Unconditional Love

A collection of art showcases the powerful bond between us and our pets.

May 14, 2018 By Nelson Santos

As a kid I dreamed that I could talk to animals, like Saint Francis or Doctor Dolittle. For years, I begged my parents for a dog, and when I went off to college, I finally adopted one of my own. Though I never learned to be a dog whisperer, Sparky (1992–2006) and Sweetie taught me more about love, acceptance and living in the moment than anyone else.

Animals are fantastical beasts that love unconditionally. A dog does not care what your serostatus is—and a cat cares even less. They don't judge you by your race, religion, gender identity or sexual orientation (OK, a cat might judge you by what you put in its bowl, but regardless); our furry companions are always there for us. They are family.

I've always been drawn to the many portraits of cats and dogs in the Visual AIDS Artist+ Registry [the largest database of works by artists with HIV]. Some of these paintings and photographs present a loving and often humorous insight into our relationship with these four-legged friends, while others examine the way these beautiful and beastly critters embody our human psyche. Many of these images take place in domestic settings—bedrooms, kitchens, couches and floors—such as Benjamin Fredrickson's and Mark Morrisroe's intimate portraits of friends on the bed, Tom Miller's family feast with cat and dog around the table and David Spiher's lap full of love, aptly titled Comfort. We invite these animals into our homes to share our lives, and they become family. Home is not only where the heart is but also where our pets are. This is perfectly illustrated in Felix Gonzalez-Torres's snapshot of his cats on his bed, the back of the photograph simply inscribed "Home."

Our pets get us through the darkest times and often help us rediscover joy in our lives. As artist member C.R. Russell said about his beloved dog Reba, "We nursed each other back from some serious blows. And gave each other time and attention. That is love." Works by Joe Monroe and Albert Winn show us their daily rituals with their dogs by their side as both human and canine deal with the anguish of declining health and anxiety about pharmaceutical dependency. Our pets help heal us—and sometimes the best medicine does not come from a bottle; sometimes it comes with a wet nose and tail.

Other artist members capture the grace, beauty and humor of our four-legged friends, like Peter Hujar's many elegant portraits of dogs, Hermes Payrhuber's playful video of his cat or Joe Brainard's portrait of his life partner Kenward Elmslie's elegant dog, Whippoorwill. While working

on The Sparky Project, I had the privilege of having several artists do portraits of Sparky, including George Towne and Eric Rhein. I will always treasure these portraits. Our pets share our lives only for a short time, but they live in our hearts forever, and many of us look forward to reuniting someday. As Will Rogers said, “If there are no dogs in Heaven, then when I die I want to go where they went.”

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Artists have found constant inspiration in the grace and beauty of animal forms, and throughout art history, folklore and literature, animals have also been used to symbolize religious beliefs, political satire and our human psyche.

“Feeling animalistic. Feeling Hyena. Feeling Wolf. Feeling Dog. I am tongue and heart,” wrote artist David Wojnarowicz.

In Western art history, the dog represents everything from fidelity to anger to protection. One of my favorite animal photographs, Jimmy DeSana’s Dog, covers all of these qualities. The snarling or smiling canine seems to be both guarding his owner and laughing at the ridiculousness of the situation. In Stephen Wolf’s and Scott Hunt’s surreal tableaux, our canine friends share our voyeuristic curiosity, as we watch in on some peculiar playtime, deciding whether to join in or look away.

Similarly, John Morrison’s photograph, Hooked on Love, takes an intimate moment and adds a bit of innocent naughtiness, wrapping his pussy’s tail around his owner’s scratching post. The fact that it is a black cat’s tail adds another level of intrigue. In folklore, black cats are often seen as shape-shifters, changing into human forms; they are also symbols of sensuality, magic, lust and sometimes bad luck, adding to the mystery of the image.

The black cat is a recurring theme in many of Hugh Steers’s paintings as well. As scholar James Smalls writes in Hugh Steers: The Complete Paintings, “While black cats, in particular, are associated with witchcraft and the perils of the night, the cat is more generally considered the guardian of homes and a symbol of domestic goodness.” With this in mind, cats are less of an omen in Steers’s paintings but rather “externalizations of the protagonist’s inner state.”

In the works of Wojnarowicz, Joseph Modica and Christian Ledan, these animalistic attributes are placed directly on the human form as costume performances, spirit animals, goddesses and puppy play. It’s no surprise that our love and fascination with these animals would make us want to be a little more like them in our own lives. To be playful, mysterious and, most of all, loving.

Nelson Santos is an artist, the former executive director of Visual AIDS and dad to his dog,

Sweetie. This essay was originally published as part of the November 2017 Visual AIDS Web Gallery. Reprinted with permission. Copyright © 2017 Visual AIDS. All rights reserved.



Luis Tavales, "A woman with coffee and her pussycat", 2015Courtesy of Luis Tavales

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