

Around the Valley

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SAN MATEO

CuriOdyssey and the cat

By Aaron Kinney

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Amala is the epitome of the shy, withdrawn artist. She's rarely glimpsed by the public, which must be content to know her through her work.

Her skill as a painter is limited, seeing as she doesn't have hands. But her work is reasonably priced at \$20, making it widely accessible.

Amala is a ring-tailed cacomistle, or ringtail cat, and her studio is a cage at CuriOdyssey, the nature museum in Coyote Point Park. She has been taught to paint by trainer Megan Hankins as an enrichment exercise.

Painting, in Amala's case, means stepping in nontoxic pigment and scampering across a piece of paper. Hankins began teaching the cacomistle about a year ago, offering her food as a reward for her footwork. A porcupine and a raccoon at the museum also have embraced the activity.

None of the animals at CuriOdyssey can be released into the wild. Some, like Amala, were born in captivity, while others suffered debilitating injuries in nature. Painting is one of the ways trainers have found to make the animals' life in captivity more engaging. The paintings are sold at the museum, with the money going toward the animals' care.

Hankins, 28, has worked with Amala for five years. Besides teaching her to paint, Hankins has trained



DAN HONDA/STAFF PHOTOS

Animal trainer Megan Hankins tries to entice Amala, a ringtail cat, to walk in a tray of paint in her cage at CuriOdyssey museum in San Mateo on Thursday. Painting by animals is part of the museum's animal enrichment program.

IF YOU GO

What: CuriOdyssey

When: Hours of operation are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday; noon to 5 p.m. Sunday; closed Monday

Where: 1651 Coyote Point Drive, San Mateo
More information: Call 650-342-7755 or visit www.curiodyssey.org

the 10-year-old cacomistle to receive yearly vaccine injections without the stress of being restrained or put under a general anesthetic.

"I feel really happy that I've been able to make her life a little better in that



Hankins shows artwork by Amala, a ringtail cat at CuriOdyssey museum in San Mateo.

way," Hankins said.
Cacomistles, cousins

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of raccoons, are found mostly in California and the Southwest, often living near water in foothill canyons. They're known as solitary, nocturnal and elusive — and Amala is no exception. She sleeps most of the day in her enclosure, so museum visitors hardly ever see her.

Hankins said museum-goers are missing out. She called Amala "2.5 pounds of cuteness."

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