

## THE VIRTUAL PET

Our granddaughter, Angela, has to take care of six pets: Buttercup the pug, white poodle Lee, petite Maltese Crystal, Moo-Moo the cow and kittens Anabella and Isabella.

That's a lot of responsibility for a 7 year old. These animals all require feeding and care, which can be very time consuming and expensive. However, they are not quite real; they are Webkinz toys, which, according to Toni Struncis, manager of Island Variety, are "beyond hot" with the elementary school crowd on Nantucket and across the country.

Originally offered in 2005, Toni says that it took a while for the virtual pets to catch on. "Initially we didn't really explain the toy and I don't think the customer understood what it did; they were just buying the toys because they were cute stuffed animals. It's just been in the last year-and-a-half that the demand has been explosive."

And explosive it is. The manufacturer claims over one million users are registered on the Webkinz website. The demand is exceeding the supply, according to Toni. "We were getting a new pet almost every month, but right now they are hard to get. We have even had people calling us from Texas and New York to get Webkinz because their local stores were sold out." Right now Island Variety is hoping for a shipment soon. In order to get a Webkinz, your name has to be on their waiting list for a dog, cat, frog, bear, horse, wild animal or whatever comes in next.



Marketed like the Beanie Babies craze of a few years ago, manufacturer Ganz Gift Company has already retired some of the toys, like the Unicorn and Love Puppy, and issues new ones periodically, such as the recently released Spotted Frog, Black Lab and Kuala Bear. Originally retailing at \$8.99 for the smaller version Lil'Kinz and \$11.99 for the Webkinz, the rarity of some of the toys, like the Love Puppy, an adorable white puppy covered with hearts, is getting \$100 bids at auction, and people are buying and holding onto them for future collectors' items.

Angela adopted her first Webkinz, Lee the white poodle, in February. The special code that comes with each toy allows access to Webkinz World, an interactive site where the pet lives. When first logged on, the user is given basic items such as a room, a welcome balloon, a food item, two pieces of furniture and 2000 Kinzcash, virtual currency.

A thermometer-style visual shows each pet's level of happiness, health and hunger which will decrease as time is spent with that Webkinz. To

increase levels, the user can feed, play with, exercise, bathe ("Great job! Your Webkinz is cleaner, happier and healthier!"), clothe its pet or put it to bed. If the levels become too low, then the pet becomes sick and has to go the clinic to see Dr. Quack, who may prescribe medicine.

Of course, many of the activities require spending money. Angela's pets eat a lot of broccoli, and they don't seem to object. "Broccoli only costs 5 Web Bucks," she explains. Much of the game play involves the making and spending of Kinzcash needed to maintain the pet in health and comfort. Playing quizzes and arcade-type minigames earns money and praise, "That game was tough, but you did well!" The user can also go to the Employment Office to get a job, selecting whatever level of skill is appropriate.

In the Clubhouse, kids can chat with each other or play interactive games, such as checkers. There are safeguards built in so that young users are protected. For instance, Angela can visit the Clubhouse and converse with another there, but she has to select the phrases from a predetermined list; no freelancing is allowed.

The popularity of Webkinz is due in part to the triple whammy combination of the natural attraction kids have for plush animal toys to love and nurture, the online games kids play before they can read and the interaction of the Internet. Proponents also point to the lessons learned by teaching responsibility, role-playing pet care, and experiencing the concepts of

budgeting and earning money.

Angela has explained to me, "You're supposed to visit your Webkinz every day." She usually finds that the few minutes before leaving for school is enough time to check on everyone and she has had lots of help from adult family members who like to play the fun games for their own sake while helping to plump up her Kinzcash bank account.

According to our daughter and Angela's mother, Linda Muhler, some restraint is important. "There was an intense fascination to begin with, but after about three weeks, the interest pretty much leveled out." Linda suggests setting reasonable limits for the time spent in front of the computer screen and offering a balance of activities. "I try to have lots of other opportunities for active playtime and social interaction with Angela's friends. We work on other creative projects together or, we just set aside time to read a book. Plus, she has all the pets of our extended family to love and care for in the real world." ■

*Jan Jaeger is owner of Geronimo's, Ltd., Nantucket's pet supply and gift shop, and is a member of DWAA and CWA (Dog and Cat Writer's Associations of America). Her pets at home are Junior, a Chesapeake Bay Retriever and three cats. At the shop are the cats, Messrs. Fish and Chips, Flower bunny, Willie guinea pig and two budgies. Send e-mail to jan@geronimos.com.*

## GUARNACCIA

*Continued from page 25*

Studio." Inside, a homemade media rack is ribbed with titles from Bob Dylan, Crosby, Stills & Nash and R.E.M.

In Dead Horse this week, Guarnaccia is trimming the sails on his latest works, which will go up at Cavalier Galleries this Thursday.

In this series, the buildings, sails, seas and beaches are swathed in horizontal sunbeams. His subjects are embarking on the journeys of their days (walking the dogs down Main Street at sunrise in "Main Street at 6 a.m.") or ending them (arriving back in Nantucket harbor at dusk after a sail in "Twilight in Nantucket Harbor").

Guarnaccia is painting the times of day when people are looking forward or backward: dawn and dusk, which represent our daily rhythms of hope and nostalgia. "If you're taking a boat trip to Hyannis, when you're leaving the harbor, you see a lot of movement. But the more you get out into the sound, it dissipates, and then there's nothing for a while. Then you get back to Hyannis, and there's movement," said Guarnaccia, comparing the parts of a nautical trip to the day itself. "You start the morning with much more energy. Then, during our day, the time is much more open before returning at the end."

Though most people associate Guarnaccia with landscapes and ships, the real subject of his paintings is light — specifically the light at dawn and at

dusk in this series.

"For me, it's all about the light," Guarnaccia said. "When I pick a particular place to paint, I need to have an initial spark. The moment when I think 'Oh my, God. I gotta get that.'"

Guarnaccia believes he uses light in a way that is unique on Nantucket. "I don't think anyone on island is doing what I'm doing with light and color. It's not just a values scale of 1 - 10, but also the intensity of light. If I use a warm light, then I use a cool shadow with the application of paint. The lighter the light, the thicker the paint, the slower the brush stroke," said Guarnaccia, as he shone a warm, overhead light on a painting of a nautical race. The sails in the painting filled with a warm, sunny light, instead of a wind — and the picture seemed to glow. "The darker the dark, the thinner the paint, the faster the brush stroke."

Typically, Guarnaccia has done most of his light studies in New Hampshire, where he and his wife abscond to a remote cottage in the mountains for a few months each year. "I learn a lot about light painting landscapes there, and bring it here and apply it to boats, and what I learn working on the boats, I take to New Hampshire," said Guarnaccia of his artistic crop rotation.

But this summer, he's spent a bit more time with his feet on dry land here, working on landscapes to prepare himself for the book on Nantucket landmarks, including Main Street, the Old Mill, the moors, the dunes and a few winter scenes.

In Guarnaccia's landscapes, vast

expanses surround the people inside the paintings, who aren't rendered any larger than one's thumb, giving the scenes a touch of the sublime. His new piece "The Dunes at Miacomet" is a good example of this.

Guarnaccia doesn't paint *plein air* — "I don't like painting where people can watch me" — so he normally begins the process by making sketches on site in oil, watercolor or even in pencil with notes on the color. He'll also take a digital shot with the camera to "create memory triggers." ("I'm not painting from a photo," he said.)

Because of the "tremendous amount of work" he's done in his light studies, Guarnaccia says, he's perfectly comfortable painting lightscapes from Dead Horse.

He begins painting with a toned canvas, on which he draws accurate but not detailed shapes with his brush. From there, he uses two-inch brushes to create an abstract painting, whose colors, shapes and values are accurate. "I call it a very aggressive block-in, and it's done fast," said Guarnaccia, who added that some patrons who've seen this process encourage him to stop at this stage.

"Abstraction has its place in my work, but I want to go deeper," Guarnaccia said of his own desire to paint representational or realist images, which he's been doing since he was 8 years old. As a young man, he trained under Stanley Stephanowitz and Frank Novak at Norwich Art School/Slater Museum before attending Paier School of Art in Hamden,

Conn., where he studied under Dean Keller, Ken Davies and Rudolph Zallinger. In later years, he took a 10-year hiatus from realism to paint only in the abstract, and though it didn't suit him to paint abstract in the long run, it did "catapult" his representational work. "Because all of a sudden, I had uninhibited technique," Guarnaccia said.

One of the benefits of painting realistically is that Guarnaccia can render ships that are anatomically correct — trimmed to be seaworthy.

"I know how the boat should be trimmed for the weather," said the sailor, who includes himself in a sailboat in every nautical painting he completes. He said he does it as a wink to viewers — enticing them to find him in a "Where's Waldo?" kind of way. But it also seems, for the man who thinks through every gust of wind and taut sail in his paintings, that including himself in the painting is a kind of emotional realism. He's putting himself on that boat to feel the scene before he puts it down on canvas.

"I've been painting for so long, I don't paint what I think," Guarnaccia said. "I paint what I feel." ■

**When:** Thurs., June 21 -  
Thurs., June 28

**Where:** Cavalier Galleries,  
34 Main Street

**For more information,**  
please call 325-4405.