

## Books

## You'll believe that a pig can paint

Joanne Lefson works for Pigcasso, a 300-kilogram pig-turned-artist. Is their tale enchanting or silly?

By Roger LEWIS

## PIGCASSO

by Joanne Lefson

286pp, Cassell, £18.99 (0844 871 1514) RRP £22, ebook £12.99



Let's face it, as there has been no competent artist since the death of Augustus John, a pig wielding a brush is as good as any. Joanne Lefson, who describes herself as the "personal assistant, creativity mentor and curator to a 300-kilogram-plus painting pig", uses the daubs produced by her porker to raise funds for her rescue centre, the staff wages, educational materials and general operations. "If this pig could paint, it was guaranteed to attract some healthy attention for the sanctuary."

I can easily see all this as a popular movie – the pig with a paint brush or palette knife clamped in its jaw; Joanne as an attractive blonde activist (Scarlett Johansson might be ideally cast), who since childhood was anti-whaling, anti-vivisection, anti-fur, anti-meat. Rescuing animals was "more than a passion. It was my self-diagnosed intrinsic purpose." Our author once ran the Sanctuary for Sick and Neglected Donkeys in Kashmir, which was a similar concern to the place now operating for cows, chickens and goats in her native South Africa.

Though Lefson's affection for the animal kingdom is somewhat extreme (when her dog died, "most days it was unbearable and I found it difficult to function"), as is her personal identification with its denizens ("pig eyes are eerily human"), I can't quarrel with her rage against factory farming, where the business model is, "grow them as fast as possible. Slaughter them as soon as it's commercially viable." I'm sure she is right to say, "If consumers saw how their food was being raised, farm factories wouldn't exist." I myself grew up in a family of farmers and butchers – and though I used to scoff at vegetarians, the joke is on me: I nearly died the other day from hypercholesterolaemia.

To make a stand, Lefson liberated a piglet from one of those "intensive facilities", and plenty of comical mishaps ensue as the animal destroys gardens, lawns, cushions, furniture. "Nothing could stand up to the snout of that pig", which is allowed the run of the house and goes for trips in the car.

"Keeping a pig," we are assured, "wasn't for the faint-hearted", and its squeals could reach 100 decibels, which is as loud as a chainsaw. Having heard that pigs can play video games, controlling the joystick with their snout, and that dolphins, cats, parrots and elephants have produced pictures, Joanne left brushes, canvasses and paint pots



▲ Better than Bacon? Pigcasso prefers to work by a beach in Cape Town

in the sty. The next thing she knew, the pig picked up the brush in its mouth and approached the easel, "her head moving frantically in all directions... There was never any reason to doubt that she got a kick out of the process."

Things either get silly at this point, or enchanting, depending on your point of view. To Lefson, looking at the daubs, "shadows were becoming shapes, there was order emerging from chaos". She sees in the pig's compositions "Mondrian's primary-coloured squares or Jackson Pollock's splatter". One picture, turned sideways, was of a penguin. Another resembled Prince Harry. "It sold instantly to a Spanish collector for \$3,000."

Why would anyone sane contemplate buying a painting by a pig? Evidently there was novelty value – and if the global art market is worth \$67.6 billion a year, it's

because the relationship between prices and perceived (subjective) quality is complex and defies logic. Where Lefson sees in her pig's work lessons about "the boundaries between serendipity and intent", my own conclusion is there's simply no limit to human credulity.

The pig, who was invited to perform on chat shows, and designed Swatch watch faces, belongs, if anywhere, with the stunts of the Dadaists or Banksy, who gave graffiti, in Joanne's phrase, "institutional legitimacy". What Lefson calls the pig's "pure, unlimited, innocent creativity" in truth does rather resemble Cy Twombly's wisps and scribbles, or perhaps Tracey Emin's lurid depictions of her front bottom. In a line that made me laugh, she says perhaps the pig "was channelling the spirit of Francis Bacon".

If the Louvre and the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition Committee remain unimpressed, in 2018

the pig had a sell-out show in Cape Town, with another last year in Amsterdam. George Clooney is reportedly a collector. Yet it is all a circus. Though the pig was as happy as a pig in, err, well you know what I mean – to imagine there was Old Master-calibre intention and coherence in the activities is fanciful and bonkers.

For a start, pigs are colour blind – and the painting pig was simply responding to basic Pavlovian conditioning. Joanne sounded a clicker to establish a routine, to get the pig to start and stop, rewarding it with grapes, avocados, pasta, peaches and peanuts. Joanne is the one who swapped the paints, rotated the canvas, manipulated the pig's movements – "getting her to dance [the brush] across a canvas took a bit more time". It's the same painstaking operation as my friend Norman Barrett deploys, when training his budgies to ride bicycles and delight audiences in Zippo's Big Top.