



Crushing Compassion Since 1913

TURNING POINT

One single moment decided the course of this artist's life

Working as an animal cruelty investigator means Canadian-born artist Twyla Francois is constantly exposed to the darker side of human nature. As part of her job she has overseen investigations that have resulted in the closure of facilities, animal cruelty charges and convictions, and the rescues of abused and neglected farmed animals.

Coming from a small farming community Twyla always felt a connection with animals. This connection combined with the relentless sight of animal cruelty and torture she sees daily meant her art was borne out of the need for an outlet. Using her investigative work as inspiration, her paintings highlight the true extent of the horrors animals trapped in the farming industry endure. She always seeks to raise awareness of these animals in a gentle but compelling way.

Can you tell me about how you discovered veganism? Is it something you were always surrounded by?

Because I grew up in a rural farming village in the 70s and 80s, veganism-and even vegetarianism-was unheard of. Like most rural kids though, I participated in an agriculture program for budding animal producers called 4H. As part of its 'animal husbandry' course, I chose and raised a calf and spent long hours getting to know and care for him. When the town fair came around, I enrolled him, believing it to be some sort of bovine beauty pageant.

It was only when I recognized the man bidding on my calf in the audience as the town butcher did I realize what I had done, but no amount of pleading or tears allowed the calf to be returned to me. Because I was directly responsible for this calf's death, I was able to make the connection between my own meat consumption and the betrayal and death of animals. I dropped meat the next day-that was 30 years ago. Years later, after beginning my work as a farmed animal cruelty investigator and a 13 month investigation following one barn of battery-caged egg-laying hens, I went vegan. It was the best decision I've ever made.

Was being an artist always your ambition?

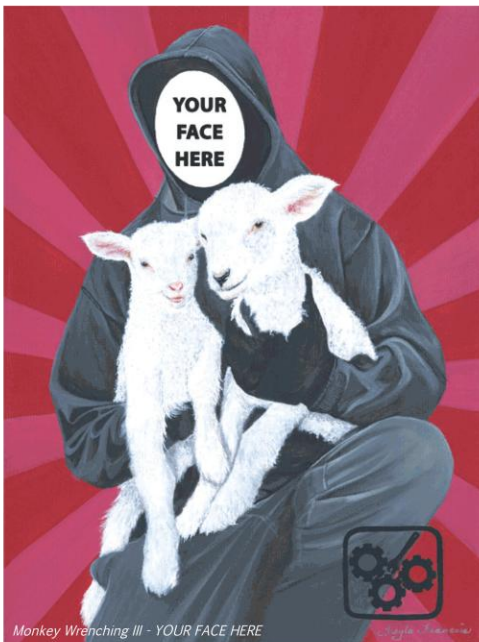
In childhood scrapbooks, my response to the question: "What do you want to be when you grow up?"repeatedly went back and forth between 'artist and 'veterinarian/animal nurse'. Growing up in a small farming village though, art wasn't seen as a particularly valuable skill. I always saw the importance of art but somehow it was always pushed into the background. It was really only recently that my partner Olivier convinced me to put aside my fear of failure and exposure. Before this, painting was an intensely private act-something I simply did to cope with what I was seeing during investigations. I never imagined that anyone would be interested in my work or actually buy it. It's been extremely heartening to learn that I was wrong.

Tell me about some of your more hard hitting pieces i.e. YOUR FACE HERE and Free Me.

I painted *Free Mein* an attempt to cope with what I was seeing during my first investigation at a pig facility in 2005. The facility served as >



Free Me



Monkey Wrenching III - YOUR FACE HERE



Wilbur



Monkey Wrenching I

a collecting station, where animals were temporarily housed while being marketed to slaughterhouses-in this case, thousands of miles away. The animals were cull sows and boars used for breeding who had spent the majority of their adult lives confined to barren concrete and metal cages barely larger than their own bodies. Because of this near immobilization, many had difficulty walking, which put them at increased risk of abuse. Workers dragged the animals by their ears, repeatedly hit and electrically prodded them, or, in the case of pigs that were completely unable to rise, tied their leg to a post and dropped them from the trailer to the concrete below, where they were left to die.

When the pigs were loaded onto the large multi-deck trailers to be taken to slaughter, many pushed their snouts through the portholes of the trailer, trying to feel the sun on their faces. I realized it was likely the first and last time they would ever experience this simple sensation. In all of their suffering, they still had a desire to feel the sun on their skin. They had to strain for it, and many who were too sick, diseased or injured to reach the portholes weren't even able to experience it. Their only certainty in life was their death which awaited them at the end of this journey as it had hung over them from the moment they were born. It was as inescapable as a shadow.

With the paintings *YOUR FACE HERE* and *Monkey Wrenching I*, I'm hoping to normalize the fact that animals are sentient beings, not property as the law currently views them. Rescuing them from life-threatening conditions shouldn't be considered theft but rather an honourable act that anyone would do if they saw the conditions these animals were forced to live in.

A lot of your work surrounds pigs; would you say you're more passionate about them than other farm animals?

Because I focus on message art, the goal is always to create something viewers can relate to. I strive to create images that cause people to look more critically at our relationship with animals and then feel compelled and empowered enough to do something about it. I've found that the animal people connect most with is pigs-

perhaps because it's so easy to see both the physical and emotional characteristics of dogs in them. If it were up to me though, all my paintings would be of turkeys! They're like tiny unicorns to me-the sounds they make, how affectionate they are, their capacity for forgiveness and the depth of their emotions are incredible.

Leading on from this, tell me about the investigative work that you do and how this relates to your art?

The art work stemmed from the investigations. I don't think I'd feel so compelled to paint without having done investigations and gotten to know the depth of the suffering of farmed animals and just how critical a role each of us can play in bringing about an end to their suffering. The investigations have shown me that things are much worse for farmed animals than any of us had ever imagined. It's also made clear that government and law enforcement cannot be counted on to protect these animals. Each of us must take responsibility-examine our own food choices and make the changes necessary to bring about an end to their suffering.

Do you think art work displaying the reality of the farming industry has greater impact than written messages?

With every release of an investigation the goal is always to paint a picture for viewers so they can understand exactly what's happening to animals and feel compelled to change it. After a decade of shooting and releasing graphic photos and footage from investigations, I came to see that we weren't reaching a substantial proportion of the population. A lot of very caring people-exactly the ones who would go vegan if they knew what was happening-were turning away from the graphic footage and photos and instantly shutting down before absorbing the message. I realised that we needed to connect with these people in a different way.

Highly emotive images in art can be just as effective, but allow us to reach people in a less threatening way. One of the most powerful things about art is how subjective it is-we each see in it what speaks to us and feels personal to us. That can make it even more effective than graphic photos and videos.