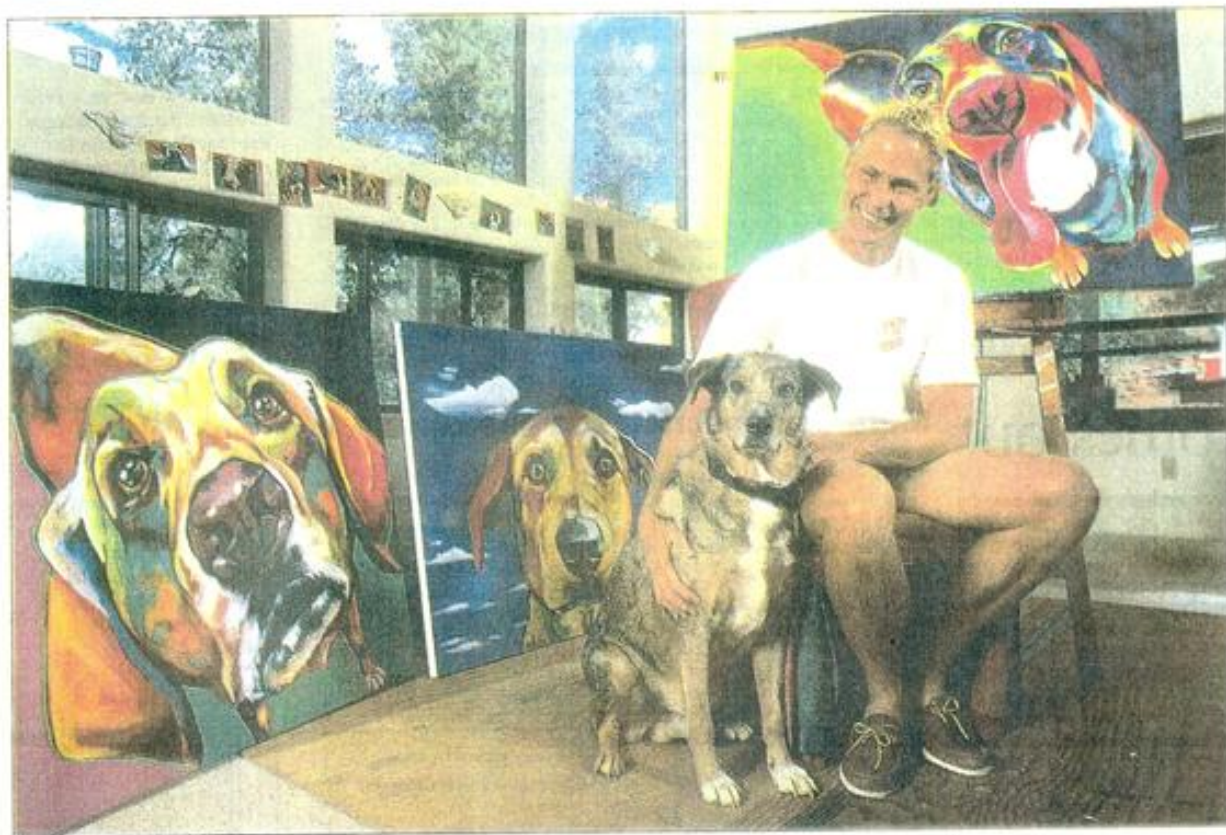


## LIFE



Suzanne Starr Staff/Arizona Republic

It's easy for Ron Burns to find inspiration for his artwork: All he has to do is look to one of his pets. Burns also keeps snapshots of appealing animals he has seen in no-kill shelters and on his rural travels.

# Petcasso

## Arizona artist's pound puppies are cats' meow

By Scott Craven  
Staff writer

The secret to Ron Burns' world is seeing color where none exists.

With wide brush and broad strokes, Burns fills his life with purple puppies, crimson kitties, pink pigs and canary cows. Red collides with green, orange wages war on turquoise. The canvas battlefield looks like one huge mess.

But stand back, and Burns' vision takes shape. In the swirl of colors, a floppy-eared dog, or perhaps the doleful stare of a bulldog, might materialize.

Few artists attempt to scramble the color wheel as thoroughly as

Burns, and fewer still have relied on that style to paint pet portraits. Yet the Sedona artist is poised on the brink of, well, pop-art success with his peculiar (eccentric?) style.

His technicolor fantasies hang in boardrooms and bedrooms. They've been reproduced on posters and greeting cards. What was once a hobby is now a business.

While he draws on his talent to fill the canvas, the spirit of his work comes from his subjects. Many of those he's captured in acrylics were discovered in animal shelters, places Burns frequently visits when searching for inspiration.

While on the road to appear at a showing or meet with gallery own-

ers, Burns typically will take an hour or so to visit the local animal shelter. He takes with him a camera and quick explanation for any curious workers he may encounter.

He'll stroll slowly down the aisle looking into each pen, yearning to take each home but knowing, with three dogs and a cat already part of the family, he has to settle for a photograph.

Once the film is developed Burns will study the prints, each one invoking the memory of an all-too-brief encounter. His mind's eye dismantles the chain-link fence that stood between them as he tries to

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RON BURNS  
ARTIST

# Inner beauty comes out

— INNER, from page C1

imagine the particular dog or cat as someone's pet.

"There's usually a spark, something in their eyes," Burns says. "That's what I try to catch as I paint. I don't want to show just a colorful dog or cat, but a personality."

Such trips take their toll. His wife, Buff, used to accompany him when he began his forays five years ago, which he'd started at her behest. At first he'd done only portraits of their own pets, a practice he stopped when Buff couldn't bear to part with the paintings.

And so he sought other subjects. Shelters were the logical choice. He never counted on the emotional drain.

"It's so difficult to go because I'll paint some of these pets and never know their fate," Burns says. "That's why I only go to no-kill shelters. When someone looks at a particular work and says, 'Oh, that's so cute, where's the dog now?', I usually say they were adopted. I don't know that, of course, but I feel much more comfortable saying that knowing the animal was in a no-kill shelter."

To balance the moral scales, Burns donates money to each of the shelters he visits. When a painting sells, he sends a check. No letter of explanation. He'd prefer to blend in.

The shelters have done well with Burns. Business has been brisk enough not only to support the unsolicited donations, but to finance a home being built on nine acres on the Sedona plain. The two-story house with studio lies in the shadow of cliffs that happen to be the color of the dachshund's tongue that takes shape on his latest work.

Burns leans closely to the canvas, dabbing a bit of magenta to a lolling tongue. He suddenly applies the brush to the dog's flanks and, against all sense of color correctness, the streak of red blends perfectly.

The artist stands back, absentmindedly running his left hand along cotton shorts that are stained with the colors of a dozen portraits. With his sleeveless white T-shirt, Burns looks more like a California surfer than a studious artist. His spiky blond hair and youthful appearance make him look 10 years younger than his 42 years.

He steps lightly across the two paint-flecked plywood boards that protect the carpet underneath. Tools of the trade are scattered along a folding table that looks like a refugee from an elementary school art class. At one end plastic jars of acrylic paint are wedged tightly among paint-stained rags. At the other, a dozen brushes are lined up next to Burns' palettes — five paper plates spattered by an acrylic rainbow.

He might work six hours a day, committing an orphaned animal to

canvas or perhaps the dairy cow he happened to spy while driving in Cottonwood. Or he's working on a commissioned pet portrait, which goes beyond simply copying a photo with paint and brush.

"I hope this doesn't sound New Agey, but I try to get into the animal's personality," Burns says. "Sometimes owners will send me a note about the pet and why they love him so much. Once I received a videotape. The more I know, the better."

Several years ago the only color in Burns' world was corporate blue. He headed his own design firm, working with companies to produce everything from packaging to annual reports. He created many things, but nothing he would call art.

To escape the drabness, he retreated during rare off-hours to his easel, painting bloated blue-clad executives into a pastel corner. The works, more therapy than art, are kept for memories rather than inherent worth.

Burns had always had talent, but his father, an ever-practical factory worker, counseled his son on the importance of a weekly paycheck.

Burns channeled his art into commercial design, meeting his father's expectations more than his own. He was successful enough to start his own business in Los Angeles, at one point employing 12 people.

That was before the earth moved. A 1987 quake damaged his office to a point where building officials condemned it. Burns and his wife eventually moved to Sedona, where the biggest natural disaster might be a malfunctioning vortex. He ran his business out of his home, making weekly trips to LA to meet clients.

As his interest in commercial art dwindled, so did his business. He spent more time on his art, finding his pets eminently better subjects than faceless executives.

Visitors to the Burnses' home admired his work, some to the point of buying it on the spot.

"That's when I realized I might be able to do something I've always dreamed about," Burns says. "Do something I love and make good money."

He closed what was left of his business in 1991 to focus his attention, and his talent, on painting pastel pets.

Burns has branched into still life, bringing his electric palette to toasters and coffee cups. He has come to seek images drained of color so he can infuse them with vibrancy.

He's not sure where this kaleidoscopic highway will lead, but as long as it's to a world where there are more flea collars than dark suits, he'll be happy.

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