

Whimsy, wolves, and masks: Julie Buffalohead at Bockley Gallery

BY SHEILA REGAN OCTOBER 18, 2012



The Lone Ranger Rides Again, 2012

You simply must stop over to Bockley Gallery, located in the Minneapolis's Kenwood neighborhood, and check out the delightful collection of mixed-media work by Julie Buffalohead. Her richly colored pieces feature a cast of characters that includes coyotes, rabbits, deer, foxes, owls, Cinderella, and a masked woman/girl. The works are filled with whimsy and storytelling, and have a childlike illustrative quality that masks a dark, satirical humor.

Disguise plays a prominent theme in Buffalohead's work. The most clear example of this is in the one human character that recurs through a number of pieces. She's both a woman and a girl, dressed in single-colored shifts, and is depicted at play with the other animals, though her face is masked. Buffalohead, who is a young mother, seems to be exploring the idea of entering a child's imaginative world, but only, perhaps, temporarily. She paints a picture of a mother who must at times pretend to be something that she feels that she ought to be, even if that's not her true self.

At times, the animals disguise themselves as well. In *The Excursion*, a rabbit wears fake antlers and puts on a striped flag (American, perhaps, though we don't see the stars) as it gives a squirrel a ride. Then, in *The Standoff*, all of the animals and the woman wear different masks, speaking to the roles that we play in the complex theater that is family life.

There's also a political edge to Buffalohead's work. In *The Columbus Prophecies*, for example, a fox and a rabbit stand poised with their weapons toward the bathtub where a miniature explorer's ship floats in wait of their attack. A second rabbit gazes at the viewer, sneakily holding two rubber duckies, and the woman/girl character stands off to the side, revealing her magnificent pink cape. It's an image that is wonderfully subversive of both colonialism and the standard history that Columbus Day celebrates. However, it does so in a way that's not overt or dogmatic. Rather, Buffalohead's childlike fantasy offers an alternative history, one where the European explorers are forced to go back to their homeland.

Similarly, Buffalohead touches on other sociopolitical themes, such as role models for women, showing how absurd and destructive Barbie dolls and Disney cartoons are simply by inserting them into the world she has created. The life-sized dolls look completely out of place in *My Life as Performed by Coyote, Rabbit, and Various Toys*, a triptych that illuminates how unrealistic expectations of appearance and body image can infiltrate even the most innocent games of the imagination.

Buffalohead also touches on some deeper emotional themes including loneliness, fear, and love in ways that are very simple but ring true. In some ways, these are the most powerful pieces -- the almost translucent coyote blending into the grey paper, the two rabbits who love not each other but the two deer who don't seem to know that they exist. In all, it's very astute. The artist has a specificity in pulling these elements from political, emotional, and playful spheres to create a show that will both surprise and delight.