



**ARTIMALS
CREATOR
NOELLE
DASS**

Artimals for All Seasons

Local painter **Noelle Dass** discovers the joy of doodling **BY RICK LEVIN**

In the beginning there were doodles – doodles, and a growing sense of frustration. An aspiring painter, Noelle Dass was attracted to the exacting tradition of classical realism. She started taking art classes at Lane Community College while holding down a full-time job at the Hult Center. What Dass wanted was to learn to wield her brush with an eye to the anatomical precision and intricate shadings of the Old Masters, but it was tough going.

"It's hard to find people that teach it very well," Dass said of her search for mentors in the classical mode. She struggled along nonetheless, making do with what instruction and inspiration she could scrounge up. "It was really fun, but I started to get frustrated because I didn't have any models," she says.

For as long as she can remember, Dass has been drawing stuff on scrap paper and in the margins of notebooks. She's filled sketchbooks with these drawings. "I'm a chronic doodler," she says. Born of artistic stalemata, she decided to make something of this seemingly absent-minded habit.

"I had these little doodles I had done," Dass says. "I thought, I'm just going to paint these. So I did. It was so fun. I could do any colors I wanted. There were no limitations."

This was in 2003. You can mark that year as the advent of a new make-believe species, which Dass dubbed artimals: brightly colored, sharply drawn characters whose linear simplicity belies a sly, singular sense of individuality. Dass's artimals – a snake, a shark, a giraffe – are almost impossibly cheery, which is not to say cheesy; like the drawings of Theodore Geisel or Matt Groening, a wry, generous sense of humor informs the simple geometry of this Eugene artist's fanciful creatures. Dass's artimals, like the sneetches of Suess, are immediately recognizable and uniquely hers.

"I think they have their own personalities," Dass says of the artimals. "I think I just sort of channel these personalities. I won't even know what I'm about to draw. I'll just try to clear my mind."

Many of the artimals feature their own aphorism, brief captions that capture some sort of essence. For instance, a cylindrical, bi-toned robot – just about the cutest robot you've ever seen – stands above the Orwellian phrase "I Will Not Be Assimilated," while a snake sporting a suspicious lump in its throat is saying, "Mouse? What Mouse?!" Dass says that oftentimes she won't know the defining trait of what she's drawing until it's finished. "The snake looked guilty," she says of her cute reptile. "They sort of reveal themselves to me, and they make me laugh."

Dass sold her first piece in 2004 at Eugene's annual Art and the Vineyard, and not long after that she took the leap and became a full-time artist. Her paintings and prints hang in a handful of galleries across the country, but her biggest venue by far is at Eugene's Holiday and Saturday markets, where she sells prints, tiles and T-shirts. "People here are really good about buying local," says Dass, who recently landed a \$10,000 commission for her artwork in a pediatric unit in Bend.