

## Julie Buffalohead's Contemporary Allegories

BY SHEILA REGAN SEPTEMBER 29, 2014



*The Land of Misfits and Ugly Dolls*, 2010, acrylic, ink and pencil on lokta paper

Julie Buffalohead's work swells with symbolism. Filled with animals and archetypes, her pieces explore political and personal topics through allegory. In a new show at Bockley Gallery, titled "Uncommon Stories," the visual artist's acrylic works on handmade paper — in some cases using numerous sheets for one piece — establish Buffalohead as a contemporary Aesop, drawing on Native oral tradition and mythology to comment on modern-day issues such as gun control and sports team names.

One of the most prominent recurring characters in Buffalohead's work is the coyote, traditionally a trickster, who appears in human circumstances. Whether she is barking at her children seated at the kitchen table, playing with shadow-puppet figures, or dressed as a Victoria's Secret model in a war bonnet, the coyote acts as a persona of the artist as she maneuvers her way through life's challenges.

In *Turn a Blind Eye*, the coyote character covers its eyes along with other animals as a woman dressed up in a cowgirl outfit — complete with white hat, boots, and skirt — waves her guns in the air in glee. The menagerie of animals are literally turning a blind eye to the violence; the sole witness to the cowgirl's antics is an injured bird who watches.

On one level, the piece drums up images of our country's obsession with guns and the NRA's overpowering presence with lawmakers, while those who might favor gun control fail to act or speak up about it. But there are also other layers happening in the work. For example, the icon of the cowgirl can be read within the context of Western stereotypes of American Indian culture. There are also small details that add to a more enigmatic interpretation of the piece, such as a couple of smiling masks held by one of the animals, and a horse head covering worn by another.

There's a temptation to over-interpret the meaning in a one-to-one equation. While there are certain images that repeat and can be seen as stand-ins for feelings, issues, or people, there's also ambiguity in Buffalohead's work. Her paintings have a kind of dream quality, where the narrative is not always straightforward.

In *The Song of the Ravens*, the coyote character, dressed in a pink 1950s dress and heels, has her arms outspread in a gesture of exasperation, her mouth open wide like she's listing off complaints to a male human figure who sits on the couch with a rifle pointed at her. A deer and a rabbit lie dead at the coyote's feet, while crows gather around the scene. Here again Buffalohead takes on issues of violence and pop culture, referencing television shows that glorify violence. The piece touches on notions of domestic violence, but also could be seen as hyperbole, where sometimes simply communicating with someone we love bears the weight of life and death — even if in reality things are not that extreme.

The exhibition takes on current events as well, such as sports teams that use Native stereotypes. In *Round 3: Counting Coup on Cheerleaders*, a group of animals look on at a shadow-puppet cheerleader next to a sign that reads, "Hey Indians, Get Ready to Leave in a Trail of Tears," the same words that were recently used by Oklahoma State University football fans at a game.

The cheerleader is ultimately powerless, not to mention two-dimensional. These and other characters are objects that are controlled and don't have agency on their own. The animal characters need only to take the sticks in order to take action against harmful tropes and degradations.

In all, *Uncommon Stories* proves to be subversive underneath the cuddly creatures and storybook illustration aesthetic. As with the best tales, the meaning is closely hidden and ready to bite.