

WOMAN'S BEST FRIEND

Ahead of the inaugural Goodwoof festival celebrating all things canine, artist Holly Frean explains why dogs have a starring role in her paintings, soon to be showcased in an exhibition at The Kennels

Words by Gill Morgan



Below: Holly Frean's *Assembly*, part of a collection headed to Goodwood for her latest solo show

Sitting in artist Holly Frean's bright, serene studio, dogs stare out from every wall, by turns puzzled, mournful, eager, amused. Many of the paintings will soon be heading to Goodwood, where they will be hung in The Kennels for Frean's solo show, *Dog*, as part of the inaugural and eagerly awaited Goodwoof festival.

"I've had great fun with them," says Frean, whose stock in trade is a painterly playfulness, often taking an artistic or historical tradition and subverting it with witty charm. Particularly striking are two enormous diptychs, *Dotty* and *Assembly*, each 10ft x 6ft, which will have pride of place in the entrance hall of The Kennels. Both take the dog theme and expand it towards something approaching abstraction. If you stand back or narrow your eyes, those hundreds of doggy figures morph into a pattern of carefully balanced colours and shapes. Only when you lean in and focus on each individual animal do the dogs emerge again, in all their individual glory.

"If you go up close, for example with *Assembly*, you can see that each dog is very distinctively itself, with its own expression and character. I've got most major breeds in there – you'll see all the ear shapes and heads and sizes are different." There is something innately comical about this large assembly of mutts, looking as if they are attending a grand meeting or performance. "It's very silly," says Frean. "But I take the actual painting and composition very seriously. I work up close on each dog, working from left to right, but then I'm constantly standing back to check I'm getting the right kind of pleasing balance of colour and shape I want."

Dogs aren't the only things Frean paints – far from it – but they keep calling her back. Trained at Camberwell Art School and City & Guilds, she found early success with worldwide shows and collaborations with brands such as Anthropologie, Burberry, Andrew Martin and Paul Smith. Her work wears its painterly skill lightly. She loves to play with repetition – "Oh yes, I love a grid" – and enjoys taking a tradition, such as Old Master portraits, and interpreting it in a way that's "a bit off". She applied a similar approach for Goodwood, celebrating the 2nd Duke's famous pack of 23 hunting dogs from 1738 in a grid, each hound carefully named, and the 24th being a fox. Another grid, *Pack*, shows 54 spaniels painted on individual A8-sized sheets of cotton rag paper.

Frean's portraits have a cult following: she has a steady stream of commissions she is behind on ("I always say, don't come to me if you want an absolute likeness; that's not what I do"), and at Christmas she unveiled an advent calendar of minuscule dog portraits, complete with tiny, ornate gold frames, that she photographed on the walls of a doll's house and Instagrammed. She couldn't produce them fast enough: "One woman in New Jersey set her alarm for the early hours of the morning so she could be awake when I posted them. I think she bought 12."

And finally, home life has caught up with art: having spent so much of her career painting canines, Frean finally took the plunge just over a year ago and acquired a family dog. Bella, a very beautiful eight-month-old greyhound, arrived on Boxing Day in the depths of lockdown and now relaxes at her mistress's feet under the desk as Frean perfects her doggy masterpieces. "Dogs watch your every move," says Frean. "I sometimes think they're learning how to behave when they reincarnate as humans!"

Dog will run from May 1–29 at The Kennels, Goodwood.