

homemade sausage or basil pesto on bread, a bowl of the soup that is always on the stove or maybe some cookies. She feels unwell most of the time.

The nonmedical issues are just as numerous. She lives in her own house with a middle-aged son who doesn't work, doesn't help her and is on disability because "he's not right." She is estranged from her daughter. She was separated from her husband many years ago (maybe she kicked him out) after a marriage that was dominated by alcohol and abuse. Serafina is depressed and wonders why God would make her keep suffering for all these years if all she wants to do is die.

She loves me. How can she? I can't do anything for her. I sit by and watch her suffer with her heart disease, diabetes and hypertension, powerless to apply my clinical practice guidelines. She brings small statues of Mary or Jesus to remind me to pray for her: "Aska God to take me home." She also brings food — pesto, lentil soup or homemade sausages — all of which smells of a pungent combination of body odour, garlic and olive oil. I am her confessor and confidant.

Serafina is strong, capable of going against church and society to do things the way she needs to. She doesn't need me to do anything at all. I want to deal

with her diseases; she wants me to understand her illness.

So I find myself trying to justify my inaction to my colleagues as they look at her HbA1C in the teens. Somehow it doesn't seem right to give patients what they want when we know what they need. Somehow it doesn't seem right to receive from patients, but when Serafina shakes my hand and gives me her blessing, "*Pace e bene*," I know I cannot refuse it.

The oath doesn't say, "Do the right thing," but only "Do no harm."

Chris Giles
Family physician
Hamilton, Ont.

Lifeworks

Best in show

kitsch — n. tawdry, vulgarized, or pretentious art, literature, etc., usually with popular appeal.
kitschy, adj.

— *Collins Concise English Dictionary*

That prize-winning Canadian photographer Shari Hatt loves kitsch is not overtly apparent in her show *Dogs*, recently at the Ottawa Art Gallery as part of a cross-Canada tour that began in Calgary in 2000. But the suggestion is there in her head-and-shoulder portraits of canines posed against green and black backgrounds. The persistent allusion to kitsch, while also acknowledging the considerably more traditional and highbrow artistic conventions of portraiture, adds spice to her work. It is also what makes it confounding.

Shari Hatt photographs dogs. Nothing unusual in that; *everyone* photographs dogs. Dogs occupy a privileged place in our lives. We pamper and show them, exercise and socialize them. We treat them like children. With a little assistance, our dogs even send us cards on Mother's and Father's Day. We have been recording our dogs' images throughout history. Dogs appear in portraits of rulers and are portrayed as

heroes *à la* Lassie and Rin Tin Tin. We take snapshots of our dogs and place them in frames decorated with paw prints and bones.

Hatt photographs her subjects in a manner that suggests the full range of portraiture devices: studio lighting, a professional backdrop, square-format presentation and that all-important element of eye contact. The instant when those studio lights are perfectly reflected in the eyes of her subjects signals the moment when she establishes communication with them. She hangs the finished photos at the viewer's eye level, choreographing a moment of communication between subject and viewer, directing us to formulate some idea of the personality of each subject.

Silently lined up, side to side, in a long row running over three gallery walls (as in the green series completed in 1999), or arranged in a grid (as in the two, ongoing projects of black dogs photographed against black backdrops), the photographs are strangely solemn in tone despite their highly saturated colour. That solemnity lends the subjects an air of importance. The dogs occupy the same amount of space in their



Shari Hatt, 1999. *Untitled* (Jake). C-print, 16" x 16"

16" x 16" frames regardless of their size in reality: Hatt has enlarged and cropped each shot to create uniformity. This presentation produces an iconic image, suggesting the directness (and not a little of the imperiousness) of a Hans Holbein painting of King Henry VIII, or the late Yousuf Karsh's photographs of Sir Winston Churchill or Ernest Hemingway.

But, dammit, the subject is a dog, and an anonymous dog at that: all of Hatt's images are untitled. And this is



Shari Hatt, 1999. *Untitled (Salem)*. C-print, 16" x 16"

where the conventions begin to disintegrate. Special status notwithstanding, the subjects of these portraits are hairy, tail-sniffing creatures with yellowing teeth and exuberant tongues. If we were face-to-face with them, instead of just with their likenesses, we would hear them panting, whimpering and barking, see them wiggle and strain in their collars, feel their hot breath on our faces and smell the full and complex odour of whatever they most recently ingested. How are we to reconcile this unstated knowledge with the information provided in the photographs?

As Hatt plays with conventions, the role of the artist as creator emerges. For Hatt is not only working with one of the most frequently explored genres of art, but has also selected a familiar, clichéd subject to portray. Her decision to work within such familiar terri-

tory allows her to challenge our understanding of not just the conventions of portraiture but also the essence of how we formulate our belief in, and understanding of, the subject of the portrait itself.

Hatt's choice of genre and subject-matter in picture-making also allows her to consider the boundaries between fine and popular art, highbrow appreciation and kitsch. In her work, Hatt alludes to Holbein and Rembrandt canvases and to painting-on-velvet; to Karsh's glamorous studies and to department-store studio portraits; to workaday images on passports and identity cards and the whole spectrum of doggie calendar art. As Hatt travels between high and low art, the viewer is unable to situate her work comfortably in either realm.

Hatt plays with these contradictions while focusing her lens on a very accessible subject. In this way she is challenging the notion of placing fine art on a pedestal as much she is working within its conventions. Is Hatt's work about elevating popular art, or about bringing down the level of snobbery in fine art, or is it more an attempt at a leveling or democratization of the playing field? Whatever the

case, Hatt is engaged in an intriguing experiment, producing art that is surprisingly playful but never superficial or facile.

Hatt's *Dogs* have been let out from September 6 to October 19 at Winnipeg's Plug-In Gallery, where they will share wall-space with images Hatt prepared during a stint as official photographer at the Liberace Museum in Las Vegas, Nevada. Nine of the canine photographs are also touring internationally in *A Thousand Hounds*, organized by the Cygnet Foundation of New York City.

Vivian Tors
Visual Artist
Ottawa, Ont.

Vessel of light

This child dying of neuroblastoma had become translucent sort of like a soft white light bulb you know, the kind guaranteed to last 10 000 hours at 100 lumens. Who could I call now that her warranty had expired? I tried, oh believe me, I tried to contact some divine light source who could replace her fragile filament but I received no answer. Unless this was it. The child in her mother's arms, her vessel of light extinguished.

Thomas J. Barnard
Adjunct professor
Department of Family Medicine
University of Western Ontario
London, Ont.