ARTS

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that."
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER

Dog days of summer continue in Fair Haven contemporary art exhibit

BY ANGELINA KOVALCHUK
STAFF REPORTER

Colorful canines abound in Fair Haven's Ely Center of Contemporary Art, where "Deus Ex Bark-ina," a contemporary art exhibition themed around dogs, is on view through Sunday.

The exhibition showcases works from more than 50 artists, including state locals and Yale alumni. While dogs have long remained in the background of paintings, organizers and artists said, moving them to the forefront can illuminate traditional themes.

"Though the subject matter is seemingly simple, the relationship between humans and dogs is complex when you explore its history," Aimée Burg, the center's director, wrote in an email to the News. "This exhibition has created space for those connections and also highlighted the many ways art is being created today."

Michael Morgan, a recent graduate of the Master of Fine Arts program at Cornell University, curated the exhibition. His goal was to depict dogs as independent beings rather than simply a "prop in a painting."

"I felt that for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, dogs have flanked white male heroes," Morgan said. "I wanted to focus on works that depict dogs in situations where they are viewed more as autonomous beings rather than just as a domestic being."

The exhibition features several sections, corresponding to a particular theme around dogs and their symbolism. Themes include regality, quotidian life, abstraction, work, play and wildness.

Animals in visual art convey emotional reactions as objects viewers can empathize with, and the drive to use animals as allegories is a longstanding one, Morgan said.

"We've always used animals to tell stories," he said.

Upon entering the exhibit, the view is greeted by what Morgan called a "welcome mat" of paintings of three dogs, including "Mars at the Door" by Kati Gegenheimer ART '13.

Gegenheimer's painting depicts her own dog, Mars, splayed atop a colorful rug with a wide-eyed gaze. Gegenheimer said the subject carries "much emotional resonance" for her.

"This portrait of Mars is about love and companionship, and how they can transcend place and time," Gegenheimer said. "He's generally patient, but by the end of a long day, he'll assume this position on the little colorful rug, dutifully notifying me that it's time to go. This reminder that we have a life to live beyond the studio door is necessary and important."

Morgan credited Gegenheimer's work as one of his first inspirations for the gallery.

"That set the stage for my desire to find works that treated their dogs in a genuine or organic manner," Morgan said.

The exhibit also features sculptures and mixed media.

Outside of the gallery space, a skeletal sculpture by Korean artist Hyunjin Park called "Three bodies of Cerberus" — a nod to the multi-headed hound of Hades, the god of the dead in Greek mythology — guards the entrance.

"Hatshepsut's Collar," a mixed-media piece by Leeza Meksin ART '07, is inspired by female pharaoh Hatshepsut in the 15th century B.C.



COURTESY OF MICHAEL MORGAN

"Deus Ex Bark-ina," an exhibition themed around dogs and their meanings, is on view at the Ely Center of Contemporary Art through Sunday. Former Yale Public Safety dog Heidi is set to make an appearance at its closing reception.

Meksin wrote in an email to the News that Hatshepsut's successors largely erased her achievements from history.

"The story of Hatshepsut still resonates in a personal way for me and many other women, gender-non-conforming and queer-identifying humans who get elbowed out of the historical record by bullish force," Meksin wrote. "Dogs are great and pliant companions, easily trained and brought to heel."

Burg said the reception for the exhibition has been positive and that the "lively conversations" among viewers have lived up to the gallery's mission.

"There is a real sense of joy and curiosity that this exhibition has inspired," Burg wrote.

In a closing reception this Sunday from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., former Yale Public Safety dog Heidi will be present at the gallery.

The Ely Center for Contemporary Art is located at 162 James St.

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After leave of absence, orchestra conductor back at Yale

BY HANNAH LIU
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After taking a medical leave of absence last academic year, Yale School of Music associate professor Elizabeth Askren returned this fall to direct the Yale Symphony Orchestra as it begins its 2026-27 season.

Askren took over as the group's director after William Boughton retired last spring. She conducted the ensemble's opening concert in September 2025 before leaving campus, when a variety of guest and student conductors — including Boughton and graduate students from the Yale School of Music — stepped in to support the orchestra.

"It was so beautiful to see everyone come together and collectively support me in my absence and support each other," Askren said in a Zoom interview. "There's a big sense of community singular to the YSO, a profound love and commitment to what it is that we do."

In the time before she departed Yale last fall, Askren co-taught a Yale School of Music class called "Introduction to Conducting" with Thomas Duffy, director of the Yale University Bands.

In the days leading up to her medical leave, Askren said, she wanted to be very transparent with her students about her departure and was honored when some students shared their own health journeys with her. She said that she returned to Yale this spring to lead an opera masterclass — drawing on her background in opera — in collaboration with the Yale School of Music.

This year's YSO season will be centered on the theme "Death and Transfiguration," which Askren said related to her own experiences coming back to lead the orchestra.

"I think it's really powerful to draw from your personal experiences when you're creating art," Askren said. "I think it really is carpe diem: celebrate life. Celebrate each and every day that you can get to know yourself and others more deeply. It's a renewed sense of commitment and dedication to what you do."

Former YSO director John Mauceri returned in March to conduct Mahler's Symphony No. 2 as part of the orchestra's 60th anniversary concert, though he said he had planned to lead the concert prior to Askren's departure.

"Conducting something that I first conducted with the Yale Symphony, 55 years later, was of course a curious and uniquely musical experience because music has a way of defying time, and yet it's all about time," Mauceri said in a phone interview. "There I was on the same stage, which hasn't changed much at all since I was the music director back in the late 1960s."

In February, Professor Adjunct of Music and Orchestral Conducting Peter Oundjian and graduate students Thomas Nettle MUS '27 and Ezra Calvino MUS '26 conducted the YSO's Valentine's Day concert.

Nettle and Calvino also stepped in to lead several rehearsals for concerts in October and November, working alongside former YSO president Tobias Liu '26 and student assistant conductor Tommaso Bailo '27, who conducted the annual Halloween show and commencement concert.

"I think the challenge of losing a conductor halfway through the year is, of course, you have a lot of different guests come in," Liu said in a phone interview. "But there's a lot of really real benefits that come from that too, as an orchestra, getting to learn from a whole host of extremely incredible different conductors across the spectrum."

Throughout the year, Bailo and YSO student leaders also focused on expanding partnerships with the New Haven community. Those included a concert in Union Station performed alongside Music Haven, a group that provides accessible musical education to New Haven students, and a collaboration with the Yale Center for Engineering Innovation and Design this January.

"One of the really cool things about the YSO is that it's this dynamic student-faculty leadership," Liu said. "You have the real pros of expertise from expert faculty like Maestro Askren and our manager Brian, but it's also led by students who are very involved day-to-day and get to shape the direction of the orchestra."

Bailo described Askren as a "figurehead" and an eager educator. "I can fully see her expanding the undergraduate conducting curriculum or creating a mentoring program," he said in a phone interview.

The YSO recently concluded auditions for the 2026-2027 season.



YULIN ZHEN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

During Elizabeth Askren's time away from campus, an array of music school affiliates — including guest conductors, previous directors and graduate students — stepped in to help lead the orchestra and work with undergraduate student leaders.

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