

RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

sculpture



Thinking Through Objects Malia Jensen

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Malia Jensen has emerged from a generation of younger sculptors who express content through a language of hybrid objects, rather than continuing last century's aesthetic exploration of art about art. Her recent exhibition "Conjunctions," at the Richard Gray Gallery in Chicago, forged adroit combinations of materials and meanings to fabricate sculpture of physical, conceptual, and metaphorical depth. Wildness and domesticity, "reality" and myth, humor and melancholy, jeopardy and sanctuary, clarity and obscurity, impropriety and elegance, mischief and tragedy, the unnerving and the darling, the conceptual and the handmade—all intermingle slyly and at many levels in Jensen's sculpture, which embodies contradiction. The tension between opposing elements causes a temporary short circuit in meanings, creating what she calls "a third thing," a new, often unnerving reality.¹

Seal + Penguin 4 Ever (2008) offers a good example of her tongue-in-cheek approach to "coupling" disparate parts for conceptual purposes. At one level, *Seal* is an outré representation of the hegemony currently enjoyed by unusual materials in sculpture: a polyester resin seal covered in shiny auto body paint (symbolizing the contemporary) straddles a penguin in patinated bronze (representing the traditional). The work is based on a bizarre story recently reported on the BBC: two wildly different animals, a seal and a penguin, were seen mating. *Seal's* blend of impropriety and absurdity epitomizes Jensen's delight in transgression, even as it offers up her sarcastic anger at discordant and inappropriate human dominance over the natural world, a recurring theme in her work.

This is sculpture that periodically skirts an unsavory edge as it cheerfully dismantles the longstanding Western penchant for thinking about the world in binary terms—mental/manual, intellect/body, culture/nature, good/bad. The work represents an unmannerly critique of enduring

17th-century philosophical premises represented by Descartes's "I think, therefore I am," where the act of thinking—not feeling—assures us of our existence and splits the world into a "superior" mental sphere of intellectual activity and a "lowly" body trapped in its material nature. This mindset has historically tainted the aesthetic status of sculpture, located as it is in the three-dimensional, everyday world of "dumb objects."

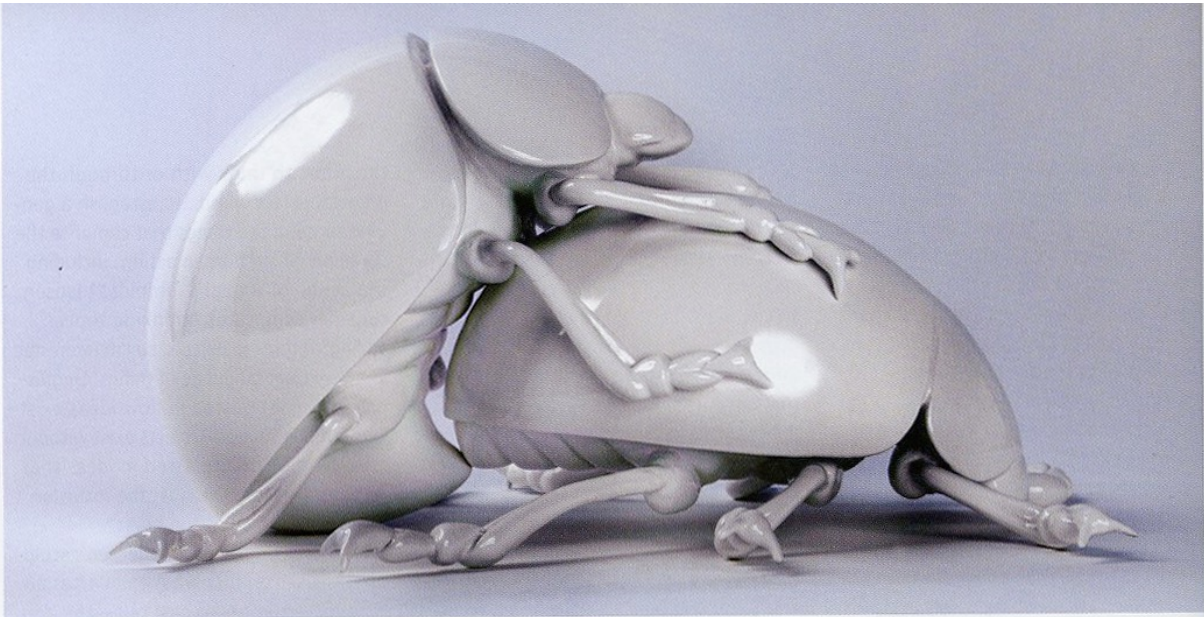
But Jensen unifies the ways in which we take meaning from the world: her sculpture allows technical virtuosity and materials to mingle equally with abstract metaphor and linguistic play to achieve an ironic punch. These aesthetic works echo the cultural theorist Bill Brown's call for "a comparatively new idiom, beginning with

the effort to think with or through the physical object world...to establish a genuine sense of the things that comprise the stage on which human action, including the action of thought, unfolds."² Jensen calls her sculptures "thinking tools," adding: "I think in objects, so I'm interested in a very clear language of things. Linguistically, I'm interested in how ideas exist without a language. Objects exist without a language. I'm interested in ideas that come in through the gut, the intuition that then rises up to the brain."

Not surprisingly, much of Jensen's sculpture focuses on just what the Cartesian "cogito" attempts to cast out—the animal in all of us. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, humans were given sovereignty over the animal world. Yet, antithetically,



Opposite: *Seal + Penguin 4 Ever*, 2008. Patinated bronze, polyester resin, acrylic urethane, and cat whiskers, 20 x 42 x 67 in. Right: *Bathing Skunk*, 2000–08. Cast soap and microcrystalline wax, 13 x 8 x 16 in.



En Plein Air, 2000. Urethane resin and acrylic urethane, 6 x 9 x 13 in.

even as humans have parsed what is “animal” to define the “human,” so we have from ancient times drawn on animal qualities of power and the supernatural to expand our own identities. Just as Claude Levi-Strauss’s epigram “animals are good to think with” destabilized the boundaries between humans and animals (they teach us how to sharpen our perceptions), so Jensen’s use of animal subjects to describe psychological plight violates longstanding assumptions about the superiority of human acumen.³ Her anthropomorphic *Bathing Skunk* (2000–08), for example, embodies the essence of what it feels like (for a human, presumably) to be in a quandary: it’s the image of a happily odorous skunk who, disconcertedly, finds its body cast from pristine soap and wax.

Although Jensen has lived in Brooklyn for six years, she grew up in the Portland, Oregon, area, spending most of her time roaming the forests and woods. She graduated from the Pacific Northwest College of Art in 1989 and maintains strong connections with the region and its aesthetic traditions: a recent exhibition at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery and the installation of an outdoor bronze sculpture titled *Pile* (2009) in downtown Portland continued her dryly articulated themes of sharp sedition.

Dark Horse, 2008. Polyurethane resin, 16 x 22 x 5 in.

Images of nature and animals form an artistic foundation in the Pacific Northwest, which draws on traditional Native American iconography and the mid-20th-century Northwest School of painting. But Jensen’s work goes further. Her animals allow her to actualize and intensify the sense of strangeness and familiarity, the autonomy and otherness, that the material world presents to humans. *Dark Horse* (2008), the speculative image of a house-

cat-sized prehistoric horse called an eohippus, is a powerful representation of opacity and otherness.

It is significant that Jensen does not operate within the aesthetic milieu of Rosalind Krauss’s “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” (1979), which famously heralded the advent of installation art. Instead, Jensen’s sculpture inhabits a discrete—not dispersed—space, offering a physically condensed, one-on-one intimacy of modest





Above: *Jam*, 2008. Patinated bronze and cast cotton paper, 22 x 18 x 21 in. Right: *Debark*, 2008. Patinated bronze, cast cotton paper, and watercolor, 75 x 11 x 21 in.

scale. She calls it, “anti-stadium art, not spectacle for the sake of spectacle.” Jensen seeks “to make smaller connections. It’s more interesting if it feels accessible. I want the audience of one person, as opposed to making art for a roomful of people.”

The sense of the uncanny in Jensen’s sculpture—which includes much more than animal imagery—also sharpens its intimacy and deftly delivered mischief. She has called her work “Northwest Noir,” a semi-jocular description circulating among Pacific Northwest residents, who often blame the rainy weather for their brooding, off-kilter cultural sensibility. Frequently, Jensen’s sculptures work like visual jokes, amplified by a stand-up demeanor—uninflected and straightforward, delivering a secondary bite after the initial chuckle. *Chopping Pillow (with nails)* (2007–08), for example, hand-carved from a restaurant chopping block, serves up a funny and alarming meditation on our assumptions about places of safety—such as beds. The gorgeously waxed, nailed surface forms a smoothly elegant location for nightmares: you might lose your head if you sleep on it. As in all of Jensen’s work, *Pillow’s* loving workmanship and refined details seduce viewers into close quarters, where they find ambiguity and contradiction. “Much of what I do is a complicated obfuscation,” she says.

This, indeed, is how Jensen leaves it: stilled poise and material presence run up against, and yet strengthen, the linguistic drive of her sculptures. *Debark* (2008), a cast paper bundle slung over a 100-pound bronze staff, embodies a longing for departure, for escape. But the staff is ponderous, the bundle pitifully tenuous, and, as Jensen implies, there is ultimately no place to go. “This is the terror,” writes the anthropologist Ernest Becker, “to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, and excruciating inner yearnings for life and self-expression—and with all this yet to die.”⁴ Jensen lays down a new set of 21st-century conditions for how humans define themselves within the progression of earthly events. These eccentric, witty works suggest that acknowledging the “animal” means acknowledging the inevitable, that is, coming to terms with the inescapable connection linking the creaturely, the human, and a perishing material world.

Polly Ullrich is an art critic based in Chicago.



Notes

¹ All quotations from the artist are taken from telephone and e-mail conversations with the author. Jensen’s solo show at Richard Gray in New York runs from September 28 through October 30.

² Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 3.

³ Andreas Røepstorff, “Thinking with Animals,” *Sign Systems Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1, 2001, p. 204.

⁴ Ernest Becker, quoted in Paul Shepard, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1996), p. 15.