in painting dogs? If so, please describe it.

I started out as a photographer. I always took pictures of the animals in my life—dogs, cats, cows, horses, geckos, frogs, fish, you name it.

Until the last few years, I did my dog pictures for myself alone. I was getting other photos published fairly regularly in literary magazines. I was and am a poet, familiar with these magazines; I was rather sure they wouldn't be interested in my dog pictures. I wasn't aware that anyone else would appreciate them.

Then in August 2017, on an airplane, by sheer luck, I met a pair of artists/teachers from Tampa (Tim and Jayne Gibbons), near where I live. I showed them some of my pictures—I had them on my cellphone. It ended up that they encouraged me and helped me (and continue to help me) get my artwork entered into local art shows.

Amazingly, one of my dog pictures ended up winning a ribbon in two separate events in 2018. It's then that I realized that maybe I reached people in my dog pictures in a way that was special.

Do you draw inspiration from other artists or illustrators regarding either subject matter or media? If so, whom?

I find Francesca Woodman inspiring. She was a great photographer, a post-modern one. For example, I like the way she incorporated out of focus or surreal-looking shots into her work. I have a tendency to use tropical colors in my art work. That may come from one of my muses, Frida Kahlo. And it may also come from my mother, whose favorite color was orange.

I've been influenced by Pop Art, Andy Warhol, and pop culture in general. For example, sometimes I tend to draw "cartoonish" dogs; I've done collaging and multiple images; and sometimes I use Pop Art-inspired color schemes.

The life and work of Georgia O'Keefe have inspired me on a personal level. Because of her, I never thought I couldn't be an artist because I was too old.

Finally, I've been influenced by the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi*, a world view under which beauty is found in that which is imperfect; this philosophy honors the natural cycle of rebirth and decay.

Please share a little about your dog subjects. What fascinated you most about each of them?

I'm an absolute dog lover, crazy for dogs. I wasn't blessed with human children. I invest my energy into family, students, and dogs.

There are four dogs that I use a lot in pictures:

Mishie was my first dog (as an adult), a German Shepherd-Husky mix. I adopted her from the Chicago Human Society in July 1998. I'd picked out a different dog to adopt. I was outraged and sobbing when I found out that the Humane Society let someone else adopt that dog in the 15 minutes it took me to fill out the paperwork.

So Mishie was my second-choice dog. She turned out to be one of the loves of my life…Funny how things happen sometimes…

Mishie died in 2008, and after a time, my husband and I got York, a purebred black Labrador retriever. York belonged to the nonprofit org, Canine Companions for Independence, which breeds and trains service dogs for the disabled.

After a puppy reaches 18 months, it has to pass a test to go on further and receive advanced

training to be a service dog. Poor York flunked his test. They said he got too attached to the ball and was too emotional. He turned out to be very calm, well behaved, and affectionate. York passed away last October.

Savane was my sister's dog. He was 11 years old when we adopted him, and 16 ½ when he passed away this last June. (My sister and her husband divorced and neither one could keep the dog in their new homes. So I took him.)

Savane was a mix, but definitely a Spaniel. He was rather high-strung, but also the most beautiful of all my dogs. (Although all my dogs are beautiful to me.)

Our dog Cookie was a rescue. In the middle of a scorching hot, humid day in July 2016, a little Chi-Spaniel (a cross between Chihuahua and cocker Spaniel, weighing less than 15 pounds) came wandering down our dead end street, dirty, skinny, scared.

We attracted her with fresh water and cheese dogs. We soon discovered that she had a stakeout chain buried in the flesh of her neck. My husband had to carefully cut it off with needle-nose pliers. We named her Cookie, and she's been the best little dog: cute, smart, affectionate, eager to please.

How did you come into the book project, *Phoebe and Ito are dogs,* with John Yamrus?

John Yamrus and I were friends on Facebook; I don't remember how that happened, but we do have over 600 friends in common. I got better acquainted with him when I reviewed one of his books, *As Real As Rain*. When it turned out that John and I were both dog enthusiasts, our friendship was cemented.

John had written a kids' book called *Phoebe & Ito are dogs*. He had talked with several artists/illustrators about pictures for his book, but nothing worked out. Finally, he posted on Facebook: *is there an artist out there who is able and willing to illustrate a children's book about two dogs?*

As soon as I read that on Facebook, I said to myself, *I can do that!* And I thought about how great it would be to immerse myself in drawing dog pictures; I would really enjoy it.

But I stopped myself from sending a quick reply and forced myself to think about it overnight. I knew I had a lot to learn. I knew it would be a seriously challenging project.

The next day, I responded to John that I'd like to do it. My main concern was that he might think I didn't have enough art experience. But John is instinctive. He trusts his gut in many things and for some strange reason, he trusted me.

How does drawing dogs compare with drawing people for you? A couple of illustrations in your collaborative book project include people. What are the differences, and will it still be dogs in the future?

I really can't think of a lot of differences between doing a portrait of a human as compared to

creating a dog's portrait. Although dog psychology is not the same as human psychology, dogs are smart, sentient beings with individual personalities. When I draw or photograph a dog, I try to let its personality shine in the picture like I would if I were creating a picture of a human. And I've been told that my dog art is different because my dogs have expressions; my dogs have character.

Looking ahead, what do you hope to accomplish in the future as an illustrator?

I did a solo, all-dog art show this summer, my first all-dog show, my eighth art show altogether. I felt it was successful, attracting mention in the local press. I have two separate all-dog solo art shows set up for 2020. I have also been commissioned to do portraits of peoples' dogs. And I have sold more prints of my dog pictures than of my other pictures combined.

I don't know what the future will bring. I am happy to create "dog art." It's work that I love that also plays into the best part of other people. It will be great if I can continue doing dog art in the future.

Buy the book: http://www.lulu.com/shop/john-yamrus/phoebe-and-ito-are-dogs/paperback/product-24183658.html?fbclid=IwAR2qPhvvquL1ITsgpfdTn36fiGrnZjwiK8sTyqy5GukDd6ZFlsaB76lifEw

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