



ECCENTRIC CHILDREN AND DOCILE PETS POPULATE THE MOODY AND COMPELLING ART OF EDMONTON'S DANA HOLST.

TEXT BY BETTY ANN JORDAN

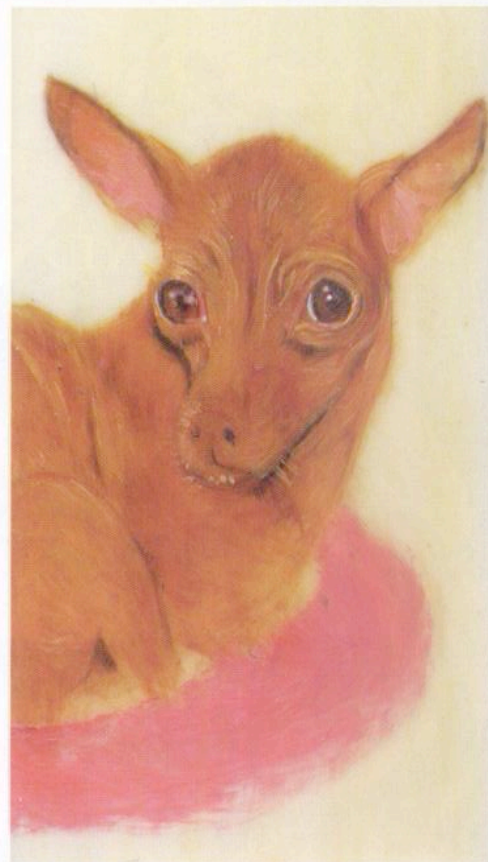
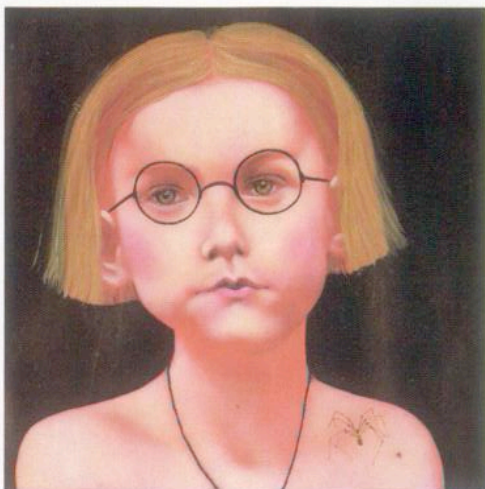


TOP (left to right): Artist Dana Holst. *Clique* (2005), 17" x 22", lithograph; *She Devil* (2005), 11" x 17", lithograph. **ABOVE:** *Contortionist II* (2004), 30" x 45", oil stick on prepared paper.

*The visual equivalent of a Brothers Grimm tale, the paintings and prints of Dana Holst fall into a few general categories: psychologically ambiguous depictions of girls, portraits of meek animals and, more recently, studies of girlish hunters. With their unblinking gazes and retrograde hair, the artist's childish subjects suggest updated Dorotheas travelling through Oz under the sole protection of their ruby slippers (and all the danger that implies). Just as often, though, Holst gives her heroines the upper hand: in the painting *Big Bad Wolf, Little Red Riding Hood* is portrayed hanging the nemesis of the *Three Little Pigs*.*

TECHNIQUE: Holst has obviously made a close study of Old Master drawing techniques, especially the heat-seeking contour lines and theatrical dark shadows of Rembrandt and Goya. She also eschews black for a heady mix of red, green, blue and brown that, when transposed layer upon layer, blends into dark tones the colour of mahogany. To create her trademark smouldering reds, she lays down an undercoat of red pigment on canvas or wood panels and then builds up her images through many layers of translucent oil paint, allowing the incandescent undercolour to leach through. The reds evoke blood, vitality, suppressed anger and, at times, a whisper of evil. For example, each of the demure girls in her *Spider Girls* works looks as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, even as she coolly ignores the arachnid crawling like a living tattoo on her bare skin.

BACKGROUND: Holst's interest in human and animal conditioning can be traced to her youth in Ontario's Kitchener-Waterloo area, where horses and show jumping dominated her life. "Animals have been domesticated over thousands of years and we want them to act a certain way," says the artist, now 35. "But being responsible for an



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TOP (left to right): *Daddy Long Legs* (2005), 6" x 6", oil on panel; *Black Widow* (2005), 6" x 6", oil on panel; *Charlotte* (2006), 1" x 2", oil on ivory, sterling mount.

animal is difficult.” The inability of some pet owners to hold up their end is the tacit subject of recent paintings. “Society wants convenience, but animals aren’t convenient. That Persian cat would look good reclining on my sofa, but what happens when it scratches the upholstery? Whether it’s child-rearing or pet-rearing, it’s hard to establish boundaries.”

While studying painting and printmaking at the University of Waterloo, Holst decided to sell her horse. But that wasn’t the end of her relationship with animals. Today, she and her boyfriend share their Edmonton home with a schnauzer-wolfhound mix and two cats, all adopted through the Humane Society. Visiting the animal shelter led to her *Pounding* series of paintings depicting traumatized creatures whose troubled expressions and damaged physiognomies hint at emotional and perhaps physical abuse suffered at the hands of negligent owners. Considering the human-animal dynamic from another angle, an upcoming series will focus on girlish hunters and their trophy kills. Her art, says Holst, is part of an ongoing quest to “shake out all the demons.”

BIG BREAK: In 1998, Holst approached Toronto gallery owner Jamie Angell for a job, but ended up convincing him to give her an exhibition. At the time, Holst was creating pictures of fey adolescent girls with brooms and mops over their shoulders. She then expanded the series to include images of

girls with flyswatters, blindfolded girls, girls with blackened eyes. In the process, Holst hit upon and developed one of her more enduring subjects: beleaguered yet spunky-looking heroines. They continue to compel her fans today.

WHY HER WORK IS HOT: Tenderly drawn and lushly painted, Holst’s works elicit complex and often warring emotions of admiration and dismay. Collectors range from new buyers to jaded art consultants, all of whom are attracted by the intimacy and resilience of both the girls and the animals in the artist’s unusual oeuvre. A number of her finely wrought pieces have also found their way into important collections across the country, including those of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, the Art Bank in Ottawa, the Colart Collection in Montreal and Ernst & Young in Toronto.

PRICE RANGE: From \$250 for miniature paintings on ivory piano keys to \$12,000 for very large paintings.

WHERE TO GET IT: Holst is represented by Katharine Mulherin Contemporary Art Projects in Toronto. An exhibition of her work is scheduled at Galerie St-Laurent + Hill in Ottawa from July 27 to August 8. Visit Holst’s Web site, www.danaholst.com, to view past works. **H&H**

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