

Art on the Wild Side

EUGENE ARTIST **JULIA OLDHAM** CONTEMPLATES DOGS, SELF HELP AND THE APOCALYPSE

By Bob Keefer

Just before Oregon plunged into lockdown this spring, Eugene artist Julia Oldham began a new art project.

She had brought home an elderly, sick and injured Pomeranian she met at the end of 2018 while volunteering at Eugene's Greenhill Humane Society. Woodrow, as she named the dog, was missing most of the fur on the back end of his body and many of his teeth. He was suffering from multiple broken bones, possibly from being kicked. He could barely eat or stand up.

Oldham brought him home and began the slow process of nursing Woodrow back to health — and back, ultimately, to trust. She bathed him and hand-fed him and cleaned up his diarrhea and gradually introduced him to the three other dogs and two cats that live with her and her husband in south Eugene.

Now she is chronicling Woodrow's recovery in a series of colorful drawings she's made on a computer pad, with the idea of turning his story into a graphic novel or comic book. The sophisticated images have a slightly antiquarian look to them, something like cartoons drawn by an upbeat incarnation of Edward Gorey. Enjoying the quiet and concentration that only an enforced lockdown can provide, Oldham has created more than 50 drawings of the hundred or so she says will tell Woodrow's story.

She's been showing the work on Facebook to an ever-growing and appreciative audience, whose members have posted hundreds of comments like these:

"His past breaks my heart. I am so glad he's with you guys!"

"I love the stories of Woodrow and the rest of your critters so much. Keep them coming please."

"We all look for the light. So happy Woodrow found his."

Oldham has also used her Facebook audience as a focus group. "I've asked people for advice for certain things as I've gone along. I've asked a lot of questions like, 'What do you guys think of the black and white images versus the color ones?' And I've gotten loads of wonderful, really helpful feedback," she says. "Being able to use social media to really actually engage with people is fun."

In 2010 Oldham moved to Eugene from New York City when her husband, Eric Corwin, took a job as a physics professor at the University of Oregon. In some ways it was a natural move for her, despite the fact her art career was just beginning to take off in New York. "I'm a woods girl," she says. "I grew up in a super rural place, and city living has just always been a little hard for me. And so there was this combined feeling of, well, you know, this, this could be a really great opportunity to get out of city life and be in a place that's more comfortable. It feels better to me."

Oldham has shown her wide-ranging, sometimes apocalyptic art in galleries and museums in New York, Chicago, Washington, D.C. and London. Her work includes a 2017 series of digitally altered photos, *She-Wolves*, that imagines her turning into a werewolf, and a 6-minute animation from 2015, *Laika's Lullaby*, memorializing the



'WOODROW'S CHAIR'

flight of Laika, a dog rocketed by the Soviet Union into outer space in 1957 on what proved to be a fatal mission.

Two years ago she and her husband visited the feral dogs that live in the exclusion zone around the wreckage of the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl. The trip resulted in a 20-minute video, *Fallout Dogs*, that documents the dogs' haunting life, as well as an exhibit of still photographs, *Dogs of Future Earth*.

"I've been working with dogs for years," she says. "I'm really interested in them as a species that really co-evolved with us. They're sort of part of us, and they are a reflection of us, too, which I find really fascinating."

Last year, in a collaboration with Eugene Symphony, the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art reached out to Oldham and three other artists — the others are Mika Aono, Anna Fidler and Andrew Myers — to make art inspired by Paul Hindemith's *Symphonic Metamorphosis on Themes of Weber*, which was to have been performed by the orchestra this spring. Oldham was just finishing up her animation of one of the work's four movements in March when the concert, originally scheduled for April 23, was first postponed until June 20 and was later put

off indefinitely. The artists' work is now to be displayed online — without the orchestra — by the museum on June 6.

Meanwhile Oldham is programming an artificial intelligence bot named Bridget the Self-Help Bot to give self-help advice.

"I started by feeding her about a hundred books with 'self help' in the title, and then a hundred books with 'mindfulness' in the title," Oldham says in a Facebook post about the project. "I thought this would give her a pretty good foundation for advice, but I also imagined that she might need some more information about the world around her to be able to really say interesting things. So I fed her some books about animals, outer space, tarot cards, poetry and cryptozoology."

It's all part of a multimedia project she's embarked on called "Loneliness Creeps Down the Spine," a title Bridget herself generated.

Like her creator, Bridget is very interested in animals. Here she weighs in on cats:

"Cats stretch to see and understand time. Cats came to the Earth as our core." ■

See Julia Oldham's drawings of Woodrow at [Facebook.com/juliaoldham](https://www.facebook.com/juliaoldham).