

Art Animals

A STUDIO MENAGERIE PROVIDES THERAPY

By Bob Keefer

Eugene sculptor Jud Turner often surrounds himself at work with animals — shiny metallic critters made of recycled car parts and other industrial detritus. He's known around town, for example, as the creator of the 16-foot-tall great blue heron that stands guard over the intersection of 13th Avenue and Alder Street near the west entrance to the University of Oregon. He once made a life-sized Columbia mammoth skeleton out of old farm equipment for the Moses Lake Museum and Art Center in Washington.

He's at work these days welding chromed bicycle and other parts into a not-quite-life-sized mustang — the horse, not the car — for Southern Methodist University in Texas.

But Turner has also long been the keeper of real-life animals at the Oblivion Factory, as he has named his studio, which is housed in a generic industrial tract in west Eugene.

"Piggert!" he calls soon after I arrive for a visit. "Boris!"

The current menagerie, which includes two pigs, four rabbits and three cats, offers various kinds of attention to a visitor. The cats, all feral, watch warily from under a parked car. The rabbits are in their hutch and seem oblivious. Piggert and Boris, the pigs, crowd in on Turner when he pulls out a bag of carrots, and they take carrot bits from my hands, too, happily leaving all my fingers intact. It's a bit like feeding sausages to an enthusiastic dog.

"Too many studio hours can make a person buggy," Turner says, when I ask how he and his partner, Renee Mahni, acquired so many animals. "When I got Piggert six years ago, I started bringing him out here with me all the time, just 'cause he was portable. My studio is an industrial warehouse, but it has a yard space attached to it that's fenced. And so it was easy to have him hang out in the yard while I did work, and he seemed quite content out here."

Piggert, by the way, is not exactly a lap pet, though he is affectionate; he weighs about 160 pounds.



Photo by Bob Keefer

"It's a high maintenance pet," Turner says. "You wouldn't want to leave one at home for eight hours while you were at your office job. I'm part of a pig Facebook group, and people who do that come home and find that the pig has dug a hole in the wall just out of boredom and destructiveness. So I'm with these two pigs almost all the time."

That may seem surprising, given Turner's degree of artistic success. After graduating from the UO in drawing and painting, Turner began making small dioramas out of plastic toy parts. Soon his dark vision let him ride the steampunk wave to representation with a gallery in London, which in turn has shown his work in such places as Art Miami and the Houston Fine Art Fair. It wasn't until last November that Turner finally visited

London and attended one of his own openings at the Woolff Gallery.

His animal population has grown along with the popularity of his art. Take the new piglet, Boris.

"I needed to get Piggert a friend because they're social animals, but I don't speak pig. So I got him Boris, and for the first two weeks they hated each other," he says.

"Well, Piggert hated Boris. He wanted to kill him, but that was just because pigs have a social hierarchy and they had to figure out who was alpha. The breeder had said keep them separated by a fence until they get sort of used to each other, and now they're totally, totally bonded. They sleep together. They get anxious if they're not together."

Plenty of drama potential remains, though, at the Oblivion Factory.

"The two female rabbits want to kill each other," Turner says. "So they can't actually be in the same space without violence. Yeah. Wow. We have to double fence them when they're in the yard together to keep them from fighting through one fence. So that didn't work out."

So does keeping all these animals around help his art in any way?

Turner thinks about that for a moment. "It can be calming when I'm having difficulties in the studio," he says. "For example, about four months ago, I had a quite fragile assemblage sculpture that I had just finished, and I turned and knocked it off of the table onto the floor. It broke. I mean, it was, you know, three weeks of continual work suddenly got broken on the floor in front of me and nobody's fault but my own, and I was ready to burn the studio down."

Instead of setting fires in his frustration, Turner went outside and picked up a rabbit and talked to Boris and Piggert about his troubles.

"And it literally, I think, lowered my blood pressure and anxiety and frustration." ■

Meet the menagerie — and buy art — when sculptors Jud Turner and Renee Mahni, along with illustrator M De Vena, printmaker Rebecca Johns, and Matt Dye and Molly mae Culligan of Blunt Graffix, hold an open studio sale at the Oblivion Factory, 3923 Cross Street, from 10 am to 6 pm Aug. 3 and 4.

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