

The Art of the Lounge Cat

An Interview With Shag

Heidi Crabtree

The natural ease with which cats take over furniture has been evident for generations and is a subject of delight for artists. Whether appearing in a classic oil painting showing a mother and kittens sleeping on lush fabrics, or “space age” commercial advertising in the form of barware, TV lamps, or bubble bath decanters, cats lend an air of sophistication and mystery to any piece of artwork. No artist can convey a retro-modern feeling better than the artist known as Shag.

You have likely seen his art. Other may imitate it, but only Shag can give it that perfection, that twist that cannot be duplicated. Imagine a pool, bachelor pad, or nightclub. Invite some fashionable friends and add highball glasses, an egg chair, and a spectacular view. Perhaps a “wolf” to sip a drink in a corner. Oh, and the cat. There must be a cat, or two or three, each noticeably aware of its own majestic presence.

Shag Shares His Views on Cats and Other Key Influences...

In an email interview with Shag, whose signature is a combination of his first and last names, Josh Agle, he reveals his choice to use cats, his source of inspiration, and whether there were any cats in his life. He has had feline family friends from the age of ten, when his family took in a box of kittens. He named his own kitten Radar, after noticing the way it swiveled its head “as if he were patrolling his surroundings.” Shag currently lives in California with his wife and children, in a home that could easily be right out of one of his creations. However, since the passing of their last cat a few years ago, he is hesitant to bring in another, since his house is “definitely not escape proof” and it is in an area with a coyote problem.

Regarding his work, after he had switched his college major from architecture to fine art, cats were often a choice for his projects. “As far as cats in my art, I don’t specifically

remember the first time I drew or painted a cat, but it goes back to my childhood.” He adds, “When I started painting for galleries, cats were in my earliest paintings.”

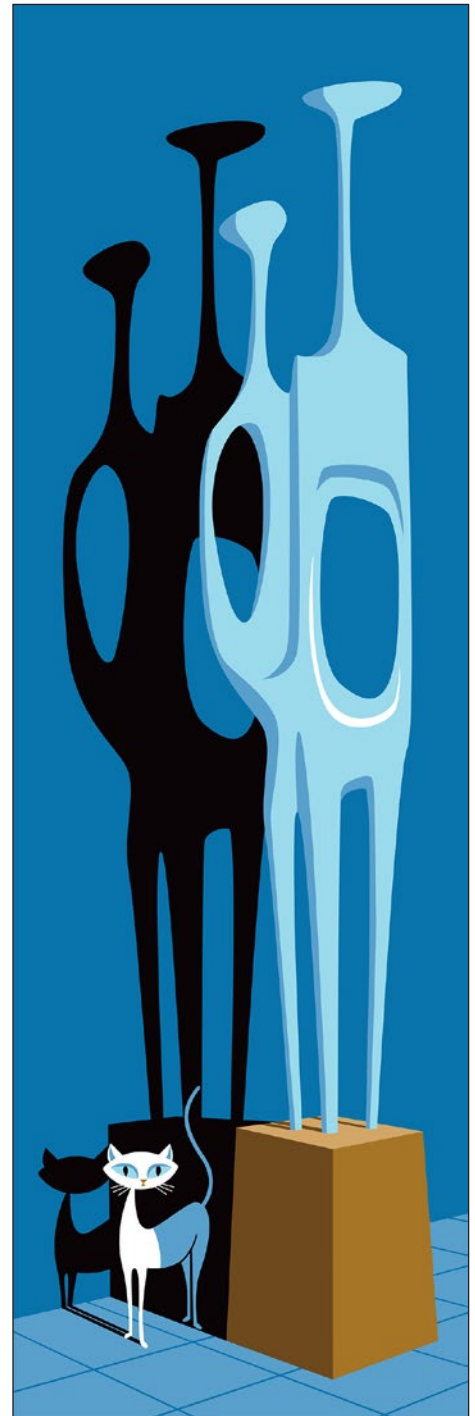
Shag’s love of traditional architectural styles led to his discovery of mid-century modern. Being in California, he saw it all around, and began thrifting in shops for pieces. As for artistic styles, he discovered the work of Gene Dietch, creator of Tom Terrific and was very taken with it. When he was doing freelance work in the mid ’80s, he wanted to incorporate some elements of Dietch’s style into his own work. He favored the single-panel style, adding, “Charles Addams was definitely an influence, especially during the first few years of my career as an artist. If you look at some of my early paintings, they have those macabre sight gags that don’t need any dialogue or explanation.”

Shag has also taken his talented hands to 3-D cat art, but says, “I can’t get it to look the way I want it. I’ve been working on a cat sculpture, but I’m not yet happy with it.”

...and His Own Unique Style

Delving more precisely into his artistic treatment of cats, Shag usually depicts his felines as connected to a woman in some way, while dogs can be attached to anyone. “If there are humans in the interior scenes I paint, the cat’s owner is always in the image, whereas a cat in an outdoor scene is more like an amused observer. The dogs in my paintings tend to be either fashionable accessories or faithful companions.”

Another animal that sometimes appears at Shag’s artistic gatherings is a humanized wolf. The joke is not lost on many. “The wolves in my paintings always have human bodies and wear clothes. That goes back to the cartoons of the ’40s and ’50s that I saw in my childhood in the ’70s, where a man



“Shadow World,” Shag’s latest work, makes its public debut here in *Cat Talk*

might be labeled a wolf if he focused on a pretty woman. That attitude is completely transgressive now, but at the time it was suitable for children,” he states.

So, what about his iconic feline style, with the long slender body and almond eyes? Shag recalled a household object from his youth. “The way I painted a cat was inspired by the memory of that black cat-shaped shampoo bottle from my childhood. Years later, I saw one of the bottles, and it didn’t look like the cats I was painting. My memory had changed it. It turned out it was a bubble bath bottle from Avon, not a shampoo bottle. In the past few years I learned the bottle also came in white, pink, and blue. If I’d seen one of those as a child, the standard Shag cat might be blue instead of black.”

I asked him about his choice for best lounge cat breed. His answer might bring a smile to readers experienced with pale furniture upholstery decorated with dark cat fur – or dark upholstery and light cat fur. He replied, “I think, visually, a Siamese looks great in a lounge setting. But for practicality, maybe a breed that is less likely to shed is better, because you don’t want to be lint-brushing your Eames Lounge chair or George Nelson sofa. I’ve always thought a Bombay looked a lot like the black cats I paint, and they don’t shed too much.”

Shag has generously given Cat Talk readers the first look at an upcoming painting. Titled “Shadow World,” it portrays a white Shag cat proudly posing by a large sculpture, in a largely blue atmosphere, showing off the brilliance of the kitty. The date and location of official release is still to be determined at the date of this writing, and we can all feel honored at the privilege of this first viewing.

Sources

Agle, Joshua. 2022. Interview by author. Oct 12, 2022
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above: "Feline Fine"
below: "Cool Cat Jazz"

