

Julie Buffalohead tells trickster tales with her art

St. Paul artist Julie Buffalohead fuses American Indian motifs and beautifully drawn animal images in a new show at Highpoint Center for Printmaking.

BY MARY ABBE MARCH 5, 2015



Julie Buffalohead sketches her deer alter egos with sensitivity, as seen in "Entwined."

A time of fantasy and play, childhood is that brief moment when kids begin to make words, tell stories, connect with the world. They learn to call a small, lop-eared, hopping critter a “rabbit,” and to label a huge animal with shy eyes and antlers a “deer.”

To adults that seems pretty straightforward, and it’s easy to imagine that we know all about these creatures — what they do, how they behave, where they figure in the cosmos.

Then along comes Julie Buffalohead, who gently jettisons all the certainties of adult convention and culture. In 10 exquisitely drawn and deceptively simple-looking lithographs, on view through March 28 at Highpoint Center for Printmaking in south Minneapolis, Buffalohead introduces a cast of animal characters. They look familiar but behave in unexpected ways, do strange and beguiling things, charm us with their winsome wisdom.

Clad in a pink-pleated tutu, a coyote stares down a rabbit waving a star-topped wand. A raccoon wearing a tiara topped with bobble-balls rolls onto its back and holds aloft a toy dinosaur that’s knitting a red scarf. A big-eyed owl appears puzzled to find itself hobbled by a tidy little house with picket fence strapped to its back along with a gun-toting cowboy silhouette. A fox curls up with a turtle while a big-toothed manga monster yells and waves a shadow-puppet in the shape of Nebraska.

Descriptions of Buffalohead’s art can read like Saturday-morning cartoons, but the lithographs are ripe with personal, historical and cultural allusions that are highly sophisticated and deftly done. The playful innocence of her images is disarming, like the clever tricksters they depict.

Two worlds fused

An enrolled member of the Ponca tribe of Oklahoma, Buffalohead describes herself as “from two cultures, biracial.” The little bungalow and manicured shrubs reference her childhood home, while the deer are metaphoric representations of herself as a member of the deer clan. By Ponca tradition, deer were essentially sacred — honored beings that were “taboo to touch.” Buffalohead learned Indian history and culture from her Ponca father and absorbed Euro-American customs from her white mother, an anthropologist. Now a mother herself, she continues to explore both cultures in drawings, storytelling and playful exchanges with her own daughter. She candidly admits to being troubled by her bifurcated identity.

“I am exploring an inadequacy, an idea of not [being]-indian-enough,” she said in a Highpoint statement.

While such self-doubts may drive Buffalohead, they never diminish her art. She has remarkable drawing skills, especially in rendering birds and animals in the most improbable yet utterly convincing positions. They always appear in ambiguous, empty spaces with no horizon line, shadows or background to hint at place or time of day. Even so, they have the visual weight and presence of figures in a landscape, a roofline frieze or traditional ledger drawings.

Deer as alter ego

Buffalohead sketches her deer alter egos with extraordinary sensitivity, often showing them bedded down with their slim legs folded and head tucked inward. Vulnerable and defenseless, they seem domesticated and even housebroken, a notion she subtly underscores by altering the antlers that are a deer’s crowning glory and defense weapon. In “Squirrel Mumbles,” a clothesline holding two tiny T-shirts dangles between the prongs of a sleeping deer. The “Entwined” deer has twigs tied to its head with red yarn in lieu of proper antlers. In “Unravel,” a prairie dog plays with a detached rack of antlers as the deer daydreams.

Often the animals wave thin rods topped by symbolic silhouettes alluding to historic events and cultural conflicts. In “Revisionist History Lesson,” a coyote uses rabbit and turtle silhouettes to attack a “Columbus” ship sailing toward North America. In “Fox Tussle,” a red fox curls around a turtle — associated with the creation of the world — that is waving silhouettes of a crow and fierce-looking cat. Nearby, a cartoonish monster brandishes silhouettes of a bungalow and Nebraska, the homeland from which the Ponca were exiled to Oklahoma.

Though they invite interpretation, Buffalohead’s lithographs never moralize. Instead, the animals’ antics and extraordinarily expressive eyes — shrewd, fierce, penetrating, playful, loving — telegraph the sly wisdom of the eternal trickster.