EXTREME DOGS

Famous for his extraordinary pictures of horses, TIM FLACH has now turned his lens on dogs. He talks about abstraction, neuroscience and the things we do to pets

"I LIKE TO use photography as a way of extending people's experiences," says Tim Flach. To encourage viewers to see things differently, he takes pictures of animals from below, through a glass floor, he uses extreme close-ups and photographs horses underwater or using x-rays.

Flach is best known for abstract images of animals. His book "Equus" (2008) lingered over swirling manes and made the swell of horses' backs look like mountain ranges. "Less is more," he says, quoting the architect Mies van der Rohe. But Flach uses abstraction in a surprising way.

Photographs are often seen as exact representations of reality, concrete and clear. But "photographs are ambiguous," says Flach. "By abstracting away from the image, you can capture that ambiguity. Abstraction gives viewers space to see more, so different people see different things." The next few pages contain several such images: the Hungarian Puli on the right, enveloped by its flying dreadlocks; the white disc of the Bichon Frise's face (*page 88*); the close-up of a prize-winning bulldog's stumpy tail (*page 91*); the pink folds of the Shar-Pei (*page 85*).

If you look closely above the Shar-Pei's right eye, threading finely through the heavy folds of the eyebrow is a tiny white stitch. It is there because the thick bristled skin, bred into this fighting dog as a defence against opponents' bites, would otherwise push the eyelid inward, scraping the >

> eyelashes over the cornea and producing an infection called entropion. The picture is both an abstract conception and a stark image of what humans do to their pets.

Flach's bestiary, apparently so self-contained and stylised, often reveals unexpected layers of meaning. He says he became interested in the faces of lapdogs – here represented by the silky Yorkshire terrier (*page 87*), the Bichon Frise and the butterfly-eared hairless Chinese crested dog (*page 84*) – partly through the work of Morten Kringelbach, an Oxford neuroscientist. Kringelbach studies the way in which the brain processes so-called "hedonic experience" (ie, pertaining to pleasure). He suggests we are hard-wired to respond to round faces with big eyes and snub noses. That is what babies look like—and those are the features that breeders exaggerate in their lapdogs. Flach's photographs illustrate the same human impulse that forms the subject of Kringelbach's research.

Flach, who is 51, earns most of his living as a commercial photographer (he has produced stamps for the Royal Mail). He is a fine-arts graduate from St Martin's School of Art in London, so it is a surprise to find science playing such a role in his choice of subject. He regards photographing animals as another way of studying them and was pleased when he heard that new research into Shar-Peis had helped scientists identify a gene that is behind the wrinkling of skin as it ages.

While science provides a context for the images, they are far more than mere illustrations of it. Flach's photograph of huskies (*page 90*) shows how science and image blend together. This is the last in a sequence of photos which begins with a close-up of one dog's startling sapphire eyes: an image of acquired behaviour. In nature, wolves do not gaze directly at other wolves and dogs are thought to have behaved the same way when they first began to live with humans. But as they have become domesticated they have changed their natural behaviour and learned from people to look directly at their masters, even scanning faces from left to right, as humans do (this is the reason why pictures are traditionally lit from the left-hand side, as in Flach's shots of a greyhound and a poodle). Subsequent photos in the sequence show huskies in fierce motion, running across a snowy landscape. The sequence ends with the dogs at rest after their exertions. They gaze directly, disconcertingly, back at the viewer.

The pictures are part of a set to be published in October as a book, "Dogs" (Abrams), and will also go on gallery walls, as giant pieces of fine-art photography: Flach's horse prints sell for £3,500. Meanwhile there are less exotic jobs to be done. Flach has just shot a round of adverts – featuring the Andrex puppy. ~ JOHN PARKER

above A Standard poodle (name: Alan). Poodles were originally working water dogs used as gun dogs and retrievers. The peculiar "continental clip" is an exaggerated version of the cut used for working. Most of the body, face and legs were shaved to make swimming easier and smoother, but the extremities and chest had to be protected, hence the pom-poms on feet and tail. The clump at the base of the tail bore a mark to identify the owner. The strong side lighting picks out the clipped forms and makes the dog look almost like a statue.

right Kinda Ready, the 2009 Greyhound Derby winner, shot like a boxer at his weighing-in. The kennels are just visible at far left. More light from the left to accentuate the musculature, and not an ounce of fat. The power-to-weight ratio is explosive, enabling greyhounds to reach 45mph in a sprint.

previous page A Puli, a Hungarian sheep-herding dog (name: Andy). The long corded coat is designed to protect the breed from the harsh winters of the Hungarian plain. Traditionally, the dogs were shaved along with the sheep they herded and, like their charges, grew their coats back before winter. The shot, designed to show the dynamic qualities of the coat, was made by getting the dog to run and jump towards its owner, with the camera between the owner's legs.

left Chinese crested dog (name: Tia). These dogs have nothing to do with China but got their name by association with Chinese immigrants into America in the 19th century, among whom they were popular. They probably came from Mexico. Dogs' internal temperature is higher than humans' and these dogs were supposedly used as handwarmers, hence the hairlessness which was encouraged through selective breeding (there is also a "powder puff" form with lots of hair). The ear tufts and eyebrows are dubbed "furnishings"; the markings on the skin, "lace".

above Shar-Pei puppy (name: Holly). Shar-Peis were fighting and herding dogs from southern China (the name probably derives from the Cantonese for "sandy coat": the coat is exceptionally bristly). By shooting close up, the photograph zeroes in on the extraordinary folds which make the dog so distinctive. Notice the tiny stitch above the eye (left).

left and above The impact of surgery. The American standard for Doberman Pinschers (here, Betty and Lucca) calls for pricked ears. Part of the ear is cropped away and the ear placed in posts—ie, taped upright (left). When it heals, the ear stands up. The tail is usually also docked. The process is illegal in Britain and many European countries, where dogs' ears flop downward (right). It's said that in Latin America owners have been known to use Botox to make the ears stick up.

right and above right The impact of cosmetics. Yorkshire terriers were originally bred to kill rats, and had to be brave and aggressive to do so. But their owners soon began to organise beauty contests, too. Now, it takes many hours of grooming to prepare a showdog like Honza for competition. A hairdresser usually travels with her. While waiting to go into the show ring, her hair is bundled into packages to keep it clean and ensure it lies perfectly flat.

above A face created by people for their own pleasure, all eyes and button nose. The Bichon Frise (here, Eric) has been a lapdog for hundreds of years. They were originally bred and owned by sailors – hence, in part, their miniature size, 10-20lb – and used up and down the Mediterranean for barter as well as companionship.

right Neapolitan mastiffs are among the largest of all dogs at 170-200lb, ten times the Bichon's weight. They reputedly descend from the molossus breed used as dogs of war by the Romans. Ercole, however, has his competitive spirit channelled into dog shows: he won best of breed at Cruft's this year. While the soft focus on the Bichon brings out the breed's cuteness, the lighting and background of the mastiff are designed to underline his monumental quality.

above A team of Siberian huskies in Iceland. Huskies are so competitive that they will resist arranging themselves in a line: there is no clear pecking order. To hold them in position for this photograph, their owner is lying behind them, out of shot, keeping them in place with leashes.

right and opposite The head and stumpy tail of an English bulldog, Harry, who has won prizes at Cruft's for the past three years, including best of breed. The front view is simply composed, bringing out the massive chest and jaws. The rear view seems to contain eyes and a face, looking back at the viewer as Harry ambles away.