

Opposites attractive and intriguing in Jensen's hands

BY MARGARET HAWKINS
Galleries

MALIA JENSEN: 'CONJUNCTIONS'

◆ Through Jan. 10
◆ Richard Gray Gallery,
875 N. Michigan,
Suite 2503
◆ (312) 642-8877;
www.richardgraygallery.com

Malia Jensen's deceptively simple-looking sculptures, now on view at Richard Gray Gallery, lull us with sweetness and then confound us with contradiction.

At first appearing to be dead-on representations of plain objects such as pillows and bricks or cute approachable animals, Jensen's work soon reveals itself to be a series of riddles or puzzles, the answers to which can only be imagined when we abandon logic for beautiful impossibility.

Every one of Jensen's sculptures in the exhibit called "Conjunctions" contains a conjunction of opposites: soft and hard, dark and pale, heavy and light, spiky and smooth, whimsical and rigorous, innocent and just slightly salacious.

"En Plein Air" is a piled up, outsized pair of shiny white mating bugs. As bulky as tanks and as sleek and antiseptic as hospital equipment, they are the opposite of the skittering blackness we expect of insects. Jensen has replaced revulsion with a kind of bland cuteness, teddy bears in heat, which renders these beetles both obscene and pristine.

Likewise with "Seal and Penguin 4 Ever," which appears to be another mating couple. Here the shininess of a white seal, as contoured and polished as a mint condition 1951 Cadillac, lies atop a dark bronze penguin. The suggestive slope of the seal's lower body and the inert dark mass of the penguin beneath it subverts the first impression of cuteness that these two icons of zoo appeal embody. It's another relationship of opposites, and everything about it is slightly off. The colors are opposite — seals are usually

black — and mammals and birds don't mate. The piece is seductive, but not because it appears to be about animal sex. Rather, it's the gorgeousness of Jensen's surfaces that seduce the eye.

Some of Jensen's works completely skirt the conundrum of cuteness. The aggressively ugly "Dark Horse" might be some kind of prehistoric pig or the dinosaur version of its namesake, but it makes us think

more of the unlikely contender suggested by the work's title than it does of any actual horse. Then there are her three pillow pieces, which avoid the animate world altogether and instead focus on materials.

For Jensen, materials have meaning. One of the most elegant of the many elegant works in this show is "Chopping Pillow," a kind of visual oxymoron. A chopping block is where one loses one's head; a pillow is where one rests it. Jensen's pillow-shaped hunk of butcher-block functions neither as a chopping block (too curvy) nor as a pillow (too hard), and it already contains pounded-in nails so even if someone tried to use it as a chopping block, any knife that struck it would instantly be blunted. As a utilitarian object, "Chopping Pillow" is a failure and a study in frustration, yet as an esthetic object, it is perfectly self-defended, proving that the best defense is sometimes uselessness.

These contrasts throughout Jensen's work suggest an overriding and obvious theme: Things are not what they appear. But over time, a more subtle version of this idea emerges, that truth is not a simple black-and-white thing and often lies in its own opposite.

One of Jensen's most appealing pieces, a tiny sculpture of a messy bed carved from a bar of pink soap, embodies her idea that truth resides most fully in paradox as well as any of her larger works. Small and adorable, like something made for a dollhouse, "Unmade Bed" is messy yet carved from soap, which is clean. A bed is safe and solid while soap is something that dissolves. Jensen doesn't draw conclusions — deal with it, she seems to say — but her work forces us to acknowledge that nothing is ever as simple as it appears to be.

Margaret Hawkins is a local free-lance writer.



"Dark Horse" is one of the thought-provoking pieces on display in Malia Jensen's exhibit "Conjunctions" at Richard Gray Gallery.