dog show

Emily O’Leary / Bucky Miller
I’ll admit it, I love dogs. As a child they terrified me—I hadn’t been raised around dogs, so I hadn’t yet learned to engage in the particular form of embodied communication they require. When you have no common language with non-human animals, especially those with the strength and teeth to rend your flesh, it takes more than an ordinary measure of boldness to extend a furless hand in greeting. Now that I’m an adult and live with a dog, a dog I’ve known since only a few weeks after he wriggled from the womb, my sense of the grammar and syntax of dog communication has eased my anxiety and made my dog seem comfortably predictable. My dog and I negotiate our respective wants, we try to behave as we think the other demands. But are these imperfect efforts to please each other true acts of non-verbal communication, or are they only my delusions, warm animal dreams that love between species is possible?

As animal theorists, biologists, and historians have argued, the function of dogs as a companion species is more complex, more potent, more mind-boggling than we dog-lovers are able to perceive in the intimate spaces of our inter-species families. In her *Companion Species Manifesto*, Donna Haraway frames the dog-human relationship as one of “significant otherness,” a compound term that highlights the strange mix of intimacy, interrelated-ness, and significant difference established by thousands of years of co-evolution with dogs. Haraway explores the history of dog breeding as well as the bio-ethical implications of dog cloning, circling in and out of a social and discursive network she calls “dogland.”

This exhibition brings together two artists, Bucky Miller and Emily O’Leary, whose work explores the significant otherness of dogs, the speculative and imaginative worlds they produce, and the “attention to fleshly detail” they require. In *Dog Show*, we encounter an eclectic selection of dog-objects, but also a range of approaches to what a dog is, who a dog is, how a dog is. These questions position the dog as both a singular figure in the human imaginary and a physical, material being with its own agendas and its own consciousness. Understanding what Haraway calls “the zones of contact,” the overlap between what we think of dogs and what they think of us is tantalizing, but probably, impossible.
industry that produces dog clones as both replacement animals for mourning pet parents and tools of law enforcement (bomb and drug sniffing dogs) for South Korea.¹

Like Snuppy, and like photographs for that matter, Miller’s Afghan Hound is inherently multiple, an image he has reproduced and will reproduce at an infinite variety of scales. Scanned and digitally enlarged, the Afghan Hound dissolves into a lattice of circular dots radiating across the image. Miller’s variably sized prints of Afghan Hound demonstrate the effects of cloning in a photographic sense—when reproduced by the technology of the digital age, the dots of light that once bounced off a real, breathing, Afghan Hound become pixels which, at close range, reveal gaps in the data. Yet even as the Afghan Hound is reproduced, the intensity of his gaze fixes us; he remains, somehow, a dog, singular but also many.

Emily O’Leary’s virtuosic embroideries may seem a world away from Miller’s photographic engagement with dogs, but in the scope of dog inquiry her work presents related questions. What do the dogs know that we don’t? How do they perceive us, our world (which is also their world), through senses different than our own? O’Leary’s “dogland” is a mythopoetic realm, in which the power imbalance between human and non-human animals falls away. In her fragmentary, evocative scenes, humans and dogs interact without evidence of hierarchy, destabilizing the relation of master and pet, domesticator and domesticated. The strangely organized society of dogs casts her human figures in a different light. In the pieces Eyelet 1 and 2, Skinny dogs and woman catching rabbits, the dogs seem more bright-eyed, more social, even less furry than the women depicted (Fig. 4/5).

Both Miller and O’Leary are interested in the insights that may be gleaned from trash, and dogs are their allies in this investigation. O’Leary’s Dog at Midden pictures a dog curiously exploring a trash heap in the mode of an archaeologist (Fig. 6). The work’s abstracted, textural pile of discarded clothing, gloves, shoes, and other refuse seems also to suggest a Pangaea-era view of the globe. Biologists have asserted that dogs’ extraordinary olfactory abilities allow them an access to the past that humans do not possess—their sense of smell is like time travel.²

Bucky Miller’s photographs of dogs come in many forms—they picture dogs he loves, dogs who are strangers, dogs who are objects, and dogs who are not even dogs (Fig. 1). United by their uncanny affect, these images combine contradictory sensations of familiarity and a kind of alien animality. Dogs like Hemingway or Cobalt seem hyper-present and impossible to access at once (Fig 2). In Miller’s “dogland,” which is also Miller’s photoland, the camera is the perfect technology for reckoning with the ways we want to see dogs, and the frustrating impossibility of fulfilling that desire. Dogs are analogous to both the photograph and the camera—they communicate without verbal language and perceive the world in minute physical detail unattainable by the human eye.

As Haraway asserts, attention to the commodification and uses of dogs, as family pets and workers or symbols and laboratory test subjects, raises significant questions about the stability of categories like the human, the animal, and the technological.⁶ Miller’s work The Picture of the Afghan Hound operates at the convergence of these categories (Fig 3). In the words of the American Kennel Club, “The Afghan Hound is an aristocrat, his whole appearance one of dignity and aloofness with no trace of plainness or coarseness. He has a straight front, proudly carried head, eyes gazing into the distance as if in memory of ages past.”⁷ Such a description highlights the paradoxical rhetoric of dog-breeding culture, presenting such pure-bred specimens as works of art (and human design), while also promoting an antique lineage that suggests a kind of natural origin. Miller produced The Picture of the Afghan Hound from a found photograph picked up in a thrift store, and the AKC’s anthropomorphic description resonates with his cropping of the image to exclude the dog’s body in favor of a too-human, head-shot style portraiture.

The work refers to one very special Afghan Hound: a dog called Snuppy. Snuppy’s name combines an anagram for the site of his birth (Seoul National University) with the word puppy. Born out of an arduous and expensive seven years of laboratory labor, Snuppy was the first successful clone of a dog, produced from three ear cells extracted from an Afghan Hound. Since his birth, Snuppy has given rise to an emergent biotech
In the exhibition’s kitsch case, Miller and O’Leary have collaborated on collecting and arranging an assortment of items that might be considered the archaeological refuse of dogland. Representations of dogs often fall within the spectrum of the lowest of cultural products, relying on saccharine oversentimentality or cartoonish goofiness. Presenting these trash-objects as artifacts of American culture, Miller and O’Leary draw attention to the odd ways we humans comfort ourselves with doggish images. These campy objects seem wholly unrelated to the actuality of dogs, but fundamental to the ways they function in human visual culture.

Jessi DiTillio is a 2019–20 Luce/ACLS American Art Dissertation Fellow and a doctoral candidate in the Department of Art and Art History at The University of Texas at Austin. She is a co-founding member of Neon Queen Collective. She was the 2017–18 Visual Arts Center Curatorial Fellow. Her research focuses on modern and contemporary American art through the lenses of affect theory, critical race studies, and feminism. She has a Cardigan Corgi named Moonpie.
Emily O’Leary / Bucky Miller

June 6 – September 21, 2019

RECEPTION
Thursday, June 6
5–7pm

Emily O’Leary received her BFA in Sculpture from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston and her MFA at The University of Texas at Austin. Like some sort of slow, slow drawing, her samplers (pieces of needlework made with a variety of stitches) depict scenarios that are modestly strange, a catalog of circumstances just at the edge of recognition or familiarity. She has an upcoming solo exhibition at Women and Their Work Gallery in Austin, Texas in the Summer of 2020. She has two sister dogs named Cobalt and Dash.

Bucky Miller is an internationally-exhibited artist from Phoenix, AZ. He earned an MFA from The University of Texas at Austin and studied in the Royal College of Art Program in Sculpture. His first self-published book was selected as one of photo-eye’s best of 2016, and he is a 2018 recipient of the Aaron Siskind Foundation Individual Photographer’s Fellowship. He is currently the Director of Education at the Houston Center for Photography. He has no dogs.