

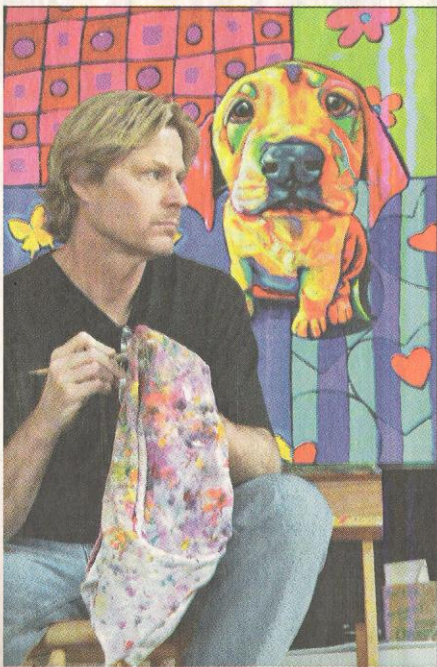
A DOG'S LIFE

Or a cat's. Many are saved, thanks in part to artist Ron Burns' portraits of shelter animals



Photos by LANCE IVERSEN / The Chronicle

Napa artist Ron Burns relaxes in his Napa studio with his dog, Rufus, who is sometimes the subject of his brightly colored portraits. Burns visits animal shelters around the nation to find models for his work. He sends a portion of the sales proceeds to those shelters.



By Andy Demsky
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

His canvases of in-your-face dogs and cats drenched in Day-Glo colors are hot sellers. He delivered 18 paintings to an Arizona gallery. By the next day, 12 had sold. At a fund-raising auction for Tony LaRussa's Animal Rescue Foundation in Walnut Creek late last year, ice skater Brian Boitano and country music performer Keith Urban engaged in a friendly bidding war, sending the price of one of his prints up and up, until Boitano took it home for \$1,500.

Currently, the Humane Society of the United States is featuring Burns' artwork in public service ads running in Newsweek, Sports Illustrated, Time, People and Fortune.

A new Napa Valley winery, Barking Dog Vineyards, is using one of his images on the label of its first release of Merlot.

And while all the buzz about his work is great, Napa artist Ron Burns has got something more

in mind than the sale of \$5,000 canvases. For Burns, his art doesn't just imitate life. It saves it. "It's great when my work gets some attention, but it's really about the shelter animals and what it can do for them, finding them homes," he says.

His wiggly, pop-art imagery all begins in animal shelters, settings of concrete floors and wire mesh all around. Wherever he and Buff, his wife of 22 years, travel, Burns takes his 35mm camera to a local shelter, where dogs and cats of all breeds look up into his lens with a mix of inquisitiveness and warmth.

Later, he uses the photos of those homeless animals as models for his paintings. Working this way, he's captured the likenesses of yellow Labs and orange tabbys from coast to coast.

His originals are acrylic on canvas; reproductions are giclee (jhee-clay), a process that

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Portraits of dogs and cats aid shelter animals

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involves high-resolution digital scans printed by a special inkjet printer using archival-quality inks. He sells all the original canvases he paints — about 50 a year — and hundreds of prints ranging in price from \$300 to \$2,000.

After each sale, Burns sends a percentage (a minimum of 10 percent, but often much more) of the proceeds to help support the work of the shelter in which he found his model.

His charity work includes providing artwork to benefit the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, PetsMart and PetsMart Charities, and Canine Companions for Independence. Burns is currently Artist in Residence for The Humane Society of the United States.

His latest project was born out of the rubble of the World Trade Center collapse on Sept. 11.

He recently completed a large painting of Sirius, a bomb-sniffing Labrador retriever who worked at the Twin Towers complex. On the day of the attacks, Sirius and his owner and handler, David Lim, were separated and when Tower 2 collapsed, the dog was killed.

Burns, who was moved by the story, contacted Lim. He learned not only the love and nobility of Sirius, but the dire need for funding across the country to train search and rescue animals.

"People train these dogs on their own time and out of their own pockets. Only when there's a disaster does FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Administration) say we're going to pay you to go to this disaster and bring your dogs in," Burns says. "There just isn't enough money to train these dogs, so that's why we're going to work with the HSUS (Humane Society of the United States) and donate monies to them."

Burns hopes to raise money by selling posters and note cards of his painting of Sirius.

"It costs \$3,000 to sponsor a dog. So we're looking at raising enough money to sponsor a lot of dogs," he says.

The 2-foot-by-3-foot posters sell for \$25 each and are only available at www.ronburns.com.

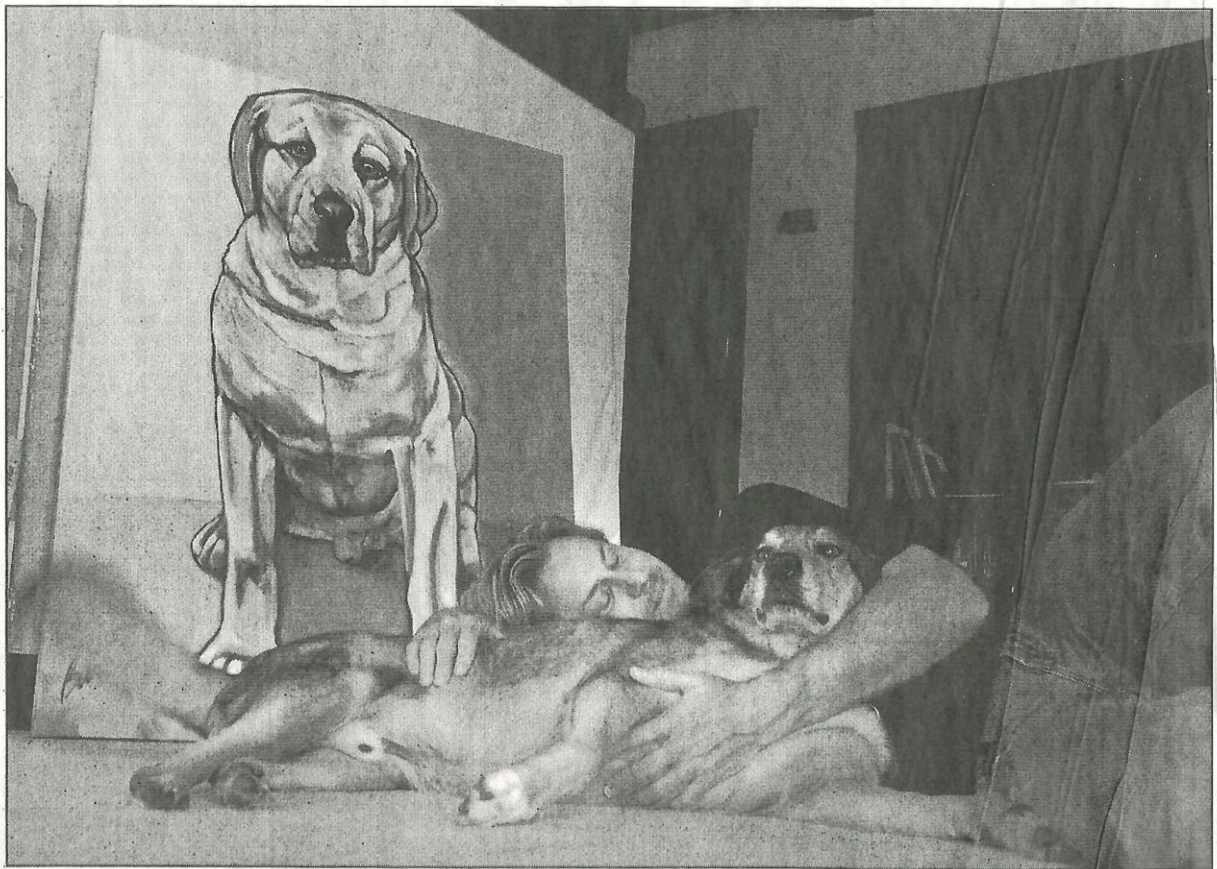
Burns also hopes to raise funds for the ASPCA's program for Pet Therapy dogs.

"These are dogs that go to disaster sites and are made available to people who've gone through horrific events. Just having these dogs around makes them feel better, gets rid of their depressed state," Burns says.

Burns started his career as a graphic artist. His Los Angeles company, Ron Burns Design, worked with high profile clients such as Xerox, TRW and Dick Clark Productions. His fast-paced commercial life ended abruptly in 1987 when the Whittier earthquake shook his company's building so hard it was closed for repairs.

Buff was too unnerved by the earthquake to stay in Los Angeles and took a spiritual breather in Carmel and in Napa Valley. Eventually the couple moved to Sedona, Ariz. Ron continued to spend his weeks in L.A., but more and more felt that his life needed to change.

"I had always loved art. I worked toward my undergraduate degree in an L-shaped building (at Ohio State, where he majored in industrial design) and one wing was commercial art and the other was fine art," Burns says. "I'd look in the windows and see them painting and throwing pottery and think, 'that looks like fun.'"



Artist Ron Burns and his dog, Rufus, share a quiet moment in front of a portrait of Sirius, a bomb-sniffing Labrador retriever who was killed in the Twin Towers disaster.

LANCER/VERSEN / The Chronicle

He started by painting images of corporate executives with huge, bloated bodies and minuscule heads. But later he switched to doing riotous imagery of their family dogs and cat.

Wanting to see if there was a market for his paintings, he and Buff started visiting galleries in nearby Scottsdale.

"In one gallery, we stopped and said to the owner, 'What do you think?' And the owner looked at it and she said, 'It's awfully bright, maybe if you toned the colors down and went a little more muted.' She loved the subject matter but told us, 'I don't know if my clients will go for it.'"

Burns talked her into taking some of his work anyway and the gallery sold everything he gave her in the first week.

"Now she sells everything I can get her," Burns says.

The idea for painting shelter animals evolved naturally.

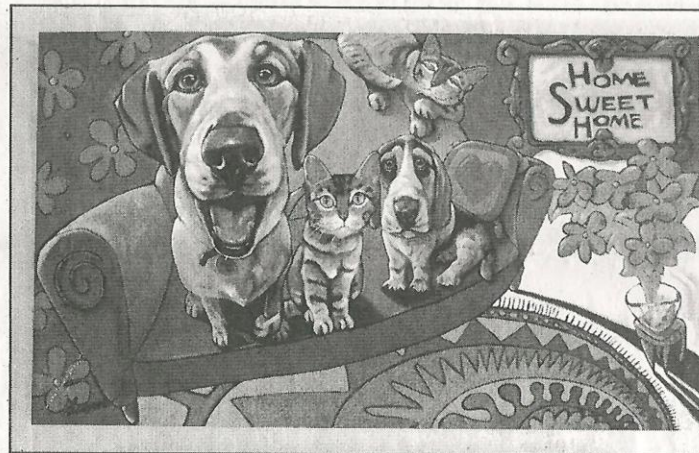
"We got our first dogs — we call them our kids — from a shelter and I started painting them. Then after I sold a couple of paintings, I thought, you gotta stop, you're painting our kids and selling them. We weren't comfortable with that," Burns says.

On a road trip to Aspen, Colo., Ron got the idea to visit a local shelter and take his camera.

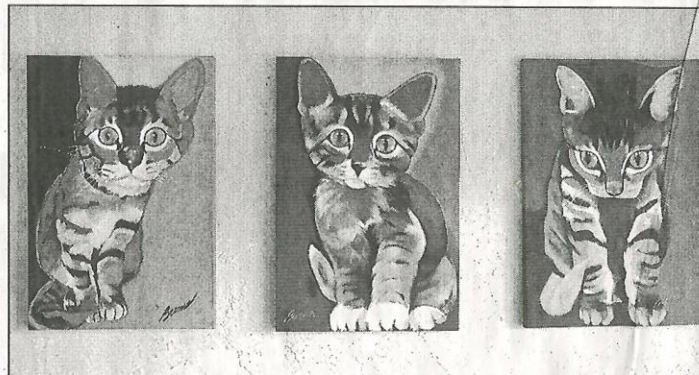
"It was emotional for me. It's always emotional, but I know now that in the long run the process I go through makes me a better painter by seeing the dogs and the cats in shelters. And ultimately, I'm able give back," he says.

He created a series of paintings from dogs at the Aspen shelter and took them to an art show in Los Angeles — and they sold out.

"We came back to Sedona and we felt so good, we thought, let's write a check for a portion of what we sold at the show to the Aspen shelter. Later a teenage guy from



"Home Sweet Home" is the pointed message in Burns' painting inspired by homeless cats and dogs, above. A kitten from a shelter is illustrated in three positions, below. "I start each painting with the eyes — the pet comes to me through those eyes," he says.



the shelter called us and was so excited. He went, 'This is, like, so totally cool.'"

They now often send their contributions to shelters anonymously, Burns says.

Burns also produces commissioned pet portraits. Working from photographs sent by pet

owners, he puts his brightly colored brushes to canvases that range in price from \$12,000 to \$20,000.

"I start each painting with the eyes — the pet comes to me through those eyes," he says. "I'll sketch the whole thing out then I finish the eyes first and if they look real, then — this is a little Sedona thing probably — it's like, OK, talk to me and just tell me how you want to be painted so when I'm done, I've done justice to you as the dog or the cat."

Last October, Ron and Buff lost their beloved dog, 14-year-old Jazzzy. Burns decided to try to paint her portrait as a surprise for his wife.

"Painting Jazzzy was terribly emotional, tears and all that. I was preparing for a show, we had people coming in for the holidays," Burns says. "Buff and I are together all the time, so I'd have to wait until she'd run out to get groceries and I'd pull the canvas out and go crazy."

"I'd be staring in those eyes, and I'd be, 'Jazzzy, talk to me, we've got to get this painting done because Mom's only gone for a short period of time.'"

The large painting, a portrait of a black Lab with large joyful eyes, a big wet nose and something like a smile, now hangs in the family room of their home.

Looking at it now, Burns remarks on his colorful, almost abstract approach:

"I love color by itself, but the nice thing is, there's something about putting that color into the pet on the canvas that gives it a sense of life forever. If you paint them in normal colors, it's more of the pet that was, where with this kind of color, you get the pet that lives forever."

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