

## Art Gallery: Julie Buffalohead

BY MASON RIDDLE JUNE 11, 2019



*Mother of Deceit*, 2019, acrylic, ink, and graphite on Lokta paper mounted on paper, 30 x 94 inches

When you first view her anthropomorphic animal imagery, you might think Julie Buffalohead is presenting traditional images from Native American art and culture — and she is. But look a little longer and deeper to discern what else she’s communicating with her ostensibly lighthearted portrayals.

An acclaimed Indigenous artist and enrolled member of the Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma, Julie Buffalohead loosely interprets the beliefs and customs of Ponca clans and obliquely critiques old stereotypes that Native Americans played no part in creating. The Denver Art Museum described her artwork in a recent one-woman exhibition there as using “metaphors, iconography, and storytelling narratives . . . to describe emotional and subversive American Indian cultural experiences, and often [analyzing] the commercialization of American Indian culture.”

While her “eclectic palette and whimsical subjects . . . evoke a childlike innocence,” they also reveal a deeply human and serious adult subtext.

Buffalohead lives and works in Saint Paul, Minnesota. She earned her master of fine arts degree from Cornell University and is the recipient of several prestigious grants and fellowships. Her work has been featured in many solo and group shows in esteemed venues, including at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Minnesota Museum of American Art, and the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian.

We talked with Buffalohead about incorporating Native American storytelling in her art and grappling with “being from two worlds.”

**Cowboys & Indians:** In your world, animals hide behind masks of other animals and even masquerade as people — coyotes wear dresses, skunks carry purses, etc. How do these images manifest themselves to you?

**Julie Buffalohead:** A lot of what I do is based off of Native American storytelling, which is very complex and has a lot of cultural history of Native peoples, using metaphors and shape-shifting animals who turn into people and people who turn into animals. I am particularly fond of these characters who tend to pop up over and over again in Native storytelling, [in particular] the trickster figure who commonly manifests itself as a coyote or raccoon. I’ll frequently make up my own narrative, incorporating our Native world view of animals. We don’t believe we’re above animals, but we do intertwine with their world.

**C&I:** Your imagery appears to explore identity, gender, and stereotypes. How does being the daughter of an Indigenous father and white mother come into play?

**Buffalohead:** I tend to make these works that have a lot to do with dichotomy — sort of one figure against another. A lot of my work is about being biracial. My parents stressed our cultural identity and how important it was, but I also spent part of my summers in the suburbs of Minneapolis and had another world I had to conform to that wasn’t very pleasant. A lot of my work is also about being from two worlds and trying to mingle them together.

**C&I:** You work in an array of mediums. Is that by design?

**Buffalohead:** I started off in college being a large figurative oil painter, but when my daughter was born, I was forced to work with materials that were nontoxic, and I really opened up my work and began working with paper to create collage as well as ink and acrylics. As a mom and working artist, I really enjoy trying to do it all. I get bored very easily and have also tried printmaking and photography.

**C&I:** Do you have a favorite piece or series?

**Buffalohead:** Not really, but I have created a small series of coyotes dressed in 1950s-style pink dresses that were featured in my recent show at the Denver Art Museum. I tend to be a bit self-referential and have always been attracted to the trickster character, who can do many things that I feel I can’t do. Perhaps the dress is a play on feminism and how women are supposed to look and dress a certain way.