

In a book chronicling the history of cat aesthetics through painting, authors Heather Busch and Burton Silver write that "the fact that some domestic cats are able to make marks with paint have always been explained by biologists as an instinctive form of territorial marking behaviour." They suggest with a little irony that "there is recent evidence which clearly supports the view that some cat's marks are aesthetically motivated and should be regarded as genuine works of . . . art." I would add that cat performance should be regarded in a similar way. In the end, *Familiar* is an experiment in interspecies relationships and puts forth new more nuanced understanding of the domestic.

**Biographies:**

Candice Hopkins is a curator, artist and occasional Sabre sitter. She has an MA from the Centre for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, NY and spends much of her time in Banff where she works as the curator-in-residence for the Walter Phillips Gallery.

Joanne Bristol's work investigates the interplay between art, science and history. Her current projects include the Institute for Feline + Human Collaboration, stationed in the Squirrel Street area of Banff, Alberta, where she is investigating how interactions with animals inform our understanding of interactions with machines. She also teaches at the Alberta College of Art and Design.

The artist wishes to thank Sabre, Donald and Marie Bristol, Anthony Kiendl, Candice Hopkins, the Canada Council for the Arts, and all animals, everywhere.

This is a Stride Gallery brochure written by Candice Hopkins who has been chosen by the artist because of her particular interest in the project. These publications provide regular opportunities for diverse writers to publish work that furthers critical discourse about contemporary art.

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all images courtesy of the artist



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**And Now...  
after four years  
of preperation  
and production...**

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**Bristol's  
Familiar**



**an installation by  
Joanne Bristol  
featuring:  
Sabre, Gary Varro,  
Ded Dot Days  
and  
Sande Moore**

**BRISTOL'S  
FAMILIAR  
JOANNE BRISTOL**

**May 28 - June 26, 2004**  
Reception: May 28 at 8 PM  
First Thursday: June 3, open until 7 PM



**the Stride Gallery**

### Familiar: towards a feline Aesthetic

Walking into the installation *Familiar* is like coming upon an open casting call. Scripts (four drafts), floorplans of the set and large black and white head-shots of co-stars (Verne the vet, Flappy the spotted bat and Carmen) are on the wall and behind a red curtain a video documenting the pre-production of the proposed film "Comfy Hostage" plays. The installation, in the words of the artist Joanne Bristol, is "inspired by the idea that the personal is the political" and it is because of this that she began to work through her relationship to her housecat, Sabre.

In each of the four drafts of the script, Sabre, characterized as "androgynous, mid-30's in cat years, serious demeanor – not unlike Rem Koolhaas," enters the dining room where a similarly described architect is working. In each case the architect, intent on the task at hand, does not notice the cat. It is in the instances –



Detail from *Familiar*, depicting the audition process for the recording of the production's theme music.

the times when the architect has either left the room or is concentrating on something else – that the Sabre steals the show. She is at times entertainer (she tap dances across the floor in the first draft), feline hero (Sabre drags a small boy to safety after he falls off his scooter in draft four), aficionado (she smokes fine Cuban cigars, drinks single malt whiskey and makes club sandwiches), and savage hunter (the third draft sees her with a freshly killed bird). Interspersed within these four drafts is one which is perhaps more realistic. Sabre only meows plaintively in the first scene and in the second, the camera, instead of recording her fantastic acts, only captures images of dust as it circles in the empty sun-streaked room.

This draft is reminiscent of an experiment that Joanne undertook in her apartment in Regina. In an effort to get to know her cat through a kind of objective observation she set up a video camera to record Sabre's actions in her absence. In the end the experiment is a failure: instead of capturing Sabre's secret life – there are a few snippets of her meowing at the door with a toy in her mouth and another as she enters and exits the kitchen – the camera mainly records the stillness of the empty hallway and the closed apartment door. The result is limited by both the camera's immobility (it can only capture one angle) and time (it can only record for two hours – the length of a standard video tape). What the tape does reveal is the inability to know a pet through only its actions and the difference between the anthropomorphic lives that we often imagine for them and their actual existence.

As the video suggests, the set of *Comfy Hostage* is the home. Like the scripts, this domestic space is represented by a number of potential blueprints that map out "Sabre Stations" in existing, proposed and abandoned floorplans and one at Sabre's "new



J. B. and P. H. set up Carmen's "money shot". Photo credit: Patricia Holdsworth

elevation" in Banff. The blueprints investigate the architecture of domestic space from a feline perspective placing Sabre's subjectivity within the space of the home. These plans bring up an interesting question: if architecture was designed for cats instead of humans what would it look like? Bristol's "Proposed Floorplan" takes this question on and features the artist's apartment redesigned with feline intentions in mind. It has been altered to house a garden that serves as an indoor/outdoor cat run complete with a retractable skylight and a central fountain. Also included in the new design is a trans-species parlour – presumably a meeting place for Sabre to catch up with little friends of another kind. The blueprints, like the scripts, are an investigation into the ambiguities and the perceived certainties of human – animal relations and in doing so challenge the boundaries between these relations.

In a way that is fitting with the aloofness often attributed to cats (or to major stars for that matter) Sabre makes few appearances in the pre-production video of *Comfy Hostage*. What we do see are her cat toys which figure in as Sabre's potential co-stars, a snippet of the first scene of the script as it is acted out by Sabre and the architect complete with a soundtrack of sweetly sentimental pop, three potential musical numbers for the *Comfy Hostage* theme song (folk, punk rock and lounge style) and the documentation Bristol took of Sabre alone in her Regina apartment. In the video Sabre's toy, Carmen, a fuzzy white knitted finger puppet, is slated by a talent agency as having the most potential as a model or a movie star and it's easy to see with her cute, slightly dishevelled look and big black eyes.

As the first domesticated animal, cats have a long history with humans and a long history of occupying different roles within society. They have at times been considered deities by the Egyptians, representations of Satan (cats were systematically executed in 18th century Europe for their perceived links to the devil) and, as the exhibition title suggests, familiars – or attendant spirits (thus the association of cats to witches). Cats have also taken on political connotations: in the 19th century tabbies like Sabre were considered the "cat of the people," a symbol of the rising power of the middle classes in post-industrial Britain. They have only recently taken on the role of pet; a position that as Bristol suggests is political when considered within the context of the home: a pet is the "Other" in this space. With this in mind Sabre's transformation from mere housecat to artistic collaborator is fitting as it troubles the supposed hierarchies between nature and culture.