



Pets 'R' Her

**Charlseay Cartwright—
An Artist For Animal Lovers**

By Sarah Lavender Smith

At the State Fair (and, no doubt, at county fairs across the land), a perennial booth sits among the hucksters of car wax and kitchen appliances: the pet portrait studio. You have to wonder who commissions such work—would you want a larger-than-life oil painting of a yappy Chihuahua immortalized in pseudo-realism? (Eyes are often rendered larger or droopier for sentimental effect.) Pet paintings, most would agree, are considered fine portraits insofar as miniature clown figurines are considered fine sculpture.

With that prejudice in mind, it's hard not to let loose a patronizing chuckle when an artist says she or he "does pets."

Charlseay Cartwright, a Sacramento artist who lives in midtown, does cats and dogs. She's even painted a pot-bellied pig. And it's OK to laugh, because some of the pets pictured are *supposed* to be amusing; as for her talent, though, she can actually rescue pet portraiture from the servitude of tackiness.

Cartwright brings a sense of humor and a respect for animals to her paintings. Her art is more whimsical than sophisticated, but it doesn't cross the line into being *too* cute. A typical Cartwright painting is an impressionistic depiction of one or several animals in an "appropriate" setting—a cat might be surrounded by a wild, abstract bird pattern; dogs could be set among a floral design or among objects such as balls and Milkbones. And the pot-bellied pig? In perhaps her most bizarre painting, the pig is at the center of a psychedelic accretion: bananas, pies, grapes and other food.

"Shumba" is perhaps a more typical portrait. In it, a Rhodesian ridgeback, a hunting dog bred in Africa, stretches regally across the canvas, while two abstract lions parade in the background. A yellow moon sits overhead, a blue elephant marches underneath, and turtles and birds are worked into the background pattern. The

"Shumba," a portrait of a Rhodesian ridgeback, shows the dog stretched regally across the canvas, while two abstract lions parade in the background. The painting has a mystical, folk quality that recalls the poetry of Rudyard Kipling.

(continued on page 21)

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(continued from page 19)

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Cartwright mainly paints her subjects with watercolors and uses acrylic for background. Her trademark is her use of paisleys and other designs in color blocks, which, along with a generally flat perspective, give the work an almost quilted look.

Pets have been her primary subject for about four years. She occasionally paints houses and people, especially children, but prefers animals. "People take themselves so seriously," she said, "and they are able to be a little softer and forgiving when it comes to (painting) their animals—although they do notice if I don't get a freckle just right on a cat's nose."

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Why animals? "I kind of gravitated toward it as a subject matter because I had such feeling for the animals and could identify with the humor and the pathos; to combine them with their relationship to people really intrigued me."

Cartwright makes the humor of her animal-imbued life readily apparent: When asked her age, she responded, "I'm 44 ... in dog years, that's 6."

I was disappointed to learn that pets don't actually sit for their portraits. I could easily imagine a cat posing and preening on a stool in front of her, but in reality she works from photographs. And it's the photo shoot that allows her the opportunity to get to know the pet and its idiosyncrasies.

Cartwright, who's originally from the Sonoma-Marín County area, lives in a house on 23rd Street, her home for about the past 14 years. It's a yellow two-bedroom turn-of-the-century cottage, decorated wall-to-wall with rose-colored floral prints and animal paintings. Her housemates are two Persian cats. One, a big fat tabby, has its portrait hanging nearby, and it depicts a feline's fantasy world: an orange cat surrounded by green- and burgundy-hued trout.

Each painting has a story behind it. One has a dog sitting next to its owner, a pilot, in the cockpit of an airplane, in which the pair soar above colorful farmland.

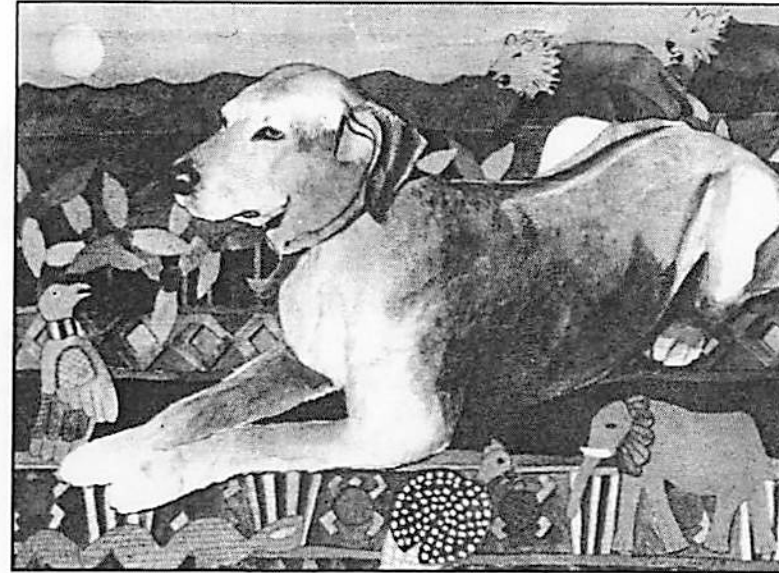
Another shows two dogs at the beach. "This one I painted for myself. I enjoyed the absurdity of the dogs taking themselves to the beach, bringing their cookies and ball and blanket."

Also, as one might expect, many of Cartwright's paintings are monuments to pets who are now pushing up daisies. As she browsed through her portfolio and pointed to various clients, she laughed in spite of herself and said, "God, I'm trying to keep this upbeat, so I don't want to keep saying they're dead, but that's the sad reality."

Granted, Cartwright isn't a big name in the local gallery scene. Nevertheless, she does enjoy a steady stream of commissioned work. As a part-time worker for the state Employment Development Department, she's busy enough.

"I haven't pursued gallery shows, really. ... It's word-of-mouth now; I've really not had to do a lot of promoting of myself." Her clients "tend to be animal lovers," she said, shrugging as she sought to describe them, "and, well, a lot of real estate agents."

Realtors? Well, there is a common thread here. Cartwright's



"Shumba" by Charlseay Cartwright.

work definitely evokes images of Sunset magazine-style homes and of the well-groomed people (and animals) who inhabit them. In other words, people who would want to commission a portrait by Charlseay. You could almost picture one of her paintings hanging in a sun-drenched room next to a tall ficus in a terra cotta planter, a purebred cat basking nearby.

None of which undermines the sincerity of Cartwright's work. In her art and in her life, a sense of home is paramount. She's chair of the Boulevard Park Neighborhood Association, and her attitude toward the job gives a new face to

Inside, Cartwright has other projects to show. Her latest venture is designing fabric, inspired by the designs in her paintings, which are also being marketed as cards and posters.

It's refreshing talking with Cartwright, an artist who's not an *artiste*; one who takes nothing, herself included, too seriously. "I would like my art to be fun to do—and fun for the viewer. And I'd like people to feel good when they look at it."

"Fun" aside, her art does have substantial quality, at least in the eyes of animal lovers. Meaning, if you're obsessed to the point where you treat your dog or cat like a person, there's a strong possibility that you might also regard a painting by Charlseay Cartwright as "fine art." □

a midtown area that some regard as marginal. "Being chair of this neighborhood association has been something of an obsession, and I'm very proud of what we've done" in terms of working for the historical neighborhood's preservation, and making it a place "where people and animals can walk safely."

"In fact," she added, "this summer I put a small swimming pool in my back yard as sort of a statement that it isn't just the suburbs that can have these things." She led the way out back to one of midtown's only pools, past a redwood tree she planted. Her neighbors helped her dig the pool (since a backhoe wouldn't fit in the yard), and she's laying the bricks herself.