

Faithful Companions, Feathered Friends and Beaming Beasties

*All Drawn Through the Artistry
of Michael Auger*



With his burnished hair, aquiline nose and quicksilver energy, Gaithersburg artist Michael Auger has the air of a Medieval knight—not the Breton King Arthur, but an earlier version of this legendary figure, the one with magical ties to Annwn, the Welsh Otherworld of eternal youth.

Today, he sits perched on his countertop, poised, if you will, between two realms. There's the solid, workaday artist—the fulltime freelancer who applies business savvy and hard work to a diverse portfolio of creative services like animation, graphic design and website development. And then there's the magician—the youthful creator who conjures up all manner of beings in his offbeat fine art and celebrates the human connection to animals in his whimsical pet portraits.

In this latter endeavor, Auger (pronounced O-'zhA, rhyming with OK) is joined by his faithful dog. Where Arthur had Cabal, Auger has Loki.

Named for the Norse trickster god, Loki is high energy and Whippet fast. She's most comfortable flying through the air for a Frisbee, but love for her master has her reclining on the floor afterwards, legs raised so Auger can wipe the mud from her paws.

"She's not very good at staying still," Auger laughs.

Like Loki, Auger's pet portraits are anything but static. They burst from the canvas full of emotion and color. Auger was classically trained on a merit scholarship at Columbus College of Art & Design, and he can render realistic portraits. He just chooses not to. "Art should create emotion," he says. "It should connect to you on some level, and I feel that it's better to do that when you're a little bit looser and take liberties with the style to get more of that heart across."

Heart is what attracted Dawn Hough to Auger's work at last year's

To emphasize their one-of-a-kind character, Auger gives his portraits a bit of 3-D relief. "It's just fun to build the paint up real thick so there's a chewy, van Gogh quality to it," he says. To achieve this effect, he mixes a paste with the acrylic paint.



Adams Morgan Day. "My first impression of him was a very large piece of his art which depicted a bemused cow being beamed into the sky by a UFO," Hough remarks in an e-mail. "The cow's expression, the vibrant colors, the joyfulness all drew me in. I had one of my birds, Pumpkin, on my shoulder as I often do in nice weather and Michael noticed him immediately."

Hough commissioned Auger to paint portraits of both of her birds, named



Pumpkin and Bird. She gave Auger several photos, as well as a general description of the birds' personalities, and she was thrilled with the results. "Pumpkin, the cockatoo, is a goofy bird that will do anything for an almond, and Bird, the Quaker, is a tough, one-legged guy that flew into my life and isn't afraid of anything. The portrait of Pumpkin shows him clowning around, upside down on his perch, stretching for an almond. Bird's portrait is of him gazing out at you, scruffy head

feathers and all." Hough adds that several of her friends—who are also friends to her birds—couldn't believe how well Auger depicted the birds' personalities.

"I love his whimsy," Hough emphasizes, "and how well that can be used to convey an individual's love for his or her pet. I feel his art reminds us to not take life so seriously ... to look for joy in the smallest of things (especially animals)."

Marian Osher, a Rockville-based fine artist who met Auger when he was 12

years old, echoes Hough's sentiments. "His work captures that joy of childhood that's in every person that sometimes gets lost when we grow up," she says.

Raised in Rockville's Fallsmead area, Auger began taking group classes with Osher when he was in middle school and progressed to private instruction during his high school years. "She helped me get my portfolio together," he says. "I published my first book when I was in high school, and she helped me do that and that got me a scholarship to college." The book was *Fish Tails*, a children's book full of Auger's sea animals accompanied by poetry written by his sister.

"He has a wonderful sense of humor," says Osher. "He's a person who really cares about people and animals."

In fact, Auger's care for animals goes beyond his dog Loki and his art. Thirty-six now, Auger has been a pescatarian since he was 21 (a vegetarian who, on occasion, eats fish).

Auger's connection to animals shone through in another recently commissioned work. Alexander McGregor asked

Auger to paint his boyfriend's two dogs as a Christmas present. He, too, found Auger at last year's Adams Morgan Day and was attracted to his use of color and exaggerated depiction of certain features. "The work he displayed had a fun, upbeat and modern feel," McGregor comments in an e-mail.

When McGregor picked up the portrait of Elmo and Zoey, he "was elated with what Michael had done. He really was able to express the crazy hyperactive Elmo and sweet princess Zoey in his piece. My boyfriend loved the piece and it hangs above his desk at home."

Most of Auger's pet portraits have been of dogs, but he's happy to paint any animal. "My motto is, 'If you can dream it, I can draw it,'" he says. "I'd love to do other pets, too. I've done birds, but I haven't done cats yet, which is surprising because there are so many cat people."


Auger began his professional career as an art teacher at St. Bartholomew's School in Bethesda, segued into doing work for a graphic design print shop, before spending five years as art director

for Eastman Strings, where he created Web and marketing materials for the then Montgomery County-based company that helped it to grow into the California giant it is today. Throughout his early career, Auger was moonlighting as well. When he got to the point where he could quit his day job, "it was fantastic," he says, "and I never looked back."

Part of Auger's success as a fulltime freelancer may be the can-do attitude informing his motto. Auger is willing to tackle just about anything—as long as it's art. Graphic design and illustration today account for half of his working hours, but the rest are devoted to his fine art and painting commissions.

"I could show you some of my sketchbooks," Auger says. "Ideas are constantly flowing, and the lucky ones become paintings. It's like a faucet."

His offbeat fine art runs the gamut from whimsical and childlike to cartoony/pop and black-light reactive with a touch of Goth. "I find that there are different kinds of people who are drawn to my work or different parts of my work," says Auger. "There's the kid who drags his parents over and says, 'I want this silly picture for my room' and Mom and Dad have money, so they spoil him. There's that. And then there's the college guy who has maybe had a beer or two and says, 'Oh, I want some black-light reactive art to spruce up my pad.' So there's that, too. And then there's the art collector who just wants something unique and different and usually something big to put on their wall and have it be modern and urban or different."

And then there's the odd commission. "I'm actually painting a toilet for one of my clients," Auger says. A contractor who loves to gamble found him on the Web and knocked on his door one day. "He said, 'You're a freelance artist? I was looking for somebody local and you popped up on the Foursquare. I was driving by and thought I would pull over. Do you do toilets?'" Auger laughs. "I said, 'Sure!'" The piece in progress is an ode to the "Royal Flush." 

You can see more of Michael Auger's art at www.arty4ever.com

