

## TWYLA FRANCOIS

# Investigator uses art as an animal rights awareness tool

Canadian Twyla Francois grew up in a small farming community located in the province of Manitoba. However, this did not stop her from questioning animal agriculture and becoming vegan.



Photo: Jo-Anne McArthur / Unbound Project

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By [Aline Khouri](#)

Later, when she fell ill and faced the possibility of dying, she decided that she wanted to fight more actively to defend animal rights. Twyla became a covert investigator in 2005 and worked with renowned organizations such as Mercy for Animals Canada, Animals' Angels, Canadians for Ethical Treatment of Farmed Animals, and the Canadian Horse Defense Coalition. Her work was featured in documentaries "No Country for Animals", "Bêtes à bord", and "Cruel Business", among others. Since 2015, she has increasingly used art as a means of raising awareness for animal rights. In this exclusive interview, Twyla talks about the importance of investigators and reflects on the role of art within activism.

**ANDA: You grew up in an agricultural community and became an animal rights activist. How did this awareness come about?**

Like most rural kids in North America, I took part in a program called 4H, which is intended to connect young people with agriculture. As part of its Animal Husbandry course, I chose a calf, raised him, groomed him and spent long hours getting to know him. On the day of the annual fair, I was proud to show him. Somehow I believed he was going to be judged on how healthy and happy he was. It was only when I recognized the man bidding on him as the butcher from a neighbouring town that I realized what I had done.

I begged and pleaded with the instructors to let me keep my calf, but they refused. I learned later that my reaction was so common that 4H created a rule that explicitly forbids children from keeping their animals. The unspoken goal is to crush the compassion of children and force them into seeing farmed animals only as commodities to be bought and sold. From that moment on I stopped eating meat and have since gone vegan.

**ANDA: When did you decide to act as an investigator and how did it come about?**

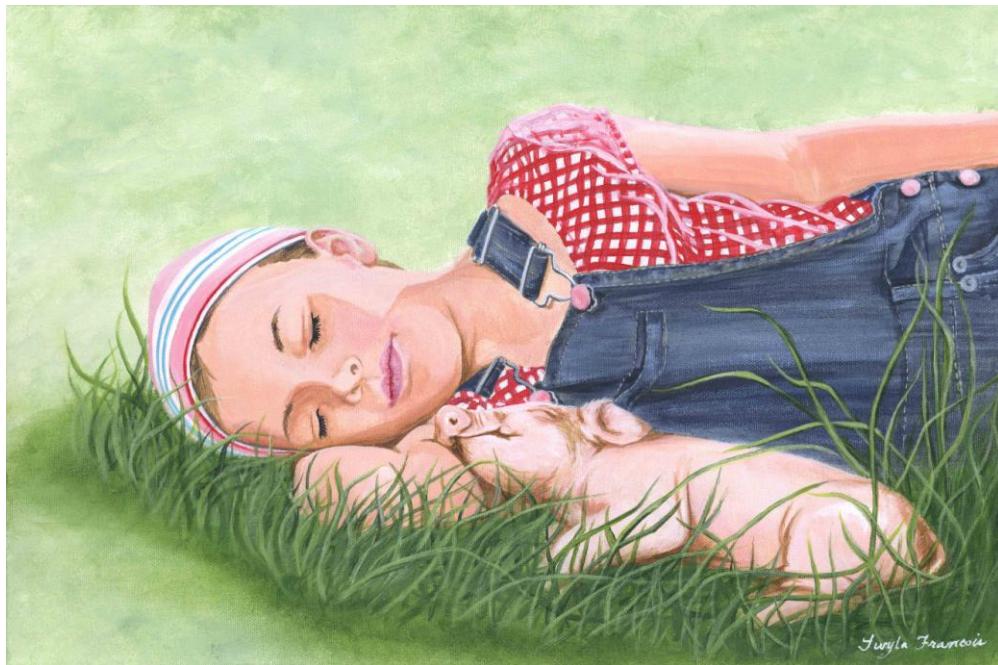
Although I had stopped eating animals, I really wasn't doing anything proactive for them. That all changed when I suddenly got sick. I had to have emergency surgery, a second surgery and six months of chemotherapy. Faced with the very real prospect of dying, I was forced to re-examine my life and decide whether I had done anything to make the world a better place. I co-founded a small, non-profit animal rights organization and immediately started receiving photos from the public. One photo showed a pig tied to a post in a parking lot in the middle of the city I lived in. I learned it was a collecting station where pig producers brought animals to be marketed for slaughter.

In an effort to figure out what was happening to the animals, I returned to the facility covertly for over a year, documenting horrific abuse both inside and outside the facility. I compiled a report with all my evidence and sent it to a number of animal advocacy organizations around the world, seeking answers to what I was seeing. An organization that was based in Germany (Animals' Angels) answered my questions and offered me a job as an investigator. It took some time, but we were eventually able to have that facility shut down.

**ANDA: What are some of the most important achievements of your work in recognized organizations such as Mercy for Animals and Animals' Angels?**

Some of the investigations I've been involved in have resulted in animal cruelty charges and convictions; others have closed facilities like the collecting station mentioned earlier. But the most important achievement to me has been the mass exposure of what conditions are like for farmed animals. When I started conducting investigations here, industrial animal agriculture had

really only been in practice since the 1990s, leaving many Canadians with the impression that the cruelties they saw in American media reports or online simply couldn't, and didn't, happen here. It was a challenge just to get the media interested enough to show my footage. Those first few exposés really changed the landscape of understanding for Canadians. They could no longer claim it wasn't happening in their own backyard.



**ANDA: There are a variety of investigative techniques available. Could you describe them to us? What kind of preparation is needed to carry them out?**

When people think of investigations, they tend to think of undercover work, but there are a number of different ways of working that most investigators switch between depending on the industry or practice being documented. Most anyone with an iPhone can now get footage either openly or covertly if they can talk their way into a facility. Night time work can gather important evidence for documenting a pattern of neglect, which is so common in animal agriculture. Trailings involve discretely documenting the loading of animals and following them to their destination - which can be days away here in Canada with laws allowing transport of some animals for up to 52 hours without food, water or a break. Leave-behind cameras can gather evidence without the risk of workers altering their behaviour by being aware that they're being recorded.

Anyone can attend a public livestock auction and either openly or covertly document the handling and condition of the animals. While they're there, they can also provide water to the animals and attempt to negotiate the release of sick or injured animals. These animals can often be secured for free by reminding the auction that they shouldn't have been accepted in the first

place. Most jurisdictions have rules forbidding sick and/or diseased animals in public places. This is where I suggest all activists interested in conducting investigations start, by learning and understanding the laws covering farmed animals in the country they're working in. All of these different methods are critical to helping expose the cruelty inherent in animal agriculture and directly helping animals trapped within the system.

**ANDA: It's interesting that an investigator uses art as well to denounce animal exploitation. How did you discover yourself as an artist? Is art also a way of escaping what you see on farms, slaughterhouses, and other places?**

I wouldn't have had the confidence to call myself an "artist" without the insistence of my partner, Olivier. Art was always an extremely private act for me and I hid the resulting paintings away in closets! When investigations started becoming too difficult emotionally, I instinctively turned to art as a way of coping with what I was seeing. The images wouldn't leave my brain until I'd literally painted them out and put them onto canvas. Olivier convinced me that these paintings could be another means of reaching people so I tried it - tentatively creating a website and submitting my art to festivals. I was happily surprised when my work seemed to resonate with people!

**ANDA: Is there a difference in the way people respond to the videos captured by investigations and your paintings? Do you think these tools complement or reach different audiences?**

I find that I'm reaching a completely different group of people with art than I do with investigative evidence. As an investigator, I know my footage is difficult for people to watch and I know it's not reaching a large portion of the public, specifically older women, people who are very sensitive, and dog and cat lovers who haven't yet made the connection that farmed animals are equally as sentient as their beloved cats and dogs. This is exactly the population my art reaches. Graphic photos and videos can cause people to turn away before absorbing the message. Art does the opposite. It draws them in and compels them to think about what they're seeing and what it means to them. Because the interpretation is largely up to the viewer and they see in a painting what speaks to them, it makes the message much more personal than footage can ever be. It's a surprisingly powerful medium for conveying the message of animal rights.