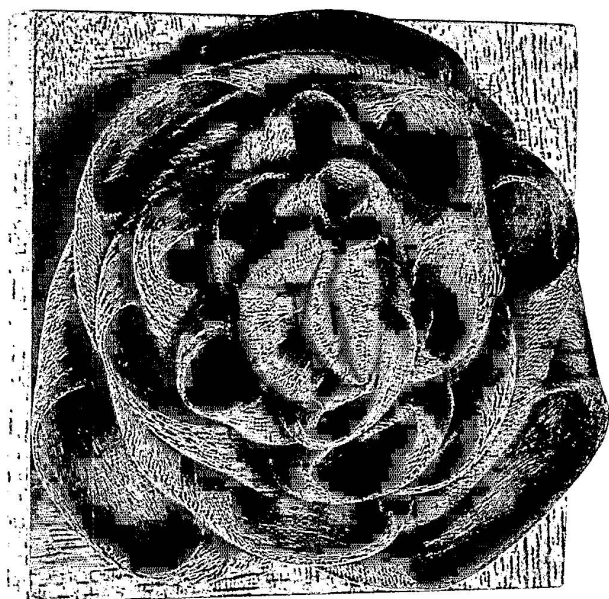


Portland, OR: Malia Jensen: PDX Gallery

Sculpture (Washington, D.C.) 20 no10 75-6 D 2001

By STUART HORODNER



Above: Malia Jensen, *Flower*, 2001. Horse-hair fabric, 6 x 6 x 6 in.

Malia Jensen is a Portland-based sculptor who exploits traditional modeling and carving techniques to create surprisingly tender and occasionally troubling figurative works. Her earliest pieces included hand-stitched garments for trees and upholstered deer heads that seemed to be distant cousins of the fierce leather masks once made by Nancy

Grossman.

Since then, Jensen has produced a bestiary of realistic animals that speak to issues of sexuality, desire, and vulnerability. While her technical facility might seem to slot her as a retro-academician, her conceptual clarity and sense of

humor help to properly situate her within the current crop of pseudo-naturalists, including Alexis Rockman, Sue Johnson, Mark Dion, and Christy Rupp. These artists explore environmentalism, taxidermy, and history with true-believer passion and a healthy dose of pragmatic cynicism.

Her sculptures produced in 2000 include an eight-foot-tall beaver made of stacked recycled plywood, a fiberglass fox surrounded by wax flower petals, birds made of barnyard feces, and copulating plastic ladybugs. The beaver was scaled up by having a modest-sized clay model

CAT-scanned at a local hospital. With the pun-laden title of *Beaver Story*, the bucktoothed beast stands on its hind legs at approximately the height of a one-story dwelling--the tall tale of Oregon's iconic state animal (who might be considered a sculptor, using its teeth to carve some local Earthworks). "Beaver" is a slang term for female genitalia, and given the figure's proportions, Jensen seems to be restating the "Is bigger better?" question, changing it from a male member conundrum to an absurdist vaginal one.

Jensen's recent exhibition "Portraits" outlined a loose narrative of adolescent and adult concerns. By including variously formed objects, photographs, and drawings within the same installation, Jensen made clear that she is interested in levels of representation that accumulate meaning through association and sequence.



Bunny, 2001. Canvas and leather, 38 x 69 x 32 in.

Upon entering the gallery one confronted *Horse*, a hyper-real, root-beer-colored cast resin sculpture in the theoretical scale of a prehistoric horse (thought to be about the size of a common house cat). Standing on a white pedestal, its body is exquisitely rendered, the muscular torso and compact head (complete with a few idiosyncratic moles) a bundle of dark compressed energy. There is a funerary air to the smallish figure, except at the bottom, where the resin is thinnest and

the feet emit a living golden glow. Two Cats were nearby, in the form of black and white photographs with a casual stop-action blur, the pet barely distinguishable from the domestic space around it. These were followed by small wall-mounted Flowers, formed with horsehair fabric on walnut. They recall the early labial constructions of Hannah Wilke and Judy Chicago--part trophy, part corsage. A large generalized Bunny commandeered most of the floor space in the crisp white gallery. Stitched together from sections of worn cotton canvas and leather, it is a potential resting place, perfectly sized for children to hug or nestle into while imagining their own stallions and flowers and kittens. Given Jensen's penchant for wordplay, thoughts of Hugh Hefner's Playboy bunnies were not unreasonable.

Two sober Clutch bags were cast in white soap, both shut tight, one with a zipper and the other with a snap. Their physical embodiment in soap alludes to the privacy of the bath, with its rituals of cleanliness and beautification. Purse was the grand finale, a baroque handbag with luscious folds and casually splayed open straps. Cast in the kind of pink plastic one associates with Barbie dolls and dental molds, it is a potent body surrogate. It sat on a wide platform, adjacent to an unframed pencil drawing of itself--evidence of being made and being looked at.

Moving from one work to another allowed for a heady relay of references--the ancient horse, linked in size to the cat of today, the tullelike material for the flower originating with the mane of the horse, and the folds and locking mechanisms of the purses mimicking the intimate sites of female pleasure and pain. Malia Jensen's "Portraits" demonstrates her ongoing negotiation of a complex womanhood that honors feminist and Pop legacies while forming their future.

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