

DOG SHOW

Artists: Anthony Frederick Ward, Annete Hale, David Spooner, Euan Macleod, Gina Allain, Glen O'Malley, Glenn Morgan, Ian Smith, Jonathan McBurnie, Pat Hoffie, Peter Hudson, Ron McBurnie, Sally Duhig, Sally Molloy, Stephen Nothling, Sue Ryan, Zoe Porter, Andrew Moynihan, Cal Schenkel, James Watts, Garry Namponan, Bevan Namponan, Leigh Namponan, David Marpoondin & Roderick Yunkaporta



Artists (left to right): Leigh Namponan, Bevan Namponan, Leigh Namponan, David Marpoondin,
Various Aurukun Dogs (Ku), natural ochres with synthetic polymer binder on milkwood

Dog Show

(wow. much wiki. so amaze.)

Dogs. Why a show on dogs? What kind of cues does a show centred around dogs send out? Too much potential for cuteness, the vernacular, the sentimental. Too much probability of strained humour – of clichés and corniness. Too much evidence of easy anthropomorphisms as a way of revealing human traits.

And yet the representations of dogs in this exhibition, no matter how matter-of-fact, how personal or eccentric or every-day, will fall within an age-old urge to represent the dog as a guardian of the invisible lines that separate realms. We look into the eyes of dogs and see both reflections of ourselves and reflections of what we might lose or that we might have already lost.



Stephen Nothingling, *Dog Tree* 2015, oil on canvas

Although the dog gods of deep history have often been used to symbolise urges and energies that seem polar opposites from YouTube images of cuteness, there is a sense that these representations share an acknowledgement of the role dogs have played in leading us between zones of awareness.

Cerberus, the guardian of the underworld in Greek and Roman mythology, was a three-headed hell-hound that made the blood of the most stoic of classical heroes run cold. Cerberus was shackled at the borderline between the living and the dead, there as a sentinel to keep any curious members of the living world from taking a peep and also – just as importantly – to keep the dead from returning to the world they may have half-remembered.



Sue Ryan, *Little Mongrel* 2013,
ghost net, galvanized wire, chicken wire,
fishing line, retrieved rubber thong whittled teeth,
glass taxidermy eyes, oil paint

Cerberus, therefore, was a maintainer of order – a frothing, snarling multi-headed beast often depicted with a mane of snakes and lion's claws. And although the renderings of his presence mutated through time, culture and predilection, representations of Cerberus remained, at core, those of a dog. Loyal only to Hades, keeper of the underworld, Cerberus was content to feast on the bodies of the dead – a tidy way of making sure that only the spirits of the dead were permitted to pass through into the underworldly realm. Feeding Cerberus took more doing than the pets of today; the mighty Cerberus' triple-rage also had to be well-sated in triplicate in order to perform his important role of guardian of the separation of the realms. Scholarly speculation about Cerberus' heads varies: some say that the number was necessary to be able to perceive the past, the present and the future. What an image! What powers!

So many of the genetically engineered breeds of today seem aeons away from the slavering, all-knowing Cerberus. Munchkin, a You Tube favourite, is a tiny toddling Shi Tzu bundled into a furry hand-made half-teddie suit – a hybrid animal-toy, the little creature’s appeal is contagious to the point that it’s unsettling. Their features conform to every trope of genetically modified helplessness possible in a sentient being. The internet abounds with such images of the dog as the innocent people-plaything; another popular page on the Earth Prom site features 23 Chubbie Puppies Mistaken for Teddy Bears, where the lambent eyes and beguiling expressions on the faces of canines reflect a deep human need to coo over the innocent, the vulnerable and the unselfconscious nature of creatures.

But there is another on-line phenomenon that runs closer to the age-old role dogs have had at a range of borderlines that include mythological realms, psychic states, territorial edges and between-world zones. If Cerberus held the borderline between the underworld and the world above it, then it could be argued that the borderline between the unreal world of the internet and the in-real world it influences has been recently commandeered by the knowing features of Doge.

The top meme of 2013 was an image of a Shiba Inu’s face over-written by multi-coloured font featuring phrases in the kind of Japanese-English creole sometimes featured on tee shirts. Semi-literate phrases like “so wow”, “very vroom”, “how to article?” are used to suggest the dog’s interior monologue while it undergoes the trials and tribulations of the world around it. The words are poised on that delicious edge where sense is almost – but not quite – made manifest. And the elusive nature of this crypto-language is doubly endorsed by the knowing intelligence of the dog’s gaze. The Shiba Inu is both kawaii (cute) and wild. This small spitz breed is rare in that it is a direct descendent of the ancient dog breeds dating back to the third century BC. This combination of lupine wildness and domesticated appeal makes it a perfect foil for thinking about what it might be thinking about: looking right back at you through that text screen, the particular breed’s face harks at both the wildness of the fox and the hyper-intelligence of an anime – at a time when all meaning seems to be on a fast-track to oblivion this combination produces a meme that seems to challenge any remaining conviction the viewer might have about whether the struggle to make anything more than a vague, semi-coherent sense of the world really matters any more.

If Kobusu, the real-world dog behind the Doge meme, can be seen as a contemporary version of Cerberus, guarding the border between worlds, then she is proving to be a guardian with powerful capacities to affect both worlds – for the meme’s viral potency has, remarkably, had increasing influences on the worlds of commerce, advertising and language. In late 2013 the popularity of the meme was followed up by the launch of the Dogecoin, the first cryptocurrency to be based on an internet meme. And out there in a tiny corner of the real world the cryptocurrency actually proved capable of functioning when it was used to sponsor a NASCAR (the largest sanctioning body of stock car racing in the US) vehicle!



Ron McBurnie, *May The Wind Be With You* 2013, linocut editioned print

And well beyond that specialised enclave the Doge site has launched a global viral adoption of ‘broken English’ that has become part and parcel of the way we communicate on-line. In 2013 MTV’s list of “Fifty Things Pop Culture Had Us Giving Thanks For” included the meme at number 12, and the short-hand language creolisations of text-speak have been altered from there on (post-lol). If the Comic Sans MS typeface used in the meme was once relegated to the daggiest of ‘never use’ categories in advertising, the meme has sky-rocketed it in popularity: enter doge meme into the You Tube search bar and all the site’s text is displayed in the font styles and colour used by the meme.



Garry Namponan, *Camp Dog* 2015, natural ochres with synthetic polymer binder on milkwood

Although this exhibition of contemporary art focusing on dogs may deal with a range of approaches to the matter-at-hand – the dog – it will also no doubt reflect some of the issues, themes and mythologies that have continued to run as a current between our past relationships to dogs and those of the present. Images in the show may present themselves as everyday, as ‘cute’, as appealing, but such imagery may also flicker with shadows about the ways dogs continue to affect us in the present just as they have in the past. The presence of dogs in our lives throughout history is evidence of a co-dependency that has continued since the first hunts, the first gatherings around fire-embers, the first needs for mutual comfort. Whether dog-‘owners’ or not, we are each affected by their presence in relation to what it means to be human. Throughout history they have offered us close reflections of the capacity for wild savagery as well as that of helpless cuteness. Animal behaviourists tell us that the fact that the dog has eyebrows (unlike the facial structure of, for example, the cat) has contributed to its capacity to reflect our own expressions and to look back at us with what seems like unmatched understanding. We turn to dogs to represent aspects of ourselves that, perhaps paradoxically, the dog already seems to understand.

Pat HOFFIE 2015

(so dog lover / such doge fan / much excite)

Euan Macleod appears courtesy of Victor Mace Fine Art Gallery

Ron McBurnie appears courtesy of grahame galleries + editions

Ian Smith appears courtesy of Heiser Gallery

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