

JEANNE TOVREA: NEW INFORMATION IN
THE MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF A VALLEY HEIRESS

PHOENIX

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THE MAN WHO KNOCKED
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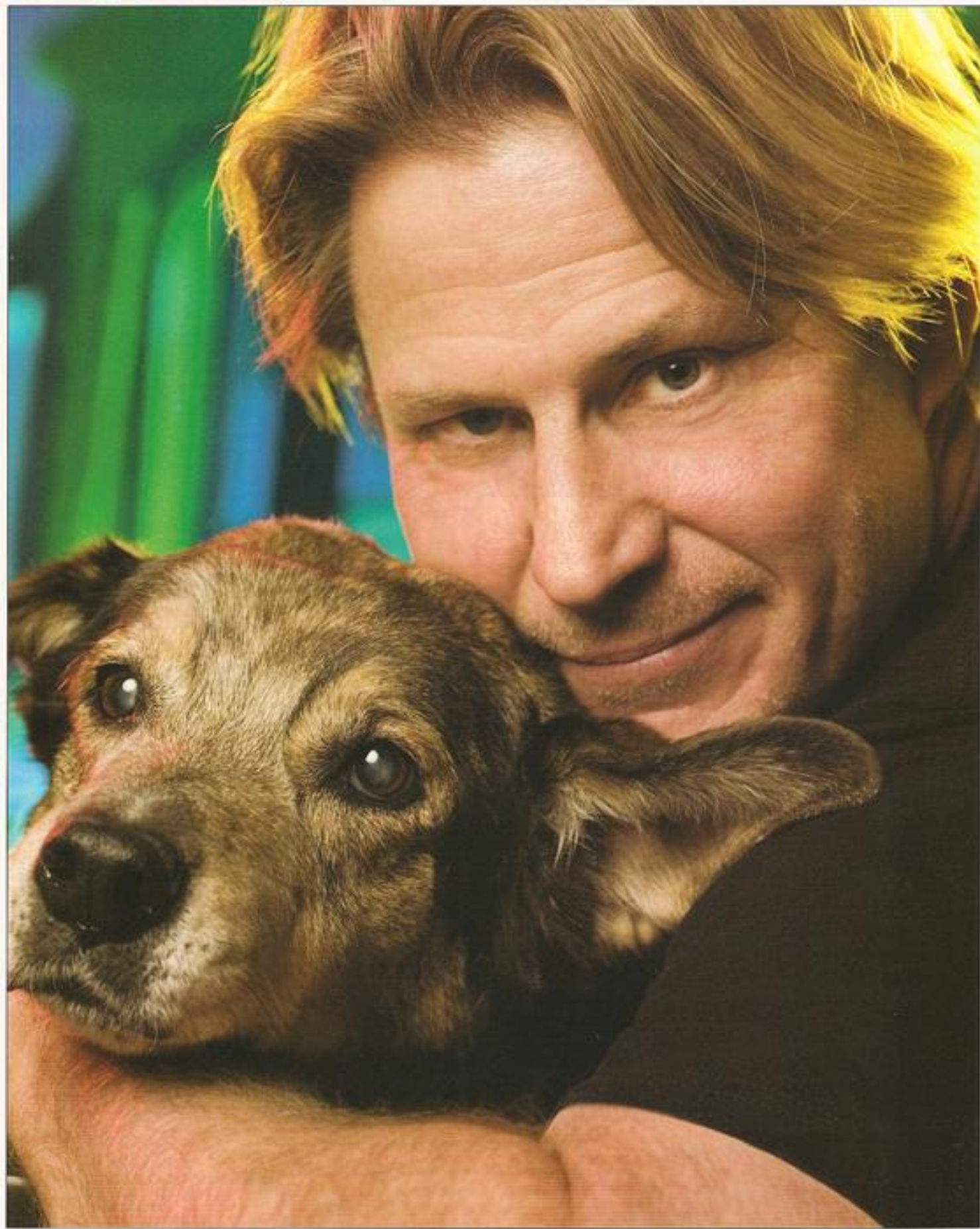
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RON BURNS (with Rufus)

Ron Burns is a dog guy. Scratch that. He loves all animals, but it's the dogs that really tug at this artist's heartstrings. In fact, it was his 15-year-old mutt, Rufus, who first inspired him to paint animals. After a long and stressful career running a graphic design company in Los Angeles, Burns moved to Sedona with his wife, Buff, and pursued his passion for painting. He transformed still-life chrome objects into colorful abstracts on canvas, but as he gazed into Rufus' wide, doggie eyes one day, Burns says he knew he had to paint him.

That was his first animal portrait, which still hangs in his house, and Burns' career has taken off since. Today, Burns, 52, along with his wife and two adopted dogs, lives and works in Scottsdale, where he paints bright, neon portraits of dogs and cats for loving pet parents. These include celebrity pets, like Joan Rivers' black Pekingese and Elizabeth Taylor's white Maltese. The commissioned paintings come at a pretty penny, starting at \$25,000 a pop. Also, as the first artist-in-residence for the Humane Society of the United States, the creator of Arizona's "pet-friendly" license plates, and the official artist for the first-ever National Dog Day last August, Burns has dedicated his artistic career to promoting pet adoption, as well as spaying and neutering pets.

How much time do you spend on an animal portrait?

I like to paint fast because of the abstract style of the paintings. If I can just paint from a picture of the animal, I can do it in a couple of days. If I'm doing three dogs in a truck with a bunch of other objects around them, and it has to look exactly like them, it takes maybe a month. Then there's the prep time, like doing sketches of the dog.

Do you meet your subjects before painting them?

For local people, I like to take my camera and go meet the dog or cat and spend time with them. If they're in another state, they usually just send a photo or video of their animal. There have been a couple of occasions where people have flown me out first class to meet their dogs. Those are the extreme dog people.

Who was your first pet?

Brownie. His picture is in the back of my book [*The Dogs of Ron Burns*]. He was a mutt. The dogs we usually got as a kid wandered onto the property and we took care of them. I grew up in Ohio, in farm country, down the road from my grandparents. They raised farm stock, and dogs to them were just things that kept the rodent population down. Eventually, I turned them into these real domestic, sleep-in-the-bed-with-me kinds of dogs.

Why did you decide to paint only animals?

I've always loved dogs. They've always been a part of my family, and I don't think it's much different than Monet's background or Matisse's. I'm sure the

artists who paint landscapes try to define themselves and their moods by what they paint. For me, I was looking at Rufus one day lying on the ground, and I thought, you know, he's what moves me.

Why always the bright, neon colors?

It's kind of cool to take dogs, which are usually gray, brown or beige, and put them into the color palette that really shows what their life is all about. My paintings capture the personality of your dog when you come home and see them and they give you nothing but love and affection.

A lot of artists now are doing similar work.

Does that flatter or frustrate you?

They say to copy is the best form of flattery, and I see that, and I understand that, and there's a part of me that appreciates that. But when I started painting, I wanted to do something totally innovative and new. What I appreciate in other art is when I can say, 'Wow, I've never seen that before.' Frustrating isn't the right word. It's not the copying of the art, but the copying of Ron Burns [that bothers me]. They try to copy every little thing I do sometimes.

When you paint animals, do you go by photos, or do the pets sit live for you?

I wish they could. I haven't found too many dogs that can sit as long as it takes me to do the paintings.

What's the strangest request for a pet portrait you've received?

Years ago I did an African tree frog. It was odd for me because the frog is already a colorful creature. I thought they wouldn't see anything new and different, but it got done and they loved it.

What is it about Rufus that you love so much?

I just know he loves me so deeply that he'll do anything for me, and he does do everything for me. I call him Velcro, because he's always attached to me.

What do you think humans can learn from animals?
Unconditional love.

What projects are you working on now?

I have an art show coming up in March at Vessley Fine Arts in Scottsdale. It's called *The Dog-Vinci Code*. A lot of people are wondering, what dog is going to play Jesus, who's going to be Judas, etc. So I'm doing a lot of paintings for that. I'm hoping to have at least a dozen new paintings up.

If you could be any animal, what would it be?

I gotta say a dog. Actually, my dog, because I know how he gets treated.

— Interviewed by Ashlea Deahl

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