

All the good news about animals, wildlife, and the earth

Best Friends

November/December 2002

**575:
Art that
Saves
Animals**

**The “Best”
Kind of
Shelter**

**A Modern
Explorer’s
Journey to
Protect the
Red Panda**

Plus:

- **Tales from a *Super* Adoption**
- **The Fast and the Furr-ious**
- **Turtles on Wheels**

Silent No Longer

A new exhibition by artist Cyrus Mejia takes its title, 575, from the fact that an average of 575 homeless dogs and cats are still being killed at shelters throughout the country each hour.

As well as paintings, the exhibition includes many other art forms, including 575 collar tags, arranged into a display of ravens, and a ceremony in which 575 candles are lit.

The exhibition is currently at the St. George Art Museum, and will then be on tour in selected cities.

► **By Elizabeth Hess**

Throughout history, artists with overt passions and strong ideological points of view have created images that are able to generate consciousness and advocate for action.

Art can provoke, but it must also communicate, not to mention please the eye. Cyrus Mejia's monumental devotion to animals is immediately clear in his current group of canvases, conceptual installations and works on paper.

In the paintings, dogs are the main protagonists. Mejia's portraits of individuals and groups of dogs seem particularly intimate and, as a result, are immediately compelling. Viewers enter these images through the all-knowing eyes of the dogs; once inside, we see that Mejia paints the animals with respect and affection. It's as if the artist inhabits their bodies, energetically depicting their movements and social interactions with each other.



“Cyrus's art has a very important message: We have a responsibility as caretakers for the animals. His art is a social commentary, and it does change people.”

— Jenny Dawn Stukey, Curator, St. George Art Museum



3 To 5. These 575 drawings of cats are done with brush and ink on Sumi paper. Each scroll is approximately 7' long by 18" wide. On average, cats will live in shelters for 3 to 5 days before being killed. Each of these drawings was made using only 3 to 5 brush strokes. The entire series was executed in 5 days.

These are optimistic paintings. Even *When?* which isolates one dog who is waiting, perhaps in a shelter, suggests that this dog's day will eventually come. Hopefully sooner rather than later.

As one of the founders of Best Friends, Mejia is obviously an advocate for animal rescue. His most didactic piece, a life-size doghouse that is covered with a collection of collars from shelter dogs, speaks directly to the fact that millions of companion animals are euthanized annually; each one of these collars used to be on the neck of a living creature. Turning this horrific reality into a palatable work of art is an accomplishment. This piece will make some viewers weep yet it is not the least bit gruesome.

The real weapons in Mejia's arsenal are the colors in his palette. The deep yellows, purples and shadowy contrasts throughout his canvases are the light and splendor in this work. 🐾

Elizabeth Hess is a journalist who is currently writing about animals. She has also written on art for the *Village Voice*, *Artforum*, *Art in America* and *Art News*. She is the author of *Lost and Found: Dogs, Cats and Everyday Heroes at a Country Animal Shelter*.



Spiral Dance (oil on canvas).
36" x 46" © 2002

Empty Nest. 575 butterflies cut from shelter cage cards and strung on nylon filament. The butterflies are displayed flying from a stainless steel cage like those used in animal shelters.



The 575 Project

Last year, between four and five million unwanted pets were put to death in shelters in this country. Five million would be 13,800 every day, or 575 dogs and cats killed every hour.

I conceived the 575 Project as both an installation and a memorial. In the tradition of the Holocaust Museum and the Aids Quilt, each piece in the 575 Project is a memorial to the 575 unwanted pets that were destroyed each hour last year.

Physical objects can become emotionally "charged," and can trigger forgotten feelings. The materials I used in creating the 575 Project are things ordinarily associated with dogs and cats, like collars, tags, and pet food cans. I collected 575 of each object, and created a piece of art from each collection. Many of these objects came from animal shelters around the country, and have a direct and tangible connection to animals that have been destroyed.

Using traditional mediums of drawing, painting, assemblage, and ceramics, as well as performance, the 575 Project gives form to the idea that "euthanasia" is not an acceptable solution to the overpopulation of domestic animals. I look forward to the day when this idea, which has already taken root in so many communities, will blossom to the point where there are truly no more homeless pets.

— *Cyrus Meija*



Purple Shadow Game Time (oil on canvas). 28" x 40" © 2002

The Migration of 575 Good Souls. Handmade ceramic ravens with 575 cancelled rabies tags.



“This has changed my perspective on life and opened my eyes.”

— *Visitor to the exhibition*