

## Animal Magnetism

*Whimsy meets weighty in paintings occupied by woodland creatures.*

BY STEPHANIE XENOS DECEMBER 15, 2014



Describing Julie Buffalohead's work is a little like trying to explain a dream. Her paintings and drawings suggest narrative without quite adhering to the usual rules that govern waking life. Well-dressed woodland creatures proliferate. A wolf serves a stuffed bear tea. Humans make appearances, too, but wolves, deer, owls, crows, muskrats, and raccoons take center stage.

A mid-career survey of her work opening this month in the Minnesota Museum of American Art's Project Space offers an opportunity to explore this dreamy landscape, and to get to know the animal characters that populate her work. The show includes more than two-dozen paintings and drawings by Buffalohead produced from the early 2000s until now, including new larger-scale work.

"A lot of the animal characters are from Native American origin stories," Buffalohead says. "I have been trying to create my own stories loosely based on those stories. The animals are stand-ins for what humans are doing."

While the animal inhabitants in her paintings and drawings may strike a whimsical chord, they are symbolic of a more serious subject matter. "What's particularly strong about Julie's work," says curator Christina Chang, "is that there are challenging socio-political messages, challenging subject matter like the representation of Native Americans in popular culture that are degrading. But she does it using imagery that's non-threatening so that conversation isn't tense or intimidating."