

Through the nose of a dog

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Artist paints scenes in Point Pleasant Park from a dog's perspective



Artist Mathew Reichertz is creating paintings from a dog's perspective this summer at Point Pleasant Park as part of Halifax's Open Projects program. (RYAN TAPLIN / Staff)

YEARS OF WALKING his dog Georgia in Point Pleasant Park have led artist Mathew Reichertz to this point.

“Are you trying to be a dog?”

“Yes,” says Reichertz.

That's the simple answer to a complex artistic challenge.

Georgia died last April, and Reichertz is painting pictures outdoors of spots in the park he and Georgia visited. His goal is to visually depict smell from a dog's perspective.

“There's a kind of impossibility here,” says the good-natured artist, taking a break during a rainy day at the Gatekeeper's Lodge.

The lodge is home base for Reichertz, but most of his painting will be done outdoors in Point Pleasant Park from 10 a.m. to 4 pm., Monday to Friday, until Aug. 31. People are invited to find him by checking reichertz.ca/dog-park (<http://www.reichertz.ca/dog-park.html>). He also has a map outside the lodge.

For this quest, which is part of Halifax's 2012-13 Open Projects program, Reichertz has constructed a painting cart in a sleek industrial design.

It has everything from a spare tire to a full painting kit to a stainless steel garbage can, as well as more mundane practical items like insect repellent and a sun hat.

Reichertz designed his own easel and a special bench that takes him low to the ground.

“The thing a dog is interested in is quite different from what people are interested in. It's all a bit lower to the ground.”

This project is part art and part science. Reichertz, who was shortlisted for the Sobey Art Award in 2006 and is associate professor in painting at NSCAD University, is inspired not only by Georgia but by an interdisciplinary animal studies group of faculty from NSCAD Kings and Dalhousie universities.

“A lot of my interest has come out of discussions with this group.”

A dog’s nose is about 44 times more intense than the human nose.

“Scientists look at the number of cells in a dog’s nose and how a dog moves air through its nostrils. Dogs can accumulate smell in their nostrils without blowing it out,” says Reichertz.

“It verges on the corny. This woman was talking about how smell is a powerful emotive scent for human beings. Just imagine how powerful an emotive sense dogs have. The idea is like smell is a pure emotion for a dog, and that’s a poetic way to deal with it.”

So far, Reichertz has experimented with depicting smell as a looping cable at the base of trees.

“I’ve been researching how odour plumes move through the environment based on wind direction and how dogs pick up odour plume and lose them, then pick them up again.”

He has also painted the experience of smell as hot red lines, like a steam radiating from the ground.

“Dogs have about a quarter of our acuity of vision. They don’t see reds and oranges and yellows very well,” says Reichertz.

“One idea is that smell may be within the red, orange, yellow range of colours.”

Dog Park will ultimately be between 18 and 30 metres of images that will be displayed horizontally on a wall, and that will approximate a walk for the viewer.

Reichertz is working in acrylic paint on sheets of Lexan film, which is a hard substance easy to cut into shapes, because Reichertz wants the images to be in sections that can be sorted in different ways.

He hasn’t gotten a new dog.

“Georgia was a big personality; it’s hard to think about replacing her right now.”

He walked her twice a day in the park for a decade.

“I know every single inch of the park. We went everywhere. Her sniffing behaviour wasn’t specific to any part of the park.

“I’m trying to go out there and empathize with what I imagine was the experience Georgia may have had in a particular place, and at the same time I have to negotiate a difficult task, which is to make a painting outside.”

Georgia, whom Reichertz painted in his *Comic Book* and *The Fight* series of paintings, was an Australian cattle dog.

“She was very busy and she was very smart.”

She wasn’t an easy dog.

“She went through a very aggressive period. Sometimes I’d come home from a walk with Georgia and I’d be just in despair: Why did she lunge after that person? For way too much time, I’d try to figure out what she was thinking.”

Sometimes people know what their pets are thinking, or at least they think they do.

“Normally, there’s a big gap in terms of understanding,” says Reichertz.

“In some way, this is a homage for Georgia, but more significantly it’s an effort to articulate something about that space we can’t cross.”

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