

## St. Paul artist Julie Buffalohead explores Native American themes

BY AMY CARLSON GUSTAFSON JANUARY 8, 2015



"The Standoff," 2012, is included in the Minnesota Museum of American Art Project Space show "Julie Buffalohead: Coyote Dreams."

A casual glance at the art on the walls of the Minnesota Museum of American Art Project Space might put you in a childlike mood. Many of the paintings and drawings by St. Paul-based artist Julie Buffalohead feature cute woodland animals and scenes reminiscent of fairy tales.

But take a closer look at any of the two dozen pieces and the complexity kicks in.

"It's rewarding work," says Christina Chang, the MMAA's curator of engagement. "It's not like you look at it and instantly you get it and you move on. You continue to discover new details."

"Julie Buffalohead: Coyote Dreams" is an endearing and powerful collection of the artist's work spanning more than a decade — from the early 2000s to today. It engages your imagination in a world where animals are the stars and sometimes wear the masks of other animals. Are these animals the instigators, victims or innocent bystanders?

"There's a kind of whimsical quality about the work she produces," said Brenda Child, an associate professor of American studies and American Indian studies at the University of Minnesota. "I find her very engaging. What really appeals to me is that it's very unique in terms of contemporary Native artists. I don't see her following in some mentor's footsteps."

An enrolled member of the Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma, Buffalohead was born in Minnesota and grew up in an academic household — her parents were professors — moving around a lot as a kid before settling in a Minneapolis suburb. Her father, Roger Buffalohead, was one of the first hires at the U's American Indian Studies department (along with renowned Native American artist George Morrison).

Buffalohead now lives in St. Paul's St. Anthony Park neighborhood with her partner, Nate Flink, and their 6-year-old daughter, Maddie.

The 42-year-old, who has degrees from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and Cornell University, has shown her work locally and nationally. Along with the current MMAA exhibit, Buffalohead also has a new print show — "Entwined" — opening Feb. 6 at the Highpoint Center for Printmaking in Minneapolis.

Buffalohead says she's inspired by the Native American stories and folklore she heard growing up. There were always stories being shared, she says, and she was particularly interested in those about animals.

"What I've been trying to do in the last few years is reference these Native American stories," Buffalohead said. "I'm drawn to animals and the stories themselves and what they have to say. Often people pass them off as folklore. They're not really that.

"There's oral history in there, there's truth, there's philosophy, there's all our belief systems in there.

"A lot of times I will take a character like the coyote character, which is a trickster character, and I will identify with it. I've used it a lot in my work as sort of a reference of the self. Some of the themes in the work are personal. I belong to the Deer Clan, so the deer is an important symbol to me. I've shifted from identifying with the coyote to identifying with the deer or maybe both."

Buffalohead said some of her work deals with being biracial — her father is Native and her mother white — and not feeling "good enough." There are pieces inspired by narcissism created by social media, gender stereotypes and how it's easier to criticize while hiding behind a mask.

Todd Bockley of the Bockley Gallery in Minneapolis first showed Buffalohead's work in 2004. He said her art has sold well the last few years, but demand has picked up.

"People respond to the narrative quality of the work," he said in an email. "They are like visual fairy tales for adults. Of course they're attracted to her wonderful use of color and the distinctive way the work is rendered, but more importantly they find a sense of identification in the sentiment being portrayed."

Dyani White Hawk, an artist who runs All My Relations Gallery in Minneapolis, has shown Buffalohead's work at the gallery. She said Buffalohead's art is timely and unique in that it fits in both the Native and national art scenes.

"I love her work," White Hawk said. "It's playful, but in a very sneakily, dark way. It's undercover dark, but at the same time it's fun and beautiful. A lot of times it's often humorous, but then she's dealing with things that can be both culturally specific and things that are just human experience. She can easily speak to multiple audiences, which is a real strength in her work."

While there are artists who aren't interested in how others view their work, Buffalohead enjoys hearing interpretations of her art.

"I like what my work does for other people," Buffalohead said. "If they love it and want it and take it home and can make their own interpretation of what it means — that's fine with me. I don't have a strong attachment to something where it has to be seen like this or be done like this. People come up to me all the time and tell me what they think something means and it's interesting to me what they're interpretations are. I like that the intent is often not readable."