

## Animal dreams: Julie Buffalohead

BY MICHAEL ABATEMARCO AUGUST 17, 2018



*Untitled*, 2017, acrylic, ink, graphite, and collage on Lokta paper

The world of Julie Buffalohead is strange and dreamlike. In it, coyotes cavort with ravens, owls, foxes, and deer, not to mention human beings. These characters engage in actions that seem innocuous at times and absurd at others, striking the viewer with the power of enigma. In the artist’s tableaus, animals hide behind masks of other animals, as people, too, bear the heads of wild beasts; a coyote wears a pink dress, a rabbit is in a pink tutu. Like fairy tales, the works contain an undercurrent of the archetypal, of secrets whispered from the recesses of the mind.

“When I look at Native storytelling,” Buffalohead said, “I don’t do illustrations of it, but it’s something that I reference. In Native storytelling, animals tend to be in the forefront of the story, but you’re really talking about human relations. The animals can be stand-ins for people, but they can also be stand-ins for philosophy and all kinds of different things. For me, the whole issue with animals goes back to the way I was raised as a Native person, which is that all living things are respected. I kind of use animals as a way to tell a little bit about humans, as well as my own struggles and my own feelings. Sometimes they’re very animal-like and sometimes they’re more human-like, so they switch in and out.”

For the past decade, Buffalohead, who is represented by Bockley Gallery in Minneapolis, has focused more on drawing and painting, though she considers herself a multimedia artist. She’s also worked in sculpture, installation art, and printmaking. “There’s a lot more experimentation happening now in my studio,” she said. “I’ve been doing stuff with ribbon work. It’s a type of appliqué that Native women use. I’ve been doing a lot of collage and paper and applying it to different surfaces. Before my daughter was born, I used to use Native materials in nontraditional ways, trying to be more experimental. I tended to be a little more abstract in some of my work and less representational. I may eventually circle back to that.” A solo exhibition, *Eyes On: Julie Buffalohead*, is currently on view at the Denver Art Museum through January 2019.

Buffalohead, who is of Ponca heritage on her father’s side, lives and works in St. Paul, Minnesota. Some of the stories she references in her work, albeit obliquely, stem from those of Plains Indian tribes. Trickster figures like Coyote figure prominently, and while she isn’t retelling their tales in a visual format, their appearance serves a similar function as in Native mythology. “In a lot of stories, trickster characters teach you about what it means to be a human being,” she said. Dolls and other children’s toys, tea parties, dresses, stuffed animals, and references to childhood — particularly to young girlhood — are also motifs that appear and reappear. These and the strategic use of pink, a color associated with girlhood and femininity, especially when juxtaposed with representations of the untamed fauna of the natural world, suggest a polarity, an uneasy balance between roles and identities imposed by outside forces — by family, society, or community — and the individual will. “For the last nine years, I’ve spent a lot of time referencing motherhood,” Buffalohead said. “It’s supposed to be this wonderful thing, and oftentimes it isn’t. You’re not supposed to have these bad feelings about motherhood. Sometimes there’s different references to having a child and a little girl.”

The disparities in Buffalohead’s compositions, though humorous at times, are the source of the tension in them. There’s nothing absurd about a tea party — but a tea party attended by an owl, a raven, and a mallard, all sporting bunny slippers, is another matter. In a way, the creatures in Buffalohead’s drawings, who sometimes carry stuffed animal versions of themselves and wear bunny masks, are like children. They’re not animal children — as in kittens, pups, and cubs — but like animals who are children in spirit. In this way, Buffalohead’s works are effectively visual metaphors drawn from the psychic landscape of the mother-daughter or human-child relationship. “Sometimes the work is more specific in its narrative — something that’s happened to me or about my personal feelings,” she said. “Other times, they’re about identity or feelings of insecurity. It’s not my intention to tell a story that people just have to get. I like it having a little bit of mythical quality to it, which leads back to the whole storytelling thing.”

Some of Buffalohead’s drawings are more unsettling than explicitly disturbing. Masks are a recurring theme, as though many of her figures are never quite what they appear to be. “I have a Native father and a white mother. I grew up in the suburbs of Minneapolis. I didn’t grow up near my reservation. I’ve always had a really hard time. I look like my mother, but I never really felt like I fit in with either culture. Not because I didn’t feel a connection with it, but just because of the way people treat you,” she said, “It’s always been an issue of mine, I think, that identity issue, feeling like I’m part of two worlds. So a lot of times, my work deals with a dichotomy between one character and another. On one side of the picture, something is happening, and on the other side, something else is happening. It’s about that internal struggle.”