

LIFE OF PETS

Our furry friends have given us comfort and joy during lockdown. Oxfordshire painter and sculptor Michelle Pearson has built a career on capturing in art these beloved creatures



Michelle Pearson Cooper has a rare understanding of cats and dogs as individual characters. Her portraits have won her a long list of celebrity commissions. She captures the spirit of big cats from distant deserts, adored dogs and cats at home where they “reign” in their owners’ lives.

She lives in an Oxfordshire farmhouse with her husband, Justin Cadbury and their two dogs, Wizard, a lurcher Saluki, deerhound cross, and a Labrador called Kilo.

Michelle won an art scholarship to Millfield School, continued her art studies in Florence with “la Signorina” Nerina Simi (1890-1987) described by Pietro Annigoni, as the “greatest art teacher of the 20th century” venerated by generations of pupils.

Michelle is inspired by primeval landscapes and their wild creatures, on her travels to India, Africa, Oman and the UAE. Michelle has given substance to her ideas born in

the silence of the desert and the solitude of the wilderness.

“I love animals,” she says. “I try to capture their character, not rob them of dignity, nor turn them into humans. My pictures were sought after as an antidote to the maddeningly popular Victorian cat and dog portraiture with its saccharine human emotions.”

Michelle is unusual in that she works in a wide range of media, including oils, watercolour, charcoal, clay casting in bronze. She describes her sculpture as a “bit of an experiment” to start with. “You begin with an armature – a skeleton framework made from wire – and then build up the sculpture itself with layers of clay.”

Michelle triumphed early in her career with the sale of a 40x50in oil on canvas (Waiting for the Houbara) to His Royal Highness The King of Bahrain. The King commissioned 16 more works.

Other celebrity commissions include a larger than life size portrait of couturier →



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Michael J. ...

Bruce Oldfield's adored Ridgeback, and the favourite animal friends of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, the Marquis of Blandford, Harry Hyams, builder of Centrepont, industrialist Lord Hanson.

Michelle, 63, held her first exhibition in 2014, encouraged by her husband Justin, of the Cadbury chocolate dynasty. Her last exhibition, "Reigning Cats and Dogs" took place in London last October, featured paintings not only of Ms Cooper's own furry friends, but portraits of local friends and residents' own pets.

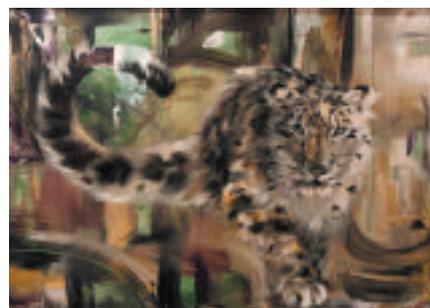
Michelle divides her time between her home in Oxfordshire and her studios in London and South Africa where one of her favourite places is Tenikwa situated on the Eastern Cape of South Africa. It is a wildlife rehabilitation centre set up by Mandy and Len Freeman.

They take injured, abandoned and displaced animals, rehabilitate and when ready return them to the wild. Tenikwa allows Michelle to spend hours of sketching time close up without being a threat (or vice versa).

Michelle, who lives near Didcot and works in an a 400 year-old barn converted into an art studio, says: "I have had the privilege to walk with several of the Cheetah including Simbali, Chester, Shaka and Thandi. They, in turn, have been painted for posterity."



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She adds: "We were in South Africa when lockdown started happening, so we were kind of removed from the situation. We got the second-to-last flight out of Cape Town and managed to get back to the UK on March 27.

"When we were locked down back in Oxfordshire, however, we had this incredible weather, people were looking at the world in a different way, away from their phones and computers, so I had this idea of painting what was going on outside in the garden. We all became so aware of our environment.

"There is a big space where the dogs can walk, and farmland surrounding us. There's so many wildflowers and sunflowers this summer. It makes you appreciate the county more and over lockdown I feel, like most people, my priorities were reset. I started stopping and looking at important things, instead of life in general taking over."

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