

Julie Buffalohead: *Uncommon Stories*

BY MASON RIDDLE AUGUST 13, 2019



The Song of the Ravens, 2014, acrylic, ink, and pencil on Lokta paper, 60 x 90 inches

The craft of storytelling is central to Julie Buffalohead’s artistic practice. Her deftly woven tales provide just enough visual clues so that we, the viewers, attempt to piece together the Minnesota artist’s elusive narratives. In her recent exhibition *Uncommon Stories*, Buffalohead (Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma) works thoughtfully with acrylic paint, ink, and pencil on thick sheets of Lokta paper, a tactile and often richly hued, handmade paper from Nepal. “I started using this Lokta paper because I wanted to paint on an object that had its own presence,” she says. “This paper has particular character with no two papers that are the same. To me they are art, and that’s something I can’t just replicate through painting.” Buffalohead has also dramatically increased the scale of certain works, some of which comprise nine Lokta sheets and measure 60 by 90 inches. The result is startling but seductive.

As in her earlier work, Buffalohead deploys a cast of characters both human and animal who act out societal codes, issues, and mores that she deems relevant to contemporary culture. Deer, coyotes, turtles, ravens, rabbits, and raccoons often masquerade as humans—and vice versa. Her thematic musings explore the complex relationships between Native American and dominant cultures, humans and animals, humans and the environment, and between men and women.

“In my recent work, I was thinking a lot about violence and images from westerns and the glamorization of violence and guns,” Buffalohead explains. “I was trying to weave a narrative around some of those images.” Nonetheless, Buffalohead’s touch is spare but loaded. Stereotypes are teased out. However, the glare of her subject matter is diffused by the stylistically naïve, illustrative execution of her protagonists and supporting cast.

In *The Song of the Ravens*, a large work comprising nine sheets of Lokta paper in a subtle grey-green hue, a man dressed in a white shirt and black slacks and wearing sunglasses sits on a flamingo pink sofa with a shotgun raised. A murder of ravens flies about as he points his gun in the air. Nearby, a coyote stands on two legs, ears back, and wears a pink shirtwaist dress and heels. Her arms are open and mouth agape. At her feet lay dead a fawn and a rabbit, and ravens pecking about. The man’s actions are ambiguous. Is she, the coyote, simply outraged at the senseless death? Or does she suspect that she is next? This disturbing scenario unfolds in an empty indeterminate space, leaving the viewer with little to factually or emotionally grasp. Buffalohead seems to give the viewer a choice: is *The Song of the Ravens* really about highly intelligent birds or about domestic violence in a contemporary gun-laden culture?

Less aggressive but still troubling is the large-scale *Turn a Blind Eye* on midnight blue Lokta. Here a cowgirl in appropriate attire raises two pistols to the sky. Nearby are several animals all injured or dead that seem to turn away from the woman. A small bird wears a cast on its leg and a bandage on its wing. A deer is blindfolded. Buffalohead seems to suggest how society ignores violence or deals with it indirectly.

In *The Merry Feast*, a three-panel piece on lipstick-red Lokta, a young girl wears antlers and sits at a small table before a bowl and spoon. A raccoon stands on hind legs in the other chair, eating from a dish. Off to one side a threatening coyote, standing upright on hind legs, howls—or is it screams?—at the scenario unfolding before him. Is the coyote more upset that the girl wears antlers or that the raccoon is eating at a dinner table? A tale with multiple interpretations, *The Merry Feast* exemplifies Buffalohead’s keen sense of our relationship to the world around us.

Like the Brothers Grimm’s early 19th century folk stories, Buffalohead creates cautionary tales that elucidate serious or uncomfortable issues in a humorous, nonthreatening manner. Over the last two years, her purposely naïve style has gained a sophistication and complexity that makes her themes ever more evocative. She has all but perfected her uncanny way of deploying a story in an empty, undefined two-dimensional space with no horizon line or background. In fact, these expanses of flat negative space now seem as essential to her narrative constructions as her figures. Like the best of literature, Buffalohead’s visual narratives need to be read more than once, and even then, explicit meaning may be elusive. Ultimately, it is Buffalohead’s larger investigations of issues of humanity, responsibility, and awareness, more than specific meanings that critically define her practice.