



q/a

Observant By Nature: A Conversation with Malia Jensen

by Rachel Rosenfield Lafo

Malia Jensen's work combines a keen sense of observation of the natural world with a complex sense of humor. Earthy, sensual, uncanny, ambiguous, and provocative, her sculptures are always more than what they appear to be, teasing out multi-layered narratives. Jensen explores mortality, perseverance, constructed beliefs, and cultural myths associated with the American West as well as concerns about the fragility of the ecosystem. Her works play with our emotions by triggering contradictory feelings of attraction and repulsion, causing us to re-examine our preconceptions about animal and human behavior.

Jensen recently received a Creative Heights grant from the Oregon Community Foundation in support of *Nearer Nature*, a project consisting of four temporary sculptural installations sited throughout Oregon in 2019–2020. The site-specific works will unfurl in seasonal chapters. *Worth Your Salt* (salt-lick sculptures inviting the collaboration of wild animals and livestock) debuted in the spring, and *Mourning Tides* (a collective exercise in temporary memorial making) begins this summer at Ecola State Park on the Oregon Coast, with opportunities for the public to participate. *Perfect Circle, Concrete (Cat-henge)* and *A Bear Sits in the Woods* will complete the project in 2020.





**Portrait of the
Artist as a
Young Pill Bug,
2018.**

Ceramic, silk,
walnut, and
stainless steel,
16.5 x 20 x 8.5 in.



Rachel Rosenfield Lafo: You were born in Hawaii, spent your very early years in the Midwest, and then at age four moved with your family to 50 acres of land in Willamina, Oregon, where you lived until you moved to Portland at age 12. You also spent 11 years in New York City from 2003 to 2014. What roles do geography, a sense of place, and what you've called a Western vocabulary play in your work?

Malia Jensen: That's a huge question. Place and landscape define me in many ways. It will pain my mother to read this, but I always felt alone in my family and not especially secure. Living in six different states before you're four years old is a lot of moving, and when we put roots in that valley, I became very attached. You couldn't see another structure from our house, and I loved the wildness and isolation. In spite of having a brother, I spent much of my time playing alone, inventing pastimes in the woods. I vowed to myself that if we ever lost the property I would buy it back, an assertion

Mourning Tides,
2019.

Interactive project using natural clay deposits on the coast of Oregon. Participants create collective memorials of hand-pressed earthen bowls as temporary markers, which are left to dissolve back into the sea with the rising tides.





FROM OPPOSITE
TOP
Deer Skull,
2018.
Raku-fired ceramic.
12 x 16.75 x 8.25 in.

**Perfect Circle
(Imperfect)**,
2016.
Slip-cast ceramic
fired with glaze,
concrete, and glass.
8.5 x 80 x 80 in.



“
A story
is an
experience
before
it gets
put into
words...

reaching
those ideas
viscerally
is precisely
possible
because of
our shared
humanity
and is, in
fact, one of
the goals
of art.”

that belied a well-developed sense of dread. When my parents divorced and we actually did “lose” it, I was devastated. My dad’s pottery studio and kilns were there; consequently, my mom, my brother, and I moved to Portland. It felt like a biblical expulsion, and when the grade school burned down over Christmas break, the door back was really closed.

Each of the four of us became strikingly separate at that time, exploring different scenarios of who we would become. Depression became almost normal for me and lasted for decades, but I had a maniacal drive and I don’t know if I was exactly unhappy with my melancholy. I remodeled a dilapidated barn in our suburban backyard when I was 18 and lived in it through art school. I bought my own house when I was 26, spending 10 years fixing it up and converting the garage into a studio, before moving to New York at 38. This was the beginning of where I am now.

RRL: You often use creatures from the natural world to personify aspects of human behavior. How does your attitude toward and relationship to animals inform your work?

MJ: I’ve always had an observant disposition and was surrounded by solitude and nature at the point in my childhood when I was most mentally engaged. My family shared a streak of absurdist humor and a flair

for facilitating dramas with narrative potential, often involving animals. There was my dad rushing outside naked in the middle of the night and shooting a skunk on the deck because it was after our chickens, or the time our peacocks flew off and joined the peacocks of the Scientologists, whose headquarters adjoined our property. We had friends in communes, and my brother and I briefly went to “free school,” where there were no rules. There was a thrilling feeling of living outside the rules as well as a palpable nearness of failure. It was an idyllic environment, even if it often fell short of ideal. Being uprooted from it at a young age, I began looking back on it with both longing and a disconnected remove, which enabled me to reconstruct it later as an armature for playing out situations and exploring broader themes of my work.

RRL: In *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Pill Bug*, your proxy is a crustacean with an armored shell that can roll up into a ball as a defensive measure, expressing both vulnerability and strength. Why did you choose a pill bug?

MJ: I was thinking back to a relationship I longed for in my teens and reflecting that it was about as likely as a friendship between a bird and a pill bug. The desire to curl into a protected ball and roll away also has plenty of appeal at the moment.



Salty,
2010.
Digital video,
13 min.

RRL: Your work is often unsettling, as is the case with *Box of Snakes (smoke)* (2018). It can read simultaneously as seductive, beautiful, humorous, painful, and disturbing. How do you use puns and humor to subvert the meaning of an object?

MJ: I don't know if I so much subvert a meaning as multiply it. I like to simplify and complicate the work in ways that allow it to contain multiple meanings but also assert itself as conceptually intentional. Puns and humor can disarm something that might otherwise be bleak or thwart something that could be too beautiful. I appreciate the complexity of humor and find it in dark and absurd places. I also admit that I like amusing myself and interrupting something high-minded with something very low.

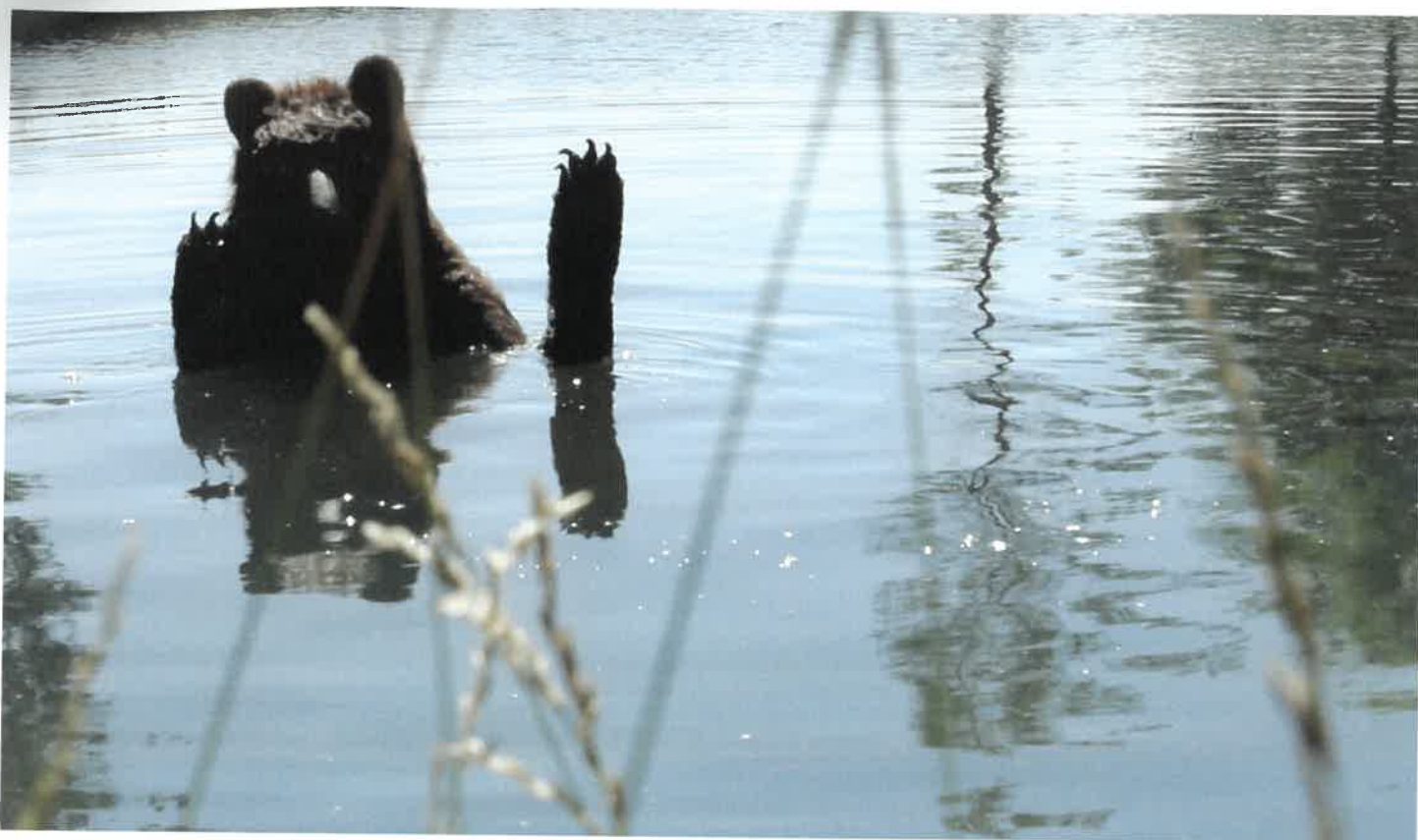
RRL: Your manipulations of mundane inanimate objects, such as a woman's purse or a rolling pin covered by a giant blob of dough, present the viewer with a choice of narrative possibilities. You've revisited the purse, which can represent a woman's sexuality as well as her purchasing power, over many years. Why does it continue to hold symbolic weight for you?

MJ: That particular purse is a sculpture I first exhibited in cast pink resin for a show I called "Portraits" (2001). I was particularly obsessed with the purse as a surro-

gate for the uterus, containing a collection of mysterious "feminine" attributes and representing our culture's persistent willingness to not know "what's inside there." I later cast a version in soap, which I recently used in a video, and concluded the series with a silver patinated bronze edition called *Old Bag*. The narratives shift but continue to reflect spending power, both monetary and sexual, and power and fertility. A woman's purchasing power and her sexuality have obviously been profoundly intertwined; it's an issue that will always be interesting to me and is particularly relevant right now. *Dough Situation* is also a powerfully female piece with some of the same roots as *Purse* and *Old Bag*, but conceptually it's more abstract and lusty. Most people don't bake bread anymore, so if it's mundane it's in the same way as the swollen belly of a pregnant woman—an everyday event that's still wondrous and awe-inspiring. I think what I'm after is surprising or weird beauty, possibly outright magic and shared human feeling.

RRL: You once told me that you've always tried to imbue the work with enough narrative content that one could, if it were possible, extract that language or those words or those stories back out of the piece. Do you think of your work as having literary content?

MJ: Yes. I love the textual implications that come from certain materials and the associations they arrive with,



as well as the ideas, however mutable, that we bring to familiar objects, tools, animals, elements of nature, and whatever else a visual artist can use to assemble a narrative. A story is an experience before it gets put into words, and I think reaching those ideas viscerally is precisely possible because of our shared humanity and is, in fact, one of the goals of art.

RRL: In addition to sculpture, you also create drawings and videos. What is the relationship of your work in different media?

MJ: Video is a way to make the sculptures move, drawing out the slowness while compounding and elucidating the narrative that's implied in the static object, like the salt-lick breast or the cast soap purse. I tend to imagine complex interpretations, so recording created collaborations with natural environments, animals, time, and situation is a way to describe how ideas are played out in the work.

The drawing I've been most interested in recently is done as in observation of nature, striving to compress the space between my eye and my hands.

My chosen subject is usually an insignificant collection of branches or roots or rocks and water, the result possibly appearing slight and underwhelming. Representational accuracy doesn't interest me—truth in looking does. The drawings that I find successful hold on to a reductive feeling of honesty, like a good translation of a poem.

RRL: You use a variety of materials, including clay, bronze, fabric, cement, glass, wood, and rubber. How do you decide which material to use for a particular work?

MJ: The materials have always been part of the vocabulary of the piece, as in the soap and salt works, or the monumental *Beaver Story* made of old plywood, or the tower of bird shit cast in bronze; they tend to be part of the humor as well as the meaning. My approach has been shifting recently, but what might look like a simplification in my recent turn toward clay has the most personal significance. Clay has not been free for me to use—it was occupied on my emotional map by my potter father and too fraught with history to approach.

Since his death, I have taken it on as a complicated mantle, filled with information and opportunity as both an honoring and a claiming in a way I can only describe as a legacy that he has given me. The expressive potential of clay most resembles what I've envied in painters, the one-to-one relationship of the hand to the work. Using clay in combination with wood and bronze and finding my vocabulary with these materials is of profound interest to me.

RRL: Do you think of the viewer when you create your work? What do you want your relationship with viewers to be?

MJ: Viewers are as essential to me as readers for a book. I'm hoping they want to look and that they're willing to put in the time. The sensual satisfaction of making everything is part of what drives me, and I'm not against some measures of seduction. The work is for them. My aim is to make connections and exchanges of ideas and feeling.

RRL: You've said that your work ethic comes from beating back fear, and that your work is about the redemption of failure. Could you explain what you mean by that?

MJ: The work is often about re-making experiences or creating a foil to examine a dynamic or situation. I see both fear and failure as forms of energy, and I'd rather use them as resources than judge them as something to avoid. You can also "redeem" a failure by exchanging it for something of value, like generating the energy and drive to create a home for oneself or finish a body of work. Anxiety and dread have always loomed large, and I had several personal maxims throughout my 20s that helped me keep going: lacking desire, use fear, and also a program I referred to as "contingency against regret," which required that no matter how depressed I might be I'd better keep working so that one day, when I was happy, I would not have wasted my time being unproductive. I still occasionally use those tools but have mostly succeeded in finding the obverse, which is, of course, desire. ■

FROM OPPOSITE:
The Bear's Progress,
2007.
Digital video, 8 min.,
50 seconds.

Purse,
2003.
Polyurethane resin,
7 x 15 x 20 in.





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Malia Jensen — Nearer Nature: Worth Your Salt
by **April Baer**

OPB Oct. 31, 2019 2:57 p.m. | Updated: Nov. 1, 2019 10:33 a.m.

While thinking about new places to take her practice, Portland-based artist [Malia Jensen's](#) mind turned toward the wild places where so many Oregonians seek solace.

“I really had been wanting to take my work out of the box of a gallery space, the expected location where we think we go to see art,” Jensen said.

What better, she thought, than to be led by the animal life that’s fascinated her since her days growing up outside Willamina, Oregon? At the same time, she wanted to address the digital culture consuming human interactions.

“I’ve been thinking about the internet as an evolutionary malfunction, a glitch that we’re struggling to adapt to,” she said.



Artist Malia Jensen’s “Nearer Nature” project utilized 18 motion-triggered field cameras to gather images of wildlife. - Courtesy of Malia Jensen

Jensen sees us letting go of the alliances we traditionally forge with disparate people from our work and home circles, random neighbors, and turning instead to screens.

“Your phone won’t save you when the shit really hits the fan. I still like to ask people for directions and favorite lunch spots,” Jensen said. “And it’s not always about being lost or hungry.”

This was both ethos and method for her latest exhibition, *Nearer Nature: Worth Your Salt*. She sought funding from the Oregon Community Foundation’s Creative Heights grant, a fund intended for innovative works of arts and culture.

Malia Jensen’s Homeward Journey

Jensen’s concept is undoubtedly an exercise in thinking bigger. Elaborating on ideas from [her 2011 installation, “Salty,”](#) she sculpted human body parts out of high-density salt licks, and positioned them in six wild places around the state: a head in Portland’s West Hills, a pile of doughnuts representing a stomach in Central Oregon, a foot near Hell’s Canyon. Together, they sketch the rough outline of a human form reclining across the state. All these sculptures were under surveillance by 18 motion sensitive trail cameras.

“The process of finding locations [for] the cameras was really interesting: honing my own tracking abilities, finding the scat, finding the multiple trails, looking for broken branches.” She wanted different kinds of light in different shots, for morning or evening, and even infrared shots collected overnight.

“There were all these multiple considerations,” Jensen said.

Oregon’s wildlife took it from there, as a diverse array of creatures — elk and deer, but also foxes, coyotes, porcupines, squirrels, chipmunks, mice and a vast array of birds — paraded past the lens.

“I love the irony and humor of using unwitting animals as diplomats and salt sculptures of human body parts as conduits for exchanges,” Jensen said. “In human and animal bodies, salt functions in a vaguely parallel way, enabling connections in our blood and muscles.” Further, she liked the symbiotic structure of her relationship with her subjects: Animals get salt their diets need, while the artist gets a series of images certain to hold human attention.



Artist Malia Jensen created “Nearer Nature: Worth Your Salt” with help from the Oregon Community Foundation’s Creative Heights grant. - Courtesy of Malia Jensen

Ben Mercer, Jensen’s editor for the project, explained: “Malia would leave three cameras at each location for a month, and in that time, it would accrue 900 sequential clips.”

In some of the clips, elk come up to the salt sculpture, squeaking and bugling to each other, right on the edge of human habitation. In other clips, Jensen caught animal interactions most people will never see in places like the Nehalem Estuary, on Lower Nehalem Community Trust land, and back country in Wallowa County, near [the LH residency](#) headquarters.

“When you’re watching it, it has a very contemplative and meditative quality,” Mercer said. Over six months, Jensen compiled more than 25,000 video clips, each 30 seconds to a minute long. With help from a team of editors, Jensen, Mercer and the team organized the clips in a grid formation, with four contiguous clips playing simultaneously.

So what to do with all this amazing video? For Jensen, the setting for playing back the clips was equally important as the images themselves.

She selected [places as diverse as her capture points for the clips](#), mindful of locations different kinds of people would use together: the Riverside Tavern in Maupin, and Manzanita’s San Dune, as well as a mental health clinic in Enterprise, [KSMOCA at an elementary school in Portland](#), a feed shop in Redmond and one tiny, 100-year-old grocery store in Tygh Valley.

The very placement of the screens felt fundamental, something to take viewers somewhat unaware. At one site, the Skyline Tavern on the heavily-wooded edge of Forest Park, Jensen’s video loop is tucked in between Keno screens.

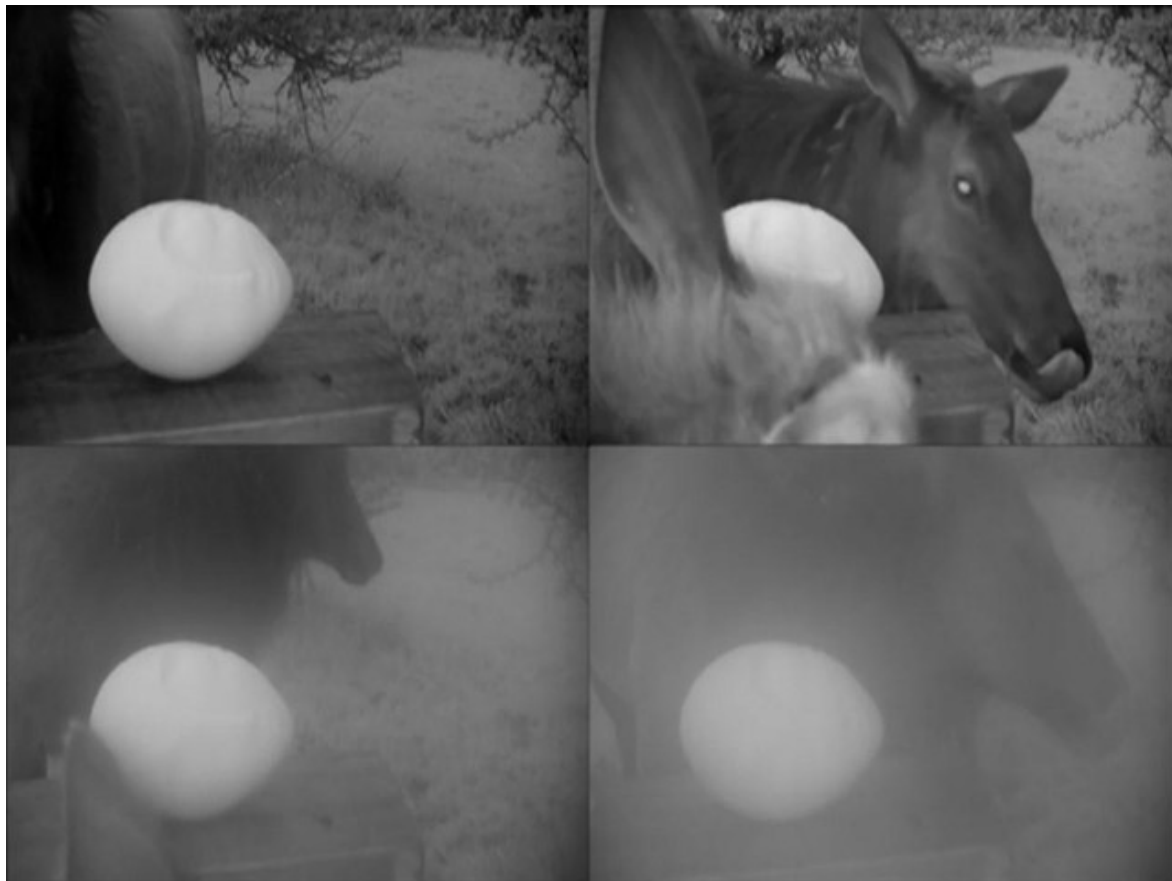
Scott Becker, owner of the Skyline and himself a filmmaker, quipped, “We culture jammed [the screen] for the next few months.” He gestured at the herd of elk on the screen, noting it was collected just down the hill from the Skyline, on private land.

“I just love it. These are our other neighbors,” Becker said.

On a barstool, an ex-welder named Scott Bently looked on as Jensen’s loop cycled through images of deer and elk meandering through a mildly-spooky black and white infrared clip. Bently, who works nights so he can spend daylight hours in the woods, agreed there’s a divide in how people view nature, and maybe by extension, each other.

“I think a lot of people new to the area are amazed to see a deer in the yard,” he said. “Some people, who’ve been here a long time are just trying to keep them out of their garden — you moved into their back yard. They didn’t move into yours!”

Jensen’s hope is that viewers from different walks of life, whether hikers or hunters, farmers or others, might fall under the video’s spell long enough to stop what they’re doing, talk with other viewers and truly listen to each other.



Some images gathered at night for Malia Jensen’s project, “Nearer Nature: Worth Your Salt”, provided intimate - not to mention slightly spooky - views of wildlife. - Courtesy of Malia Jensen

“This project isn’t about me or my art,” Jensen said. “It’s about bringing a literal network back to the earth after having thrown our relationships up to the internet, to network face-to-face.

Whatever people talk about as they watch the video is great. I’m not trying to be in that conversation.”

These chance encounters are what Jensen thrives on. In fact, it was an unexpected meeting with a molecular biologist in Wasco County that led to one of “Nearer Nature’s” installations. On a siting trip through Tygh Valley, Jensen was on a rancher friend’s land when she happened on a private fly-fishing party on the White River.

“As it turned out,” she said, “they were a group of doctors and scientists from OHSU.” And among their numbers was Dr. Susan Hayflick, a medical geneticist, and chair of the department of molecular genetics at OHSU.

“We noticed a person in a white van,” Hayflick remembered, “walking back and forth past her, we struck up a conversation. She came and spent the evening with us. We were mutually intrigued with each other.”

Hayflick, an avid outdoorswoman, was so taken with the project she offered Jensen space for one of her video installations on a monitor outside her lab’s office.

“We work in such a technical, synthetic environment here, I liked the idea of contrasting that — or calming it — with art,” she said.

While it’s not the most heavily-trafficked part of the OHSU campus, Hayflick said the installation quickly became a draw.

“It’s really compelling. It’s hard for me to walk away from it. There’s always something coming next I haven’t seen. I see other people stopping, even if it’s only a half a minute,” she said. “It’s starting to be a topic of conversation: ‘Did you see the fox family?’”

Hayflick sees science and art as intimately tied together, in ways that echo throughout “Nearer Nature.”

“We see the beauty of the molecules we work on, their power in causing or relieving disease. It’s a continuum of those elements to the macro elements of the elk wandering through the forest.” If you come across one of Jensen’s video feeds between now and December, watch a while and maybe strike up a conversation with someone else watching.

“We have to build alliances with people whose opinions differ from our own, and create a society from our common humanity and not the extremes we’re being pushed to,” Jensen said. “To untangle difference from animosity and be compassionate with each other ... it takes actual work.”

“Nearer Nature: Worth Your Salt”, is [on view at 12 sites across Oregon through Dec. 2](#).

'Salty' artwork suggests beauty and connection

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- T. Lee Brown



Gallery. Museum. Public park. Those are the places we expect to find art. Malia Jensen's "Nearer Nature: Worth Your Salt" defies expectation and brings art down to earth, among the people — and animals, too. Through the end of December, the project is on display at a feed store in Redmond and a bar in Maupin, among other locations.

Malia Jensen carved sculptures out of salt and installed them in wild and rural locations, including Central Oregon.

The video installations form one component of an unusual, clever, and downright funny piece. The first step involved sculpting parts of the human body, and objects representing body parts.

Jensen is a gifted sculptor who roams from medium to medium: bronze, wood, clay, polyurethane resin. For "Nearer Nature," she carved sculptures out of white, high-density salt licks, the kind left in pastures for cattle to nuzzle.

The resulting sculptures were placed in wild or rural locations dotted throughout the state, including land near Redmond. Motion-sensitive field cameras filmed animals drawn to the salt licks: deer, coyotes, birds, elk.

Jensen and a team of editors used the footage to create a six-hour video.

“Watching the video — it’s meditative, contemplative,” she said. “It’s just basic animals. It’s not charismatic mega-fauna doing battle, its not National Geographic spectacular. It’s just animals, daily life, walking through the woods. In a way, it’s not that special.”

Viewing nature and animals on the screen, however, feels special in the right context. From the hypnotic charm of television to the addictive lure of smartphones, screens are often used to manipulate people for financial or political gain. Instead, Jensen harnessed their power to suggest beauty and connection.

“I see this project as a kindness, an open-hearted pursuit of something beautiful,” she said. “If there is an evolutionary function to beauty, it’s to remind us to take care of that which is not yet broken.” (See related story page 9.)

Jensen’s family moved to the Willamette Valley from the Midwest when she was four years old. Her grandparents were “working-class Minnesota, very stalwart;” her grandfather owned a big farm. In Willemina, a small town on the southern edge of Yamhill County whose tagline reads “Timber Town USA,” her parents bought 50 acres.

“My dad was a potter, Mom taught grade school. We had a classic ‘70s back-to-the-land craftsperson life,” she said. “We had a big garden.” After her parents divorced, Jensen and her brother moved to Portland with their mother. Jensen was 12 years old.

“I think of the country, my childhood in Willemina, as the Eden that I lost,” she said. She has lived in Portland much of her adult life, with ample time in New York City as a working artist.

“There’s an urge in me to get back to that wild land,” she explained, “and a longing for the landscape that drives me.”

The project reconnected Jensen to country life, if only temporarily. Driving to the Redmond area, she was reminded of her days as a scenic painter on the set of the Gus Van Sant film “Even Cowgirls Get the Blues” years ago. It was hard work, but driving through the landscape bookended each difficult day with beauty.

“I stayed in a friend’s cabin in Tumalo for a month and a half while I was working on that movie,” Jensen remembered. “I drove a crummy old Datsun. I remember waking up in the cold, my paint would be frozen in the morning. Painting a lot of fake rocks and outhouses and signage. Bonding with the Smith Rock area.”

She sees the project as illuminating the pathways that animals make through the landscape,

partly to “underscore the parallel map of human movement and travels — where you build your life.”

Her travels and other expenses for this project were supported by a grant from the Oregon Community Foundation’s Creative Heights Initiative.

“I think of the animals as emissaries from the other world, the world of nature,” she said. Human consciousness can be seen as one world, “the land of language and fossil fuels. Then there’s the animals: spiritual connectors to our primal roots.”

Yet Jensen is also inspired by overhead maps of Manhattan.

“You see Broadway cutting at a diagonal across the island,” she said. “It’s that way because it’s the original pathway, the migration pathway of the animals up and down the island. Then it became the path that the Indians used, and then became the path that the white man used.”

Such paths “connect us as humans to the very literal, essential, fundamental need and use of the land, the landscape, and the environment,” according to Jensen. “I feel such urgency now — many of us feel urgency — to connect back to the earth, to what is essential, fundamental, undeniable.”

“Nearer Nature: Worth Your Salt” is on view at Oregon Feed and Irrigation at the north end of Redmond through the end of this month. The work may also be viewed at Tygh Valley General Store and the Riverside Restaurant in Maupin. Details are available at maliajensenstudio.com.

Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art

Malia Jensen: Nearer Nature



Nearer Nature by Malia Jensen

Lewis & Clark College is pleased to announce our partnership with artist Malia Jensen, recipient of an Oregon Community Foundation “Creative Heights” grant, a prestigious award intended to enable artists and institutions to test new ideas, stretch creative capacity and take creative risks. Jensen’s project *Nearer Nature* will be comprised of four temporary sculptural installations throughout Oregon in 2019-2020. The site-specific artworks will unfurl in seasonally aligning chapters and conclude with four posters and a catalogue published with Container Corps in 2020.

Beginning in April 2019 in Ashland, OR with *Worth Your Salt*, *Nearer Nature* seeks to foster deeper connections between humanity and the natural world. Each chapter will incorporate and engage varied communities of strangers, friends, students and wildlife to highlight themes of interconnectivity and interdependence. The video works and photography resulting from *Nearer Nature* will be exhibited at the project’s conclusion.

Worth Your Salt
Southern Oregon, Ashland
Spring 2019

Worth Your Salt features hand-carved salt block sculptures placed in nature and observed by trail cameras. A supine human form is represented by two hands and two feet situated in a pastoral setting and serving as human-scaled salt and mineral licks, providing essential elements of fortification for wildlife in springtime. Animals such as rabbits, squirrels, porcupines, deer and elk may be drawn to the salt offerings while their unwitting exchanges are captured by trail cameras and shared on internet links and video monitors placed in nearby urban locations. Sign up [here](#) to receive the *Nearer Nature* newsletter and details on where to view.

Mourning Tides
Oregon Coast, Ecola State Park
Summer 2019

Mourning Tides commemorates and honors the shared experience of loss and bereavement. Participants will meet at a special location on the coast of Oregon, rich in deposits of natural clay, to create a collective memorial of hand-pressed earthen bowls. As dozens of the tiny vessels begin to encrust the basalt rocks on the shore, these small markers of remembrance create a new shared experience as the work is left to dissolve back into the sea with the rising tides. This event will repeat five times over the Summer. Sign up [here](#) to receive the *Nearer Nature* newsletter for dates and registration.

Perfect Circle, Concrete (Cat-henge)
Eastern Oregon, Union County
Fall 2020

(continued on following page)

A ten foot diameter cast concrete sculpture comprised of a ring of sculpted cats, curling together paw-over-back in a perfect circle. Underscoring our interconnectedness and the importance of cooperation, the sculpture will be created on-site with the assistance of area High School students who will be compensated for their work with funds from the grant. *Perfect Circle* will remain at the site as a public artwork, landmark and hiking destination. Sign up [here](#) to receive the *Nearer Nature* newsletter including information on location and construction of *Cat-henge*.

A Bear Sits in the Woods
Central Oregon, Deschutes County
Winter 2020

A snow-sculpture of a seated polar bear occupies an isolated Winter woodland but is observed in remote urban locations as it's wilderness circumstances shift and change. Encrusted with layers of seeds and berries and other natural food sources, the bear/sculpture will draw wild animals and birds into a poetic exchange exploring the fragility and precarious beauty of the natural environment. The process will be monitored and recorded by surveillance cameras. Sign up [here](#) to receive the *Nearer Nature* newsletter and details on where to view.

[Follow NearerNature_Project on Instagram](#)



Nearer Nature is grateful for the additional creative partners engaging with this project: the Schneider Museum of Art, a part of Oregon Center for the Arts at Southern Oregon University, Ashland, OR; Art Center East, La Grande, OR; Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York, NY and Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, OR.



Malia Jensen's Homeward Journey

by April Baer OPB | Oct. 7, 2016



Malia Jensen is one of the most engaged — and engaging — artists working in Oregon today. A gifted maker with a restless, unpretentious intellect, she mines the natural world to explore connection, environmental concerns, as well as the powers and limitations of the human form, and she’s got a knack for embedding startling ideas in startlingly beautiful sculpture.

Jensen’s work takes center stage this month at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, where her newest show “Ground Effects” is on view. (The title is a nod to the custom after-market auto accessories like LED lights, spoilers and custom grills. Jensen calls it her homage to “the glamour in the underside, remaking what is below.”) She also just shipped off a large new work for a group show curated by Jens Hoffmann, “Animality: Animals and Art,” at the prestigious Marion Goodman Gallery.

Jensen's been on a two-year tear since returning to Portland after eleven years in New York. We caught up with her at her studio, shortly after installing "Ground Effects."

Q&A with Malia Jensen

April Baer: What's the story of your return?

Malia Jensen: That was a confluence of a whole bunch of important details — finances being one. The loft I was living in became hard to hang onto. There were family things I needed to be back for. My house [in Portland] had been rented out for 10 years and needed some work. And New York was losing its appeal for me, and I needed to have my feet back on the earth. A lot of my work is about nature, and I had been outside of it for so long it was starting to be something I imagined in a hypothetical sense.

Baer: Trying to maintain connections in the art world and staying in touch with nature sounds like a balancing act.

Jensen: Yeah, I've always used elements of nature in a metaphoric context within the work — say, like the "Bubble Field" pieces that I made in Boston while I was still on the East Coast — they are in the show ["Ground Effects"]. They come from my fascination with the beginning and ending of cycles, or the inflating and collapsing of systems. They are about a mud-field-bubble-Yosemite experience, but they are really about creating and maintaining some kind of structure of faith.

Baer: Would it be fair to say that things were bubbling up in you at the time that you were working on this?

Jensen: Things are always bubbling up!

Baer: You've taken on a huge range of stuff in the past couple of years.

Jensen: When I got back I took to heart something I'd read in a list that Werner Herzog considered his "list for living" or "advice for living." Two things that I always remember are "Always carry bolt cutters," which I don't do, and "Send out all your dogs. One of them will return with prey." And this is what I felt like. For the past two years I've been trying to do this, trying to do that. I've been firing on as many circuits as an artist can, trying to figure out, how do you support yourself? How do you make a living? What situations do you create for yourself that you can use to sustain your personal ecosystem?

Baer: Can you give us an example of the "dogs" you send out?

Jensen: I had a class that I proposed to Barry Sanders at PCNA. It was a workshop class on anger. It was to be called "Discontent in the Age of Liking." I pitched myself as a restaurant designer for a friend who was opening a new place. I thought that the environment needs an ad campaign. Maybe I can do this. But inevitably what ended up working out was what I have always done, which is being an artist. So through a conversation with Stephanie Snyder I had a show at the Reed College Cooley Gallery in the Cases, which is beautiful. It was a summation of a lot of work, a very autobiographical collection. I had a show at Wieden + Kennedy that was facilitated by some friends who worked there. That beaver that in the W+K atrium has literally

kicked down so many doors for me and set so many other productive things in motion for me in my art life. It was a real privilege to get to revisit that piece and contextualize it with a lot of other work. And there's the show at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery and the show with Marian Goodman in London.

Baer: How do you observe people reacting to these different layers in your work? Is there something that has to happen when someone looks at a work in that first moment?

Jensen: Yeah, I think that should happen. I feel pretty committed to making a piece that has an inarguable quality, like there's only this way that that piece can be. There's a minimalism to the way I think about it. That's the way it's going to be ... I feel like I'm finding some kind of a central form.

Baer: Is getting [the idea] in your head into [physical] form a significant part of the time you spend in the studio, or is it an exploratory process of working with materials and seeing what evolves from that?

Jensen: I've always felt through my hands. What I hope for a viewer is that they arrive at it and understand it at a gut level, and have that reaction move up to their head...It might start with an idea but I don't know how that's going to come about. For instance I'm looking at "Owl Carrying Chicken Striking a Power Line (starting a forest fire)."

Baer: This is a wire sculpture from the show.

Jensen: I've carried this around for years, after hearing the story on the radio, maybe about six years ago, about a forest fire. The news announcer said it was started by an owl carrying a chicken striking a power line. And I was so struck by this! I thought of it as a Western tableau, and about end times — where they might come from. We try to protect ourselves from terrorist threats or something else we might control. But really, it's just going to be an owl carrying a chicken.

Baer: This literal collision of something naturalistic with something very modern!

Jensen: Yeah. Completely. I had that thought in my head for years before I figured out how to make it. I tried to sketch it in clay, I tried to sketch it in plaster. Is it going to be a wall bronze? Is it gonna be a huge thing? I ended up, in a residency at Ucross in Wyoming where you are plunged into nature. I found this old fence wire and manipulated it into this sculptural piece. It came through my hands.

Baer: There's a work in the show called "Lupe." It's a bronze casting of a wolf's head. The wolf is chewing on something and, on approach, you realize, it's the wolf's own tail. How did that image come to you?

Jensen: That image comes from something that has been in the gestation period for a long time. I'm thinking about it as a metaphor for the cycle of success and failure. Just in the last few months the wolf — because it's succeeded in recovering — has been removed from the Endangered Species List. This means that you can shoot them again — a direct result of its own thriving! It's become for me a metaphor about self-destruction. As a people we are creating

our own self-destruction by our thriving. We are just using resources we can't sustain. So what's a sustainable level of thriving? Western cultures are obviously pushing that limit.

Baer: It feels there's a low-frequency buzz of anxiety running through the whole piece.

Jensen: Yeah, it's a metaphor. I'm celebrating a situation of failure and redemption, finding beauty in those moments that are so fragile and vulnerable. This heavy bronze wolf has a frailty to it ... The inside of the wolf has a shape of the bronze that I'd taken out of my forms when I cast it. It has a look like a cave. Daniel at the gallery says it's Plato's cave. It has a philosophical interior.

Baer: You had a work shown in Chicago called "Perfect Circle." A more recent work you've just sent to London revisits the concept. Could you describe it for us?

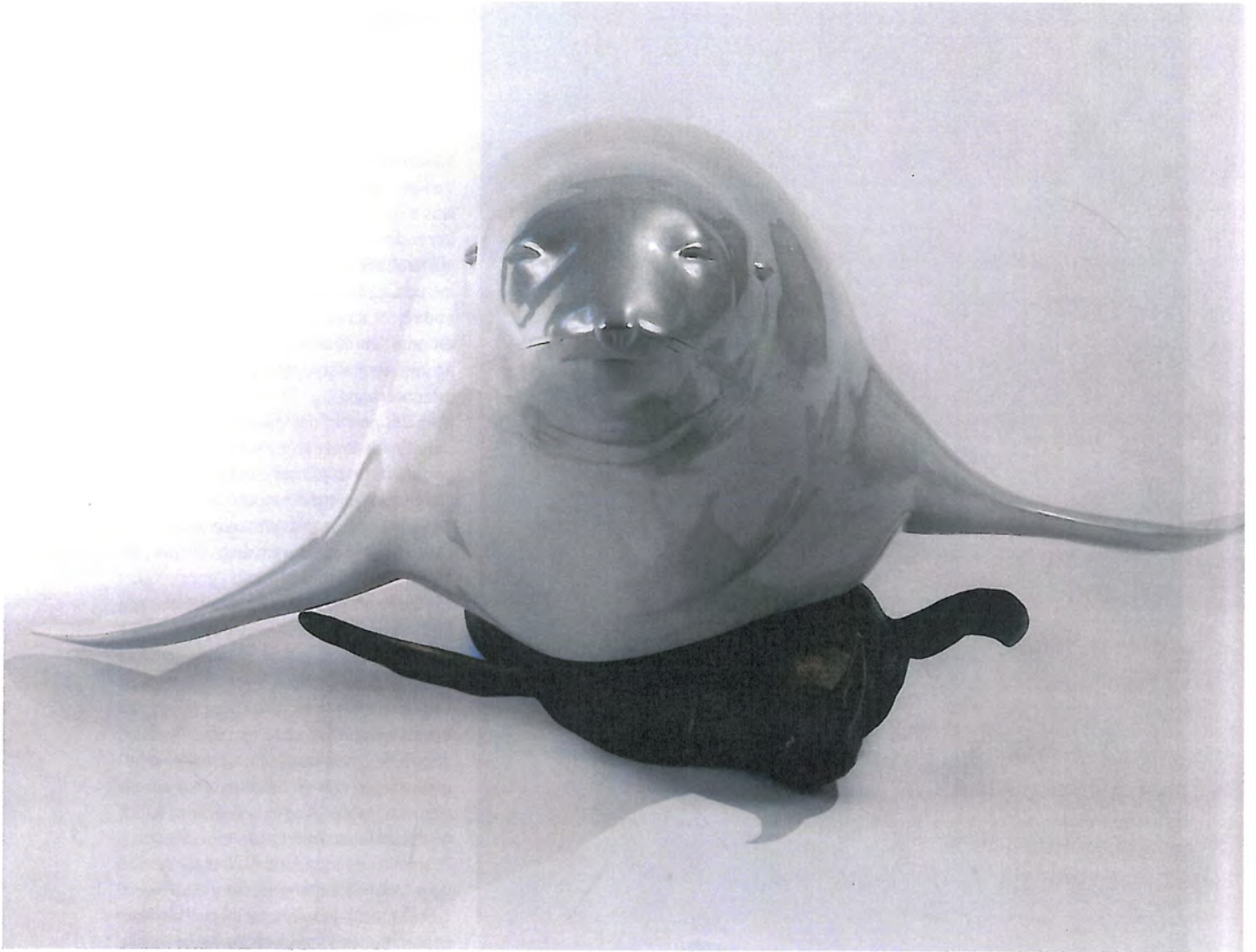
Jensen: The original piece I made in 2008 was one form with a paw out on its side so that, in repetition it makes a complete ring with one paw in front of the next cat. I was thinking of it originally as a minimalist piece that you might see at the Dia Foundation — a bastion of minimalist but earth-driven pieces: Robert Smithson, Carl Andre, Agnes Martin. I was invited to be in a show at work Marian Goodman Gallery in London in November, curated by Jens Hoffmann, called "Animality: Animals and Art." I proposed to make the full-scale version of "Perfect Circle." This version is also ceramic but it's fired with glaze and concrete and glass. It's called "Perfect Circle, Imperfect." A cat circle in post-apocalyptic time. It's a bit dark, very earthen looking. It has runs of color in browns and rusts and dirt and metal. It's kind of a mess, but it's still redeemed by its continuous circle and the loving touch of each being onto the next.

Baer: The closeness of the community is still very much there.

Jensen: And that's a case of different people's reactions. Some will say, "How cute!" And some say, "That's horrifying." One piece can generate really polar responses.

Baer: What was it that made you want to mess up, or mess with, the perfect circle?

Jensen: Nothing is perfect! And in failure there's an opportunity for redemption. I was thinking about grief and the fact that it is often hand in hand with love. You have to have love in order to have that depth of feeling, of loss. There's a poignancy in this piece that I feel addresses concerns that I share with the rest of the concerned world. In the first piece it had a lighter sweetness to it that I felt like revisiting in darker times.



Thinking Through Objects

Malia Jensen

BY POLLY ULLRICH

October 2009
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sculpture

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 Roepstorff, “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.

ARTslant

new york

Interview with Malia Jensen
by Abraham Ritchie

December 2008– Malia Jensen is an artist based in New York City, who is exhibiting at Richard Gray Gallery in Chicago through the 10th of January 2009. Her work features a cast of enigmatic animals in sometimes tragic situations. The plight of the animals is usually tempered by humor and a high degree of attention to material and the overall production. The result is work that is poignant, lyrical and sometimes funny, with a tinge of sadness. We sat down before her opening to discuss her work.

Abraham Ritchie: A lot of writing about your work talks about the use of humor. What does the role of humor play? How do you intend to use it?

Malia Jensen: I think that humor is a survival tool. It's kind of a counterpoint to a bleakness, and I think that there are both things in my work. There's bleakness, there's humor and there's beauty. So it's like they're playing together. Like with the Bathing Skunk, he's in a sort of dire situation as far as a skunk is concerned. The skunk is made of cast soap and he's essentially undermining his principal identity as a skunk: being stinky. He's stuck in this situation where he's made out of soap, which is not necessarily agreeable to his character. So it's funny, but also to me it is like a little, tiny tragedy, this skunk. But it is funny. Then of course the skunk is also in an implied pool, so he'll dissolve since he's soap. He's in a predicament.

AR: The elements of humor that I detected weren't really the laugh-out-loud kind of humor, but a darker humor. Like with Seal + Penguin 4 Ever the penguin and seal are copulating but it also seems that the seal may crush the penguin. So is humor a way to, let's say, get a foot inside the door with the viewer and open them up to other possibilities?

MJ: Sure, absolutely. And so does beauty. And the finely made-ness of things. You can seduce someone in, and they might be laughing for a while, but they realize this is somewhat dark. There's a deep sadness in a lot of the work. It's like finding a human condition in an animal parallel.

[. . .]

AR: Let's talk about the animal's personae. Each animal could have a cultural association. For example, what does the bear mean to you?

MJ: It's a loaded animal; it classically operates as a surrogate man. If there's a "man conquering nature" image, it's often man versus bear. The bear can stand on two legs, it has a parallel "man" feeling.

I think we have a simultaneous fear and sympathy for the bear; the teddy bear is a comfort creature, but at the same time it's the most frightening creature. You know, "bears came in and stole our children or, bears did this. . ." it's not like we have that same fear of deer. Or lions. Lions are so far out of our North American culture and reference, but again we don't think of lions as likely to steal our children or harass us at a picnic.

There's a unique human analog in these primal animals, if you think about our own animal nature. These particular animals embody that better than any other animals could. People can bring their own associations to it; I don't say what I think it could be.



Malia Jensen. Dark Horse, 2008. Polyurethane resin. Copyright the artist, image courtesy Richard Gray Gallery.

AR: On the topic of animals of North America, I have to ask, is Dark Horse a chupacabra or something like that?

MJ: It's an eohippus, a prehistoric horse.

AR: Oh ok. So is it smaller than a real-life eohippus would be?

MJ: That's the actual size that it was. I did a series of scale-shifting prehistoric animals, like the 8-foot tall Giant Beaver, the actual height of a prehistoric beaver, and the prehistoric horse was small, reportedly it was housecat-sized.

So those were also funny, identity-reference pieces. What makes it a horse? How, even to a scientist or archaeologist, is that a horse? We have this attachment to our identities as being fixed: we have evolved, we're finished, we are a species, this is how we look.

But who's to say? If the horse looked like an eohippus that long ago and now it looks like it does... Things keep changing. So I kept playing with that idea, "what is it?"

AR: And obviously by mentioning the chupacabra I brought my own associations to that question. Recently, I was thinking about how cool it would be if we still had North American Camels and the other mega-fauna.

MJ: Yeah, it would be insane. The Wrecking Pet piece was also part of that trio of scale-shifting animals. The prehistoric guinea pig was supposedly the size of a rhinoceros, or something, which is obviously to say that the rhinoceros has a certain given size too. So a prehistoric guinea pig was this gigantic thing. The ones I've made are meant as a studies so they're small, but I want to make it large, prehistoric size, about four feet wide and to be used as a wrecking ball.



Malia Jensen. Wrecking Pet (Guinea Pig #2), 2006. Enamel on bronze. Copyright Malia Jensen, image courtesy of Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

AR: What would that wrecking ball wreck then? Out of curiosity. . .

MJ: Houses.

AR: So anything that needs to be knocked over?

MJ: Yes. I figure that having a guinea pig, it's kind of a destructive pet, the only ones that I ever knew were chewing up everything and destroying the house anyway, so I thought it's a good animal to have as a wrecking ball. Plus, it has the association with "being the guinea pig," it's the test creature, the thing that gets used and abused.

AR: On the topic of guinea pigs and pets, do you own any pets?

MJ: I have two cats.

AR: I noticed that the animals you pick (with the exception of the series we were just talking about) are more domestic, ones that we see in our everyday lives.

MJ: Yes. I edit my animal choices pretty carefully. Someone might say, "Hey here's this leopard and it's totally you." But that's not really what I would approach, it's like the lion, it's too outside of my reference point.

I think that with what I'm choosing, there needs to be a sense of feeling connected to it. The Seal + Penguin is a little different because I don't have any relationships with seals or penguins, so that one stands apart. That piece was based on the article that someone sent me – it was an idea that came to me as a piece already, and it was maybe my job to manifest it. It was a real situation that I wanted to translate into a bigger story. I think that the cat whiskers give it a mystical or enchanted feeling.

AR: Because it's so unlikely?

MJ: Because it's so unlikely and there's a kind of romance to it.

[. . .]

AR: What's the importance of place in the work that you make? What is the importance of city versus country [animals]? Some of the new pieces have a more rural feeling.

MJ: I grew up in the country, in Oregon, and it definitely did impact my thinking. I was the kind of kid with invisible or imaginary friends. I would make up scenarios that could play out in nature and in the imagination rather than with friends. I also had a sense of empathy with beasts. So place is really important, how can it not be? It's also how you construct things in your own interior landscape. Like there's a stage, there are players. For me, it all has a certain logic. It's not surreal, in the sense of nonsensical or disjunctive situations. It all makes a certain amount of sense and there's a logic that I adhere to. It may have been something that I made up, but it adheres to it.

– Abraham Ritchie

PORTLAND, OR

Malia Jensen

ELIZABETH LEACH GALLERY

It's tempting to characterize Portland-bred, Brooklyn-based artist Malia Jensen's recent solo show at Elizabeth Leach Gallery as a classic case of the country mouse in the city. Jensen's work has often trafficked in animal forms, and the shift in iconography from forest creatures to rats and pigeons following the artist's move from the Northwest to New York two years ago is hard to ignore. But to boil it down thus would be unfair and would discount her work's wry humor and its lucidly drawn tension between form and content. Sometimes, apparently, the country mouse is just naturally as refined as its metropolitan cousin.

Jensen's career took off in the early 1990s, when she began making taxidermied forms investigating the dark comedy of death and its display, with undertones of sexual perversity: a deer upholstered in red rubber; an eyeless black rubber doe. In the years since, she has acquired a regional following for her deft play of sign, surface, and scale, a material and semiotic slipperiness that turns a horse into glass, a pig into newspaper. Among the more accomplished pieces in her portfolio are *Beaver Story*, 2000, a nine-foot beaver made of used, layered plywood (an ode to the region's first mammalian land developer, and a monumental, if deadpan, anti-phallus), and *Purse (in soap)*,

2001, a carved soap purse sporting vulvic drapery and stamenlike clasps.

In this show, Jensen further extends her themes of nature and signification via a concise handful of three-dimensional pieces. *Pigeon Tower*, 2006, is a stack of bronze pigeons that form a shaft recalling Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column* sculptures—a study for a larger monument designed to be erected in an urban park and host real pigeons. *Stalagmite*, 2006, uses the same bronze and patina material to rather different effect; it's a satisfyingly lumpy pile that speaks of gradual accretion as opposed to flight. *Trash with Rats*, 2006, is a diorama of a black garbage bag, including a juice box with a straw, and rats made of latex enamel on canvas. *Wrecking Pet*, 2006, is a small bronze guinea pig with a hook attached to its back, an adorable substitute for a standard spherical wrecking ball. Hanging over the show like a halo was an elegant mobile of flies, *Fly Mobile*, 2006, which completed the urban ecosystem and highlighted the works' ambiguous drift between cute and grotesque, the lyrical and the rotten.

This show also saw Jensen expanding her practice into photography and cartooning. The cartoons—one-panel, *New Yorker*-style numbers—are especially satisfying. *Worried Coal*, 2006, hits a grim note, with two lumps of coal sitting in a mine shaft, one opening, I FEEL SICK; *Animal Thing*, 2006, could be read as commentary on the artist's own place in an art world lately smitten by depictions of forest life: A bear says to an owl, I'VE BEEN DOING THIS ANIMAL THING FOR YEARS.

Indeed, at a time when artists have been returning en masse to the natural world for inspiration—has the plague of wolves and owls in galleries finally abated?—it is ironic that Jensen has turned her eye to the world of urban fauna, though it's not necessarily surprising. Her work has consistently gazed on the mute mysteries of nature, but always with a pronouncedly linguistic orientation, and an almost incidental art-historical allusiveness (hints of Alberto Giacometti, Claes Oldenburg, and Alexander Calder are all detectable in this show). While passingly affined with recent trends toward the animaloid, Jensen's oeuvre points more forcefully in the direction of such sculptors as Robert Gober and Katarina Fritsch, arch craftspeople in whose work irony and spiritualism are hard to tell apart.

—Jon Raymond

Malia Jensen, *Pigeon Tower*, 2006, enamel on bronze with wood base, 25 x 6 x 6".



PORTLAND, OREGON

Malia Jensen
Elizabeth Leach Gallery

Malia Jensen's childhood fascination with the plants and animals surrounding her rural, wooded home near the coast of Oregon has stayed with her throughout her career. As a mature, city-dwelling artist, she makes relationships between humans and nature her focus, and her sculptures describe this relationship as more than slightly skewed. Several years ago she took measurements of young trees, which she used to make paper patterns for brightly colored flannel "tree socks." With the finished "garments," she dressed the trees. Extra "socks" hung limply on a clothesline. In another instance, she covered the taxidermied head and neck of a horse in black rubber that she had cut, patched, and stitched to encase and blind the animal. Since then, she has continued to emphasize, metaphorically, the human predilection for control and sublimation of nature. Her quirky sculptures, produced with meticulous craftsmanship, combine irony and beauty, realism and ambiguity in her subjects, which most often are animals.

After making a name for herself in the Northwest with her realistic but decidedly conceptual works, Jensen moved to New York two years ago.



Malia Jensen, *Pigeon Tower*, 2006. Patina and enamel on bronze and wood base, 25 x 6 x 6 in.

Still exploring the same issues, she now finds her subjects in the species that share her Brooklyn neighborhood. Representatives of the most populous, notably rats, pigeons, and flies, were featured in her recent Portland show, "Nature Studies." As I stood in the gallery, I was aware and somewhat annoyed by a swarm of flies overhead. But it wasn't a swarm of flies that interfered with my concentration; it was a large mobile with actual-size, cast resin "flies" moving around as the air stirred.

At first, the exhibition seemed merely playful, Jensen's sense of humor working overtime. Very soon, however, it became apparent that

the presence of these life-size effigies signified more than amusement. The flies, realistic white rats on a large black garbage bag, a fat pigeon musing a few claws, and a guinea pig configured as a wrecking ball gave rise to questions of place and identity. Representing the underside of urban wealth and power, these creatures contradict the economic and cultural achievements of the city.

Although she no longer uses unconventional materials like flannel and rubber, Jensen's attention to detail and finish remains evident in the bronze and ceramic sculptures she now creates. The patina and enamel applied to the bronze *Pigeon*

Tower produces a uniform dark brown finish on the stack of 10 pigeons that rises from a weathered wood block. An impressive tower, it is reminiscent of Brancusi's many austere vertical sculptures. Another, slightly smaller vertical piece, more a pyramid than a tower, is related to *Pigeon Tower*, although it isn't recognizable as such. Covered with loosely applied pale green and white enamel over bronze, *Staiogmite* was modeled from a pile of pigeon excrement.

Trash with Rats is an immediate attention-getter, with its replica of a full garbage bag, the top pulled closed as if ready for pick-up. One large white (latex) rat sits on top of it and another ignores a squashed juice box next to the bag. An ugly subject handsomely executed, *Trash with Rats* pointedly exemplifies Jensen's interest in exploring complex relationships, especially when survival is concerned. As usual with her work, in formal terms, it's a beautiful piece. The white rats are sleek and streamlined, the shiny black garbage bag an enhancing contrast in form as well as color.

Contradictions between visual characteristics and content have been a hallmark of Jensen's sculptures. But as her work evolved, the romantic and poetic resonance of verdant Oregon forests disappeared. Apparently it has been replaced by a recognition of the alienation and struggle inherent in all of nature. Like her subjects, Jensen is adapting to her new environment.

—Lois Altan

SCULPTURE BY ELIZABETH LEACH GALLERY

A new fire station on Skyline, Dalmatian not included



PHOTOS BY TORSTEN KJELLSTRAND/THE OREGONIAN
Architect Stuart Emmons (left) and firefighter Chris Hanson look at a map of the area covered by Portland Fire Station 27. Emmons designed the new station (right).



By Fred Leeson | THE OREGONIAN

A Portland fire station unlike any other awaits visitors at the grand opening of Fire Station 27 on Sunday from 4 to 7 p.m. at 3130 N.W. Skyline Blvd. Careful: It's easy to drive by and hardly notice it. We talked with architect Stuart Emmons about the unusual design of the \$1.93 million structure.

What was your goal? What we tried to do is respect the nature of Skyline. Skyline has a history of farms and is one of our most beautiful rural streets close to the city.

We tried to build a building with low visibility to the street and keep as many trees as possible. They're putting up a lot of minimansions up there so the street is not as rural as it was even when we started. But we thought it was important to respect Skyline as it was. Because the site slopes away from Skyline, the deer and squirrels have the best view. People on Skyline have the most minimal view. I think it's one of the zippier fire stations out there.

So what's in it? It's a single company for four firefighters. There are five individual bedrooms so there can be firefighters of both sexes. It's kind of an upside-down station. There is no fire pole. The living areas are on the lowest level and the sleeping rooms are on the same level as the apparatus.

On the lower level there are rooms for living, kitchen, dining, laundry and exercise. Out back, there's a deck for barbecuing. It's a cool location.

Any amenities for public use? Yes. We designed a room for public meetings. It's always a challenge to make them hospitable, because if the firefighters have to leave and lock the station, we want the meeting still to go on.

The meeting room looks like an individual building, although it's attached. One of our primary inspirations was the collection of diverse metal buildings seen on many Oregon farms. I've always enjoyed their compositional poetry.

Wasn't there a controversy over corrugated metal siding? The site is in Multnomah County, not the city, so we had to go through county reviews. The county wanted it to "fit in." What does fit in mean? The reason we proposed metal siding was to tie in to the agricultural past of Skyline. The county wanted us to change to Hardiplank siding, and that's what we've got.

We also planted some cherry trees in front as a reference to old cherry orchards that got chopped down years ago. In spring it will add some beautiful coloration to Skyline.

Tell us about the public art.

Malia Jensen did a stacked wood waterfall for the lobby. I called Malia and said, "If you make it out of wood, what about mist and movement? That's what a waterfall is all about." She said, "Just watch." I think she nailed it. It's probably the best piece of art in a fire station.

Can I move in? There's an extra bedroom, Fred. You get three squares and there's parking. ■

Fred Leeson: 503-294-5946, fredleeson@news.oregonian.com



Malia Jensen: Nature Studies

ELIZABETH LEACH GALLERY, PORTLAND OR – May 4-27 Malia Jensen's artwork has gained recognition in Portland since her graduation from the Pacific Northwest College of Art in 1989. Previously, Jensen was creating vignettes of nesting kittens with satin accessories that had a



Malia Jensen, *HELP* (2006), archival inkjet on fine art paper
[Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland OR, May 4-27]

playfulness similar to Jeff Koons' puppies. In *Nature Studies*, Jensen's "heightened anxiety about the state of the world" is more prominent – perhaps as a result of her move from Portland to Brooklyn, NY.

In sculptures, drawings and photographs, Jensen creates subtle satires intended to provoke a particular moral about what we consider to be "natural" in the context of escalating modernity. Most of Jensen's studies use animals as a metaphor for the "animalness" in humanity. Although her works are conceptually based, she welcomes instinctual reactions to the quirky situations she is proposing, like a guinea pig being used as a wrecking ball, a tower formed by a stack of

bronze pigeons, or a mobile made of cast resin flies.

Jensen's work can be viewed as a narrative, although it is the situation rather than the story that is of interest to the artist. She addresses the distorted lens through which society perceives the natural world and attempts to unfold a sense of place and identity within it. Our relationship with nature is implied in the parables she creates, which often employ humour with sinister undertones. Although beauty and warmth in this new work is understated by Jensen's objective, her worldview is laden with poetry, insight, distress and dread. *Allyn Cantor*

In a place where

Mount Hood shimmers in and out through layered light and mist, it's not surprising that environmental images pervade the arts scene. What might be surprising is its verve—and nerve. Local artist and writer Jeff Jahn calls the Portland, Ore., arts community a “self-organizing ecosystem,” where established artists regularly “mix and collaborate with the unproven but educated.”

When museums from Vancouver to San Diego launched a 2003 survey of West Coast art that Portlanders felt neglected them, for example, their response was Core Sample, a 10-day, multivenue, “institution-punishing-scale,” do-it-yourself tour de force.

“Here people get an idea and say, ‘Let’s see if we can do it,’” notes Cynthia Lahti, native Oregonian and Rhode Island School of Design graduate. “I didn’t see that back east. We’re just a bunch of settlers here—sure we can do it. No one’s really watching us.”

But people have started watching. The 2000 census found that the city’s immigration of college-educated singles between the ages of 25 and 39 ranks among the top five of metropolitan areas in the country. And Lahti says that the acceptance of Portland installation artist Miranda July in the 2002 Whitney Biennial changed people’s ideas about the city’s artists, a group that’s also growing. Former Bay area artists Chris Johansen and 2004 Whitney exhibitor Harrell Fletcher are among the latest to call Portland home.

It’s easy to be an artist in Portland, says sculptor Nan Curtis, curator of Pacific Northwest College of Art’s Feldman Gallery. “The cost of living is relatively low, and the spirit of makers is strong. People are making very sophisticated art of whatever materials they can.”



Rising 11,239 feet, Mount Hood, Oregon’s highest mountain and fourth highest in the Cascade Range, has a commanding view of downtown Portland. Opposite, First Thursdays in the Pearl district bring out huge crowds to see works like “Beaver Story.” The eight-foot piece, of recycled plywood, is by Malia Jensen, represented by PDX Gallery.





Adrian Arleo's "Embrace" was on view at the Contemporary Crafts Museum & Gallery, which features cutting-edge work in rotating exhibits and has more than 700 craft objects in its permanent collection. Top, Mark R. Smith used old clothing, vinyl and plywood to create "Mosh Pit." His work is shown at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, now in its 23rd year.



In fact, materials are reincarnating all over this city of about a half-million. Marie Watt references her Shona heritage in blanket-and-bronze totems. Mark R. Smith uses old clothing as the pigment for his "paintings." Melody Owen sculpts with crashed windshield glass or pennies she finds on the street. Tom Cramer, always a risk-taker, carves and paints intricate bas-reliefs that

have been called "the missing link between drawing and sculpture."

"I try to use the material that best serves the idea," says artist Malia Jensen. Her intellectual witticisms—an 8-foot layered plywood rendition of a prehistoric beaver, an erotically suggestive soap carving of a woman's purse, the carefully shredded satin cushions that she calls re-enactments—pack an immediate punch while further rewarding viewers who take time to ponder these visual parables.

Storm Tharp, Cornell-trained mixed media artist and Oregon native, ties the current arts energy explosion to dual influences from the '60s. Jensen, he points out, is a potter's daughter who grew up living with finely crafted objects and now uses everything from car paint to satin with ease. "And like '60s abstractionists, her personal search to feel things transfers so obviously to her art. That inspires me."

Environmental awareness is famously acute in the Pacific Northwest. "The forests and mountains here affect us, whether we're conscious of it or not," says Tharp. Michael Brophy's large-scale landscapes lament the loss of Oregon forests. And environmental consciousness can make for provocative work. Chandra Bocci's 11-foot installation "This Would Suck a Lot Less" sets identical toy soldiers amid cardboard hills and trees cut from



"Blue Collar, White Collar, Green Collar," one of Bonnie Meltzer's latest works, incorporates digital photography on maps.

Jeff Jahn **PORTLAND**

Something to Prove

*It's all happening in Portland,
the aspiring 'creative city of the West Coast.'*

Supporting a funky, unhomogenised aesthetic, Portland stands as an alternative model to cookie-cutter American cities. Here a crush of young artists and older idealists seeking a different urban reality have set a somewhat European tone filled with iconoclastic energy. It is beginning to focus. With a long-standing commitment to the visual arts, a tendency for civic criticism, and uninterrupted years of art scene momentum, Portland has become one of the best destinations for artists in the US. What is keeping them here is a pervasive sense of opportunity and a rare bohemian permissiveness. Easy-going Portland can still be described as one big coffeehouse; here millionaires wear jeans.

The city is about avoiding the mistakes and oppressive ruts of the late twentieth century. The wet air hangs with a think-for-yourself ethic, allowing protests and innovative, tech-savvy, bohemian business ideas to find fertile soil. No wonder filmmakers like Gus Van Sant, Todd Haynes, architect Brad Cloepfil or the Weiden and Kennedy ad firm are attracted here: it gives them a pulse on the sophisticated youth outside major financial centres. No longer an insulated old-money haven, Portland has changed considerably since Mark Rothko grew to adulthood here, but the moody sublime skies that obviously informed his work endure. And the enormous Forest Park, volcanoes like Mt



(Above)
Malia Jensen,
En Plein Air, 2000,
cast plastic, 15.2 x
22.9 x 33 cm.
Courtesy PDX

(Above right)
Portland skyline
with Mount Hood.
© POVA / Brent
Bradley

The wet air
hangs with
a think-for-
yourself
ethic...

St Helens or Mt Hood and 30-minute access to the Columbia River Gorge provide a backdrop that no manmade edifice can match. On the human scale the city's pedestrian-friendly, nineteenth-century-style downtown layout complements the technology of the wireless office and joins it to a bibliophile soul. Portlanders boast of Powell's Books, the US's largest independent bookstore. Reading and walking on the West Coast? Believe it!

Another West Coast surprise, the city is home to the most active gallery and indie art scenes north of Los Angeles. First Thursday, one of many art walks, can pack truly impressive crowds. The walk was begun 16 years ago by the much missed gallerist and civic leader William Jamison, whose legacy lives on. During the sunny half of the year thousands mill along the toney streets of Pearl District, past fire dancers, street artists and, what Americans fear most, naked people. Portland has permissive nudity



laws – another sign you are not in Boston.

Although not impervious to the dot-com bust, Portland has avoided the worst cultural mistakes of its older and younger neighbours, San Francisco and Seattle. Artists retained their studios and exhibition spaces during the boom, allowing them to expand into ever-more inventive combinations, putting Portland ahead of the game. Young artists feel enfranchised with generous press and crowds at openings. Yet it remains to be seen if they can strike a critical nerve and create a big enough ruckus to garner international attention.

The current mayor, Vera Katz (once married to international sculptor and fellow Portlander Mel Katz), vowed that Portland will be known as 'the creative city on the West Coast'. Its artists act less like the id of the rich and more like the soul of the city: civic, idiosyncratic and blessed with peculiarities, they also need to survive six straight months of

rain after six months of green paradise.

Dedicated to responsible ideas such as environmental sustainability, political activism and progressive public transportation, Portland as an art scene hasn't peaked yet. Still, with antic youthful art groups like Red 76 (who took over bathrooms all over the city for Art/Stall), Alphabet Dress and The Charm Bracelet doing regular events in irregular spaces, the independent scene has grown increasingly competitive. Portland has a surprisingly robust market for artists adding hustle to their endeavours.

This DIY scene has been anchored by the Everett Station Lofts for over ten years. Everett Station is home to 16 artist-run galleries, occupying a single block. Businesses like Powell's Books, Visage Eyewear, Compound and Ogle provide sometimes posh exhibition spaces which further refine Portland's visual arts network in engaging, hybridised ways. A scene of semi-stable venues such as the ___Hall (which changes its name for each show), PSwhat? and Disjecta persists because of progressive-minded landlords and/or plucky promoters. Along with the myriad independent artists in the city, other continually shifting venues make Portland difficult to fully take in. With the fact that established galleries are suddenly signing younger artists there is a sense of momentum, not just promise, here.

Both anarchic and civic, Portland is connected and accessible from the top to the bottom of the society pages. One can network easily with international writers, artists and curators. Local and national art stalwarts such as Katz, Gregory Grenon, Tad Savinar, Rick Bartow, Sandy Roumagoux, Judy Cooke and James Lavadour all provide a yardstick precedent or contrast for the wave of independent work by Nic Walker, Laura Fritz, Chandra Bocci, Dan Ness, James Boulton, Michael Oman-Reagan, Zefrey Throwell, Cynthia Star and Marcello Munoz. The fledgling non-profit Portland Center for the Advancement of Culture (PCAC) has evolved to support this activity. With the decentralisation of the art world many have decided to make

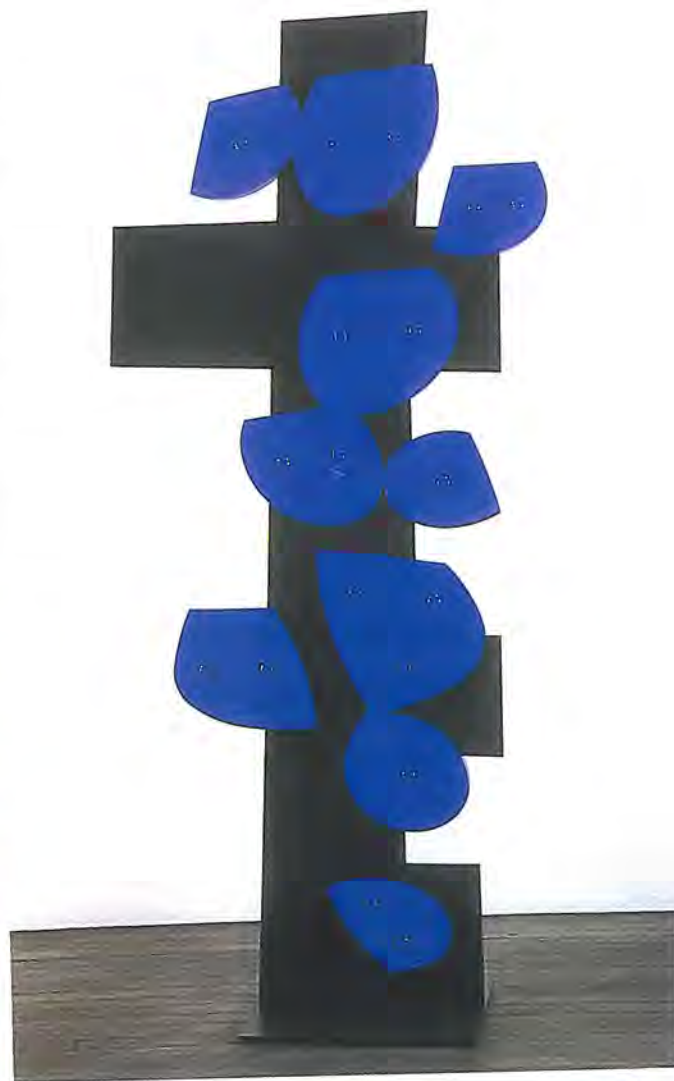
a stand here. Somehow, for Portlanders, going to New York just seems like a critical lack of imagination. Besides, many Portland transplants grew up in the Big Apple.

Although it is the youth that must carry the day in Portland, some of the younger but firmly established artists such as conceptual trickster Malia Jensen and the relentless Tom Cramer point the way after years of successful shows. So far Jensen is the only Portland artist deemed worthy of a solo show at the internationally focused Portland Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA).



Not to be outdone, Cramer has pulled off ambitious collaborative projects with the Oregon Ballet Theater, and has begun to show up outside Oregon at LA's Bergamot Station. His hip/ancient work combines woodcarving with trance-inducing finish-fetish modernism, and speaks well for the future of northwest art as something definitively different.

Another seasoned, slightly younger group have remade the better galleries in the last several years. Quixotic Heidi Schwegler and the decisive Jacqueline Ehliis, a former student of Dave Hickey, have begun to set off Portland's newest gallery, SAVAGE. The impressive gallery occupies a 5,000 sq ft former garage and focuses on international caliber artists such as Su-en Wong and Bryan Hunt. At Pulliam Deffenbaugh Gallery, local artists Brendan Clenaghan and Brian Borrello both incorporate unique materials such as joint compound or



(Clockwise from left)
Tom Cramer,
Redwood, 1999, oil
on carved wood, 35.6
x 33 x 5 cm

Mel Katz,
Afloat, 2002, painted
aluminium, 243.8 x
109.2 x 49.5 cm.
Courtesy The Laura
Russo Gallery

Ellen George,
Trail, 2002, polymer
clay, eight hundred
2.54 cm elements,
dimensions variable.
Courtesy PDX

motor oil. By contrast, Ellen George and Melody Owen explore a Zen-like presence filtered through conceptualism at the ultra-respected PDX gallery. With a dash of colour, Butters Gallery exhibits Terrence le Noue. At Froelich Gallery, Matthew Dennison focuses on figurative work. Not to be pigeonholed, Mark Woolley Gallery follows a creed of eclecticism expressed through Matthew Picton and damali ayo along with the ab-ex estate of Whitney dissenter Ralph Rosenborg. Augen gallery is home to Todd Ross's formalist history paintings

derived from WWII military aircraft. Gallery Bink focuses on Lowbrow art, and local Extremo the Klown is likely the Matisse of the genre. Even the venerable Laura Russo Gallery has added supreme optical patternist Rae Mahaffey and the astute Laura Domela to fill out their strong roster which also includes sometime Portlander Robert Colescott. Lastly, in business for over 20 years, the Elizabeth Leach Gallery offers M K Guth's super-powered heroines and the nostalgic Sean Healy. Leach shows promising locals alongside masterworks by Hans Hoffmann and Louise Bourgeois. The list of galleries goes on and on and is a testament to how working artists are supported here. Outside the gallery system conceptualists such as Harrell Fletcher and Bruce Conkle highlight the everyday and the environment respectively.

Not to be outdone by the living artists, the Portland Art Museum, cornerstone of the city's cultural edifice, has embarked on an expansionary course when other museums nationwide have scaled back. At 110 years, it is the oldest in the Pacific Northwest and couples solid attendance with the support of arts doyenne Arlene Schnitzer and patrons Tom and Gretchen Holce. In a bold move in 2000 the Museum lured hulky curator Bruce Guenther away from the Orange County Museum of Art, and acquired the Clement Greenberg collection. The Greenberg collection provides a foundation for the contemporary holdings, which recently were augmented by 14 Joseph Cornells, a Kienholz installation and a gutsy painting by Tim Bavington, *Voodoo Child a slight return, solo*. Not resting on its laurels, the museum has now announced a renovation of its north wing. This addition, an enormous one-time Masonic Temple, will be given a modern makeover, providing an aggressive 30,000 sq feet of gallery space for the contemporary collection. To prepare Portland for this cultural Christmas the



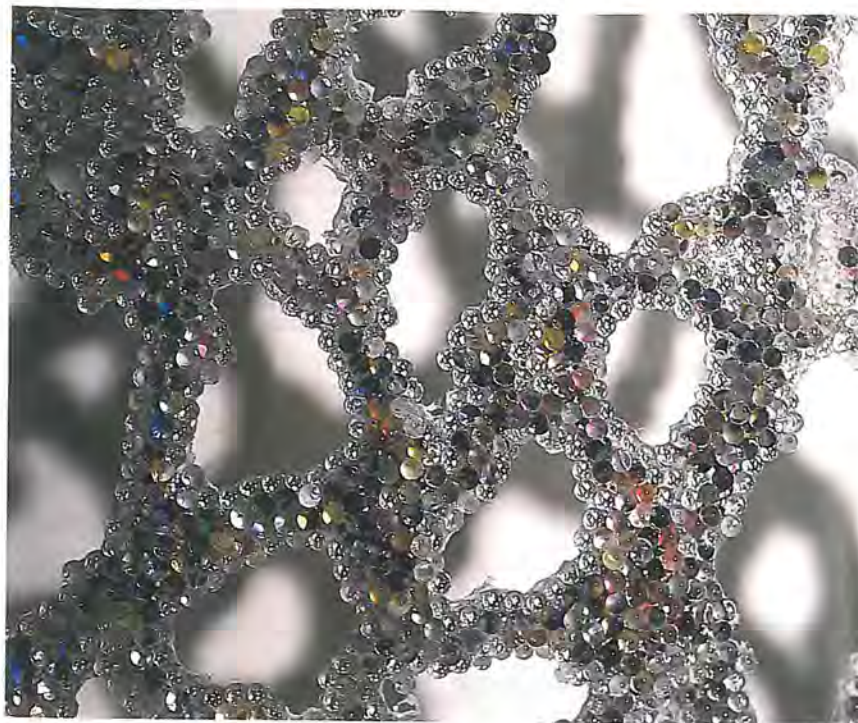
Portland has permissive nudity laws - another sign you are not in Boston.

(Right) **Matthew Picton**, *Pavement Drawing* (Series 10, number 1), 2000. Courtesy Mark Woolley Gallery

(Below right) Former mayor Bud Clark flashes a sculpture in the *expose yourself to art* poster.

© 1978 E. Michael Beard. 'Expose Yourself to Art'™ errolgraphics.com

(Below) **Sean Healy**, *Color Blind*, 2002, glass, enamel and graphite, 88.9 x 5 cm. Courtesy Elizabeth Leach Gallery



museum has brought in the likes of Donald Kuspit, Peter Schjeldahl, David Pagel, Christopher Knight and the always impressive Robert Storr for well-attended lectures.

By contrast, PICA, unburdened by a collection, focuses keenly on the aesthetics of right now. The Institute's ambitious international programme is driven by director and founder Kristy Edmunds. Only seven years old, PICA is pushing forward both in the community and internationally. Curator Stuart Horodner has already showcased Luca Buvoli, Jim Hodges and Shelly Hirsh, quixotic photographer Melanie Manchot, and this spring will feature William Pope.L., who will offer 'food sculptures' and crawl in a Superman suit up Burnside Blvd. PICA also stages informal discussions and unique off-site projects that build dialogue with the city's numerous artists. And now it proposes an annual 'Time Based Art' festival, scheduled to run 12-21 September 2003. Modelled on the Edinburgh Festival, it promises big names in performance from local Miranda July (2002 Whitney Biennial) to dancers Ros Warby and Thomas Lehman.

Other exceptional exhibition spaces at Marylhurst University's Art Gym, Lewis & Clark College, Reed and Pacific Northwest College of Art actively reach out to both the community as well as



expose yourself to art

students by showcasing local and international artists. The old provincial feel is melting away.

The new Portland is not just a flash in the pan. All this energy culminates in the Portland Art Museum's Oregon Biennial, which never really satisfies anyone but renews the civic commitment to the arts. Because of the Museum's new contemporary art mandate and the art scene's vigour, 2003's Biennial threatens to be of unusual consequence. Portland has something to prove. What other US city can boast a former mayor like Bud Clark flashing a sculpture in the famous 'expose yourself to art' poster? Still incredulous? Watch if you dare when Portland opens its trench coat!

'Oregon Biennial', 28 June - 7 September, Portland Art Museum.

Singin' in the Rain

Artists, designers, restaurateurs and style mavens are making once-sleepy Portland a city to celebrate.

PHOTOS BY DAVID TSAY

Granola Central. Land of Birkenstocks and dreadlocks, towering redwood trees, legal nudity, radical politics and wet weather. Such has been the general conception of Portland, Oregon—until recently. Thanks to an influx of notable architects, artists, designers, musicians, restaurateurs and filmmakers, the city that was once known as “RIP-town” is fast becoming one of the most vibrant and sophisticated metropolises on the West Coast.

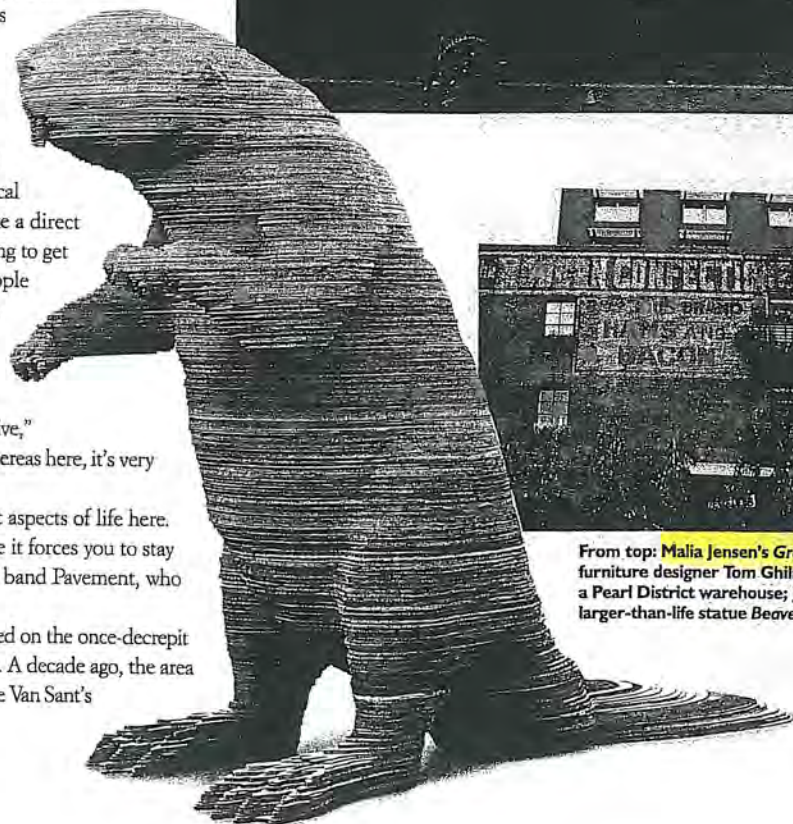
“It’s amazing how much things have evolved here over the last couple of years,” says director Gus Van Sant, a longtime Portland resident. “The whole city has suddenly become cosmopolitan and sort of spiffy in a way that it never was before.” Kristi Edmunds, executive director of the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art, concurs. “When I first moved here in 1990, Portland still had this derelict, sort of ghost-town feel to it,” she says. “I mean, there was really not much going on commercially. But at the same time there were some really interesting people living here, and I had a great feeling about the place. I sensed that a lot of the things I wanted to do were going to be possible here.” In 1996 Edmunds founded PICA, which has helped launch the careers of Portland-based artists such as Malia Jensen and Storm Tharp and has become a cornerstone of the city’s burgeoning cultural community.

Edmunds wasn’t the only one who saw potential in Portland. Starting in the early Nineties, a number of creative types—ranging from indie rocker Stephen Malkmus and architect Michael Czosz to restaurateur Bruce Carey—began migrating to the city. Surrounded by lush forests and, usually, a scarf of fog, Portland perches along the hilly banks of the Columbia River, in the shadow of snowcapped Mount Hood. It’s a picturesque place where a state-imposed urban-growth boundary has prevented the sprawl that has leached the life out of so many other American cities. Hence the appeal to artists and other creative folk: Portland in the early Nineties was like nothing so much as a town where time had stood still. Its Victorian downtown was largely intact, its loft district was amazingly Gap-free and rents were dirt cheap. The biggest retail sign was a neon holdout from the Fifties that reads MADE IN OREGON.

“Portland is sort of the last frontier,” says Thomas Lauderdale, who grew up in Portland and returned after college with fellow Harvard alum China Forbes to found the wildly popular cult band Pink Martini. “You don’t have to jump through magical hoops or be born into an old-money family to make a direct impact here; as long as you have talent and are willing to get involved, you can. So I think it tends to attract people with pioneering spirits, people who want to make their mark.” Forbes, for example, abandoned life in Manhattan in 1996 to settle in the bohemian Northeast section of the city and never looked back. “New York was too difficult a place for me to be creative,” she says. “There was always this pressure to go out, whereas here, it’s very easy to just stay home and do your thing.”

Transplants have even embraced the less pleasant aspects of life here. “In some ways, the rain in Portland is great, because it forces you to stay inside and do work,” says Malkmus, formerly of the band Pavement, who moved here from New York four years ago.

Most of the creative activity in Portland has centered on the once-decrepit warehouse neighborhood known as the Pearl District. A decade ago, the area was home to the sort of bohemian drifters that populate Van Sant’s



From top: Malia Jensen's *Graft*; furniture designer Tom Ghilarducci; a Pearl District warehouse; Jensen's larger-than-life statue *Beaver Story*.

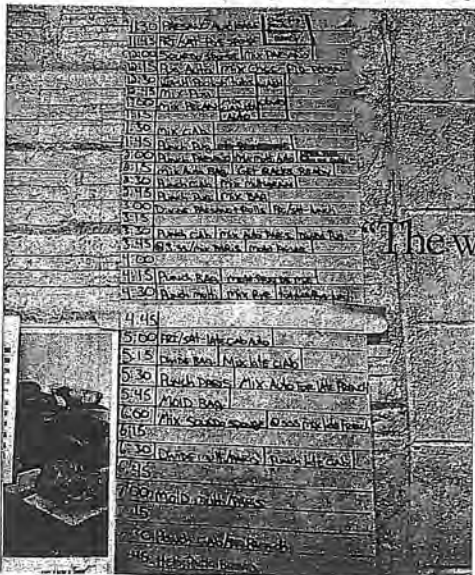
Singin' in the Rain



Left: The bar Shanghai Tunnel. Above: Artist Storm Tharp's *The Prince's Theatre*.



Clockwise from above: Pink Martini founders China Forbes and Thomas Lauderdale, center, and their friend Patrick Abbey; clothing designer Alice Abou-Haider; Sammy's Flowers; the bread-making schedule at Pearl Bakery.



early films (*My Own Private Idaho*, *Drugstore Cowboy*), but it now encompasses some of the most coveted real estate in the city. (Van Sant, who divides his time between Portland and New York, recently purchased a sprawling apartment in the area.) "In the early Nineties it was just squatters and broke artists living in the Pearl District," says Susan Tompkins, who moved from Los Angeles to Portland in 1994 and opened what is now the city's reigning hip boutique, Odessa, in the neighborhood. A sleek, minimalist space where the racks are hung with labels that include Martin, Development, Jane Mayle and Tony Smith, Odessa would be very much at home in New York's NoLiTa or L.A.'s Los Feliz. Tompkins readily admits that only lately has there been a market for her wares in Portland. "Ten years ago, I don't know if a store like this could have existed," she says. "But the city has developed so much recently, particularly this section of town. These days you'd be hard-pressed to find an artist who can afford to live here."

Indeed, rents in the neighborhood have quadrupled during the last decade (they now average \$20 per square foot). The cavernous lofts that once played host to artists' soccer games and strung-out runaways are being transformed into gleaming, well-planned retail and gallery spaces. Jane Beebe, owner of the cutting-edge PDX Gallery, says, "The great thing about Portland is that even though it's changed a lot over the last 10 years, it didn't have the kind of instantaneous flood of money that Seattle had, so it's developed in a much more natural, organic fashion. The money hasn't erased its soul."

One of the best and most obvious examples of Portland's transformation is

the extraordinary headquarters of the Portland-based advertising agency Wieden + Kennedy. In 2000 the space, an enormous former ice store, was remade by architect Brad Cloepfil into a sunny, wide-open mecca of modern design complete with furniture by Roy McMakin and Christian Liaigre. In addition to Wieden + Kennedy, the building also houses PICA's headquarters, the chic modern-furniture store Full Upright Position and the city's hippest restaurant, Bluehour—all of which cemented the Pearl District's reputation as the city's commercial and creative hotbed. "The Wieden + Kennedy project was great, because the company was sort of the first in Portland that really had the confidence to assert itself and



make a statement," says Cloepfil, a Portland native who recently beat out Rem Koolhaas for a sought-after commission to design the Forum for Contemporary Art in St. Louis. "They were willing to have a building that would participate in a larger dialog among international cities, and that was tremendously exciting."

It was also contagious. Numerous cafés, antiques stores, boutiques and residential lofts have sprung up in the faded brick warehouses and factories that form Wieden + Kennedy's orbit. Soon after Cloepfil's project was completed, architect Frank Gehry and artist Ed Ruscha entered into discussions to design a low-income housing development along the banks of the Columbia River. Meanwhile, Carey, a former maître d' at San Francisco's Zuni Café who had sworn that he never wanted

The whole city has suddenly become cosmopolitan and sort of spiffy in a way that it never was before," says director Gus Van Sant.

a large restaurant, decided to open Bluehour, an urbane 180-seat eatery with seductive lighting, ebonized floors and a menu featuring such dishes as sautéed truffle-infused monkfish. "I had a feeling when I moved here that the sort of restaurant I had in mind would be well received," says Carey, who also owns

Singin' in the Rain

Saucebox, another of the city's new wave of trendy hangouts. "But to be honest with you, I never expected to do it on this scale. I just never thought that the city would explode the way it has over the last couple of years."

Fueling the city's remarkable growth was the arrival during the mid- to late Nineties of a wave of affluent new residents. "A lot of very savvy people seem to be fleeing the urban metropolises in favor of smaller, more manageable cities like Portland," says Beebe. "So what you end up with is an incredibly sophisticated little town." Lured by Portland's old-fashioned, European flavor—it has more bookstores per capita than any other city in the U.S.—and by the promise of jobs at companies such as Nike and Intel, hordes of twenty- and thirtysomethings followed the artists' lead. With them came the demand for good food, good stores and good art. Kenny Scharf and William Wegman have recently created public sculptures in Portland, and Maya Lin, who designed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., is in the process of creating two large-scale works for the city.

Paige Powell, who heads the Pearl Arts Foundation, is largely responsible for bringing such artists to Portland. Powell, who returned to her hometown after 15 years in New York, where she was associate publisher of *Interview* magazine, says, "It's kind of amazing how design-oriented this city has become. In a way it makes sense because you have this lovely, old Victorian city that hasn't been destroyed by commercial development, so of course it's going to attract a lot of people who are interested in keeping it beautiful. But it's still quite something."

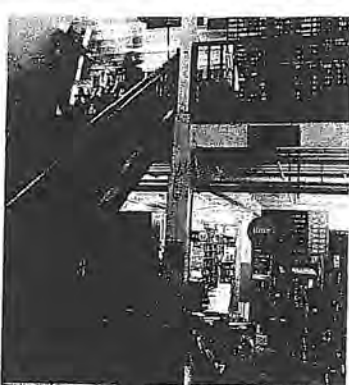
Perhaps inevitably, the response to Portland's evolution has not all been favorable. "There's a long tradition of people who think of Portland as their own paradise that nobody else knows about," says City Commissioner Eric Sten. "And, of course, those people aren't too psyched to see the city becoming sort of popular and polished." The primary casualty, of course, is the city's dark, seedy charm, which is fast disappearing under fresh coats of plaster and paint. Malkmus complains that "the only old, shabby places that are left here now are self-consciously so, so there's really no place to hang out anymore." And Portland's unofficial poet laureate, Walt Curtis, laments, "The thing that's too bad about the development is that a lot of the city's bohemian flavor has been lost in the process; I mean, this used to be a place where people could come and afford to live and be creative without having to work too hard, but now the rents are so high that kids can't really afford to do that."

Still, many of those "kids" have made a tidy profit from the city's evolution. A trip inside Wieden + Kennedy reveals Malia Jensen's *Beaver Story*—an enormous plywood statue of a beaver—and sleek contemporary furniture created by local

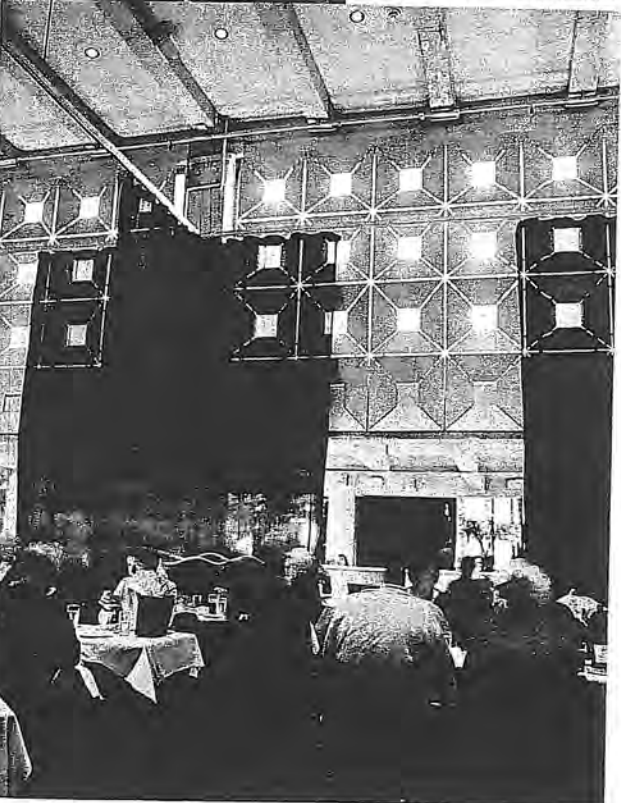
designer Tom Ghilarducci (who also designed some of the furniture inside Bluehour). "The creative community here is very small but very strong," says Ghilarducci, who followed a girlfriend to Portland from Massachusetts in the early Nineties and never left. "Everybody knows each other, and people tend to work together more so than they might in larger cities."

And although Ghilarducci acknowledges that the city's character is fast becoming "more hip than hippie," he says that "people still feel really free to be themselves in a way that you wouldn't come across elsewhere. I mean, we have a lesbian mayor, the last mayor was a bartender, and the governor goes everywhere in jeans and cowboy boots. Where else are you going to find that?"

—KIMBERLY CUTLER



Clockwise from left: Powell's, one of Portland's plethora of bookstores; Jensen's *Err Plein Air*; Bluehour, an upscale restaurant in the revitalized Pearl District.



"Portland didn't have the kind of instantaneous flood of money that Seattle had, so it's developed in a much more natural, organic fashion," says gallery owner Jane Beebe.



Clockwise from above: The Pearl District boutique Odessa; diners at the hip, new eatery Mint; restaurateur Bruce Carey.

ArtsWeek

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EDITOR: BARRY JOHNSON • 221-8589

Malia's 'Animalia'

Malia Jensen's menagerie of sculptures is full of tricks, twists and sometimes deeper meanings

By D. K. ROW
THE OREGONIAN

If you visit the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's minimalist space this month, you're probably not expecting an encounter with nature, "red in tooth and claw." But that's what Malia Jensen's always fascinating and often compelling new exhibition, "Animalia," delivers — at least in part.

Next to an 8-foot-tall beaver made out of horizontal sheets of plywood and among seven other sculptures of mating ceramic ladybugs, contemplative fiberglass foxes and lounging birds made out of cow dung, looms a 7-foot-tall walnut tree trunk. Neatly plumed and hilariously retrofitted with electrical wires and sockets, the once-magnificent hunk of wood now emanates only an unnatural, sepia-colored glow.

One could rightly interpret the sculpture, called "Spring Tree," as the sum of its disparate parts: nature and industry in a quirky, humorous embrace that touches on our region's ambivalence about them on the cusp of a new century. But the halogenically bright-and-flashing sculpture is a deeper cultural puzzle, a metaphor that opens the door on a host of other impulses that have nothing to do with sacred forests or the dire desires of the big, bad city.

"Animalia," PICA's third exhibit in its new gallery inside Wieden & Kennedy's luxurious offices, may take its cues from the dueling worlds of roaming animals, primeval forests and city buildings. But it finds its truer,

Please see **JENSEN**, Page F7



PHOTOS BY ROSS WILLIAM HAMILTON/THE OREGONIAN

A sheep in fox's clothing? Malia Jensen's nature sculpture, "Vulpes Fulva Fulva."



A toothy tale of Northwest logging and evolution: Malia Jensen's 8-foot-tall "Beaver Story."

Jensen: Artist's metaphorical ceramic works hide deeper issues

Continued from Page F1

and deeper, meanings in the landscape of the human condition.

For anyone who's familiar with the work of Jensen, 34, who's been one of Portland's more critically lauded artists since she graduated from the Pacific Northwest College of Art in 1989, such multiply layered illuminations are a matter of course.

Consider some of the Hawaii-born but Oregon-raised Jensen's previous sculptural works. Filtering a genuine wonder of the natural world through a post-pop conceptual lens, she's fashioned everything from a taxidermist deer form wrapped in a flannel print of Elvis Presley to a Naugahyde-upholstered birdhouse hiding a small ceramic wolf.

But aside from their distinctly Northwest love of craft and dark strain of humor, Jensen's nature sculptures are really vehicles to meditate on such non-flora-and-fauna dilemmas as carnality, gender roles and a post-adolescent sense of emotional dread.

More often than not, in "Animalia," those oblique metaphors hit their mark, revealing Jensen's mordant, observational voice and only occasionally descending into a facile predictability reminiscent of the work of 1980s art provocateur Jeff Koons.

Take "En Plein Air (Ladybugs)," for example. In what could easily be interpreted as a borrowing from Koons' kitschy, intentionally shallow pop concoctions, Jensen captures two plastic-cast polka-dotted bugs locked in an oh-so-compromising mating position. Usually Jensen would come out the better in a comparison to Koons, the former stockbroker turned art kingpin. But here, she seems to emulate Koons' transparent attempts at unveiling the perverse banality behind reality — attempts that are themselves thin-blooded descendants of Marcel Duchamp's influential appropriations of "everyday" objects.

Far more poetic but even more Koonsian and just as flat is "Vulpes Fulva Fulva," an installation that presents a cast fiberglass fox resting a bit too pensively in front of a delicately littered path of paraffin-made petals. Striking out into more heart-tugging terrain than usual, Jensen tells us that the slickly fabricated metallic fox has many "sexual options" ahead of it, with the flower petals symbolizing that Pandora's box of "vulnerability and indulgence, relationships to beauty and narcissism . . ." If Jensen knows how to wield double-edged wit to ambiguous effect — as in "Spring Tree" — she has yet to master the more blunt-edged and difficult weapon of sincerity.

Still, most of the time, Jensen hits the bull's-eye — or something close to it — as in "Mr. and Mrs. Grouse," a slightly

mean-spirited zinger that plays like a swift, underhanded punch to the gut. Creating what looks like a boringly quaint scene of two birds — the eponymous Mr. and Mrs. Grouse — Jensen's banal pastoral homage ascends to perversely persuasive heights when the viewer realizes that the birds are made out of cow dung.

Then there's what could be the show's most seductive piece, a series of soap sculptures that simmer with a number of elusive meanings. Laid out on a small shelf on the gallery's back walls, several pastel-colored soap bars molded from real wallets and pocketbooks await examination. More than re-contextualized cleansing products and money-holders, the soap sculptures become "elevated" cultural repositories, touching on issues of personal privacy (private information carriers offered up in a public space) and the paradox of money (so dirty yet "cleaned up" here).

Jensen was originally a painter and

ART REVIEW

Maria Jensen's "Animalia" continues noon-6 p.m. Wednesdays-Sundays, through Sept. 17, at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, 219 N.W. 12th Ave.; \$3 admission; 503-242-1419.

switched to making sculptures several years ago. What distinguishes both the good and less successful works in this exhibition is their sustained level of superior craftsmanship — part of the Northwest tradition. The sculpture that will impress, even awe, most viewers will be the steroid-sized toothy beaver at the center of the gallery. Hunched over, its paws raised bunny-like, the beaver seems to be begging for food.

"Beaver Story," as the brilliantly hilarious piece is called, gathered momentum in Jensen's mind after she found out that the Northwest beaver once stood a proud 8 feet tall before being cut down to comparatively Lilliputian size by the quirk of evolution. It's a tale of the envi-

ronment, full of ironic twists and turns that resonates for obvious reasons. Jensen calls the beaver the "original logger" and references other similar evolutionary fates. So, fittingly, Jensen re-creates the ancient towering beaver by building one out of sheets of horizontal plywood, and painstakingly, if imperfectly, gluing them atop one another.

For a deeper view of the sculpture's orientation and even a bird's-eye glimpse as to how Jensen's mind works, walk a few paces farther into the gallery's project room. There, Jensen has gathered many of her exploratory works for the piece, including a clay model of the beaver and a group of X-rays that map out the proportions of each plywood layer. Jensen's cheeky sensibility emerges in several jokes interspersed amid the neat clutter of roughly drawn sketches and various kinds of outlines. Look, in particular, at the wall opposite the X-rays and you'll notice a smirky but somehow touching photograph of the clay beaver

passing through the X-ray machine.

Whether or not you're moved by, or can laugh at, the photograph of the little beaver passing bravely through the futuristic X-ray portal, might predict how you respond to the exhibit as a whole. Jensen's work can be funny and touching, even a joke without a real conclusion. But its power depends on whether you accept Jensen's sculptures as pointless parodies or nervy allegorical tales.

That said, it may be helpful to remember that, historically, the greatest public objection to art — from film to music to visual arts — has been its perceived inscrutability. For Jensen, maker of complex puzzles, that can't be a soothing thought, especially coupled with our prevailing desire in both life and in art for tidy, comfortable resolutions.

Jensen's not an artist who intends to propose answers in her work, only questions. It's a sign of the budding complexity of her artwork that often those questions take us to the threshold of deep emotional considerations. But it's also a sign of its quirky but skin-deep texture that it sometimes fails to morph into anything more complex than a pithy joke.

Still, if you're unwilling to buy into "Animalia," consider it in light of PICA's status as an arbiter of local cutting-edge taste. Four months ago, French conceptual artists Alain Bublex and Marie Sester had the honor of inaugurating the new PICA space with their slick, avant-garde show "Fictional Cities." Freely employing such media as video projection to often-ponderous effect, Bublex and Sester's urban-futurist musings were predictably fitting as PICA kicked off its marriage with the local advertising kings that house the gallery.

But even though Jensen's a completely unknown name beyond the region, this third show at the new space strikes at the core of PICA's aspirations: giving local artists a museum-level venue to show their most ambitious work.

Appropriately, PICA executive director Kristy Edmunds has high hopes for the exhibition. A catalog is being produced, and Edmunds is talking to several curators at prestigious experimental art venues around the country so that the show can be seen outside Portland.

That's an important consideration because it helps to raise public expectations for local artists, galleries and museums while also attempting to project art made here into a national orbit. Within that larger context, there's no question that "Animalia" is the right sort of question for PICA to embrace.

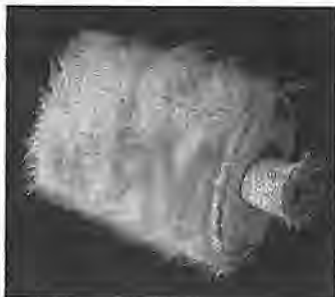
A JENSEN RETROSPECTIVE: 1992 - 1997



A deer, lingerie and sheets helped create a magical forest in "Art in the Arboretum" at the Hoyt Arboretum in 1994, above.



A warm metaphor for winter emerged from "Pillow (Narcissus)" in a 1997 installation called "Wintering In" at the Oregon College of Art & Craft.



In "Muffler #2" from 1992, Jensen wrapped a car muffler with fake fur.

PHOTOS COURTESY FOX GALLERY

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Visual Arts

BY LISA LAMBERT

Animalia reminds us that we weren't always so damn big.

LEAVE IT TO BEAVER

REVIEW

Animalia, the current exhibition by Kalla Jensen at PICA, is like a deadpan joke: cool, understated and as rife with insight as it is with humor. The show, which runs through the summer, is about our modern relationship with nature.

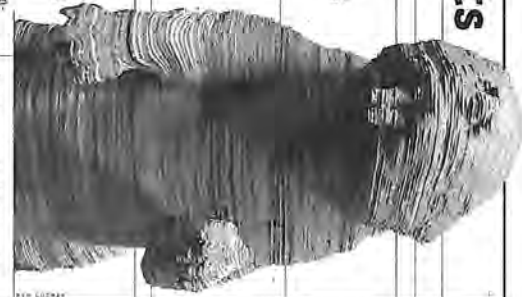
Animalia
Portland Institute for Contemporary Art
219 NW 23rd Ave.
242-1419
Ends Sept. 17
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At first glance, it seems that PICA's gallery has turned into a spotless menagerie of forgotten garden decorations. Cute and toy-like animal sculptures abound in smooth plaster and bright, monochromatic colors. Jensen uses paraffin-covered sculptures of

foxes in a number of installations that look as if they could have just arrived off an assembly line. The pieces don't betray a single scratch or variation. But don't let their sleek surface simplicity fool you. Viewers will have to be observant, taking note of the pieces' idiosyncratic component materials, in order to understand the works more fully.

Taken Jensen's sculpture of a skunk, for example. In form, it's just a sculpture of a skunk pulling itself from a pool of water. But the piece, *Skunk takes a bath*, is cast in pure white soap. In a single artistic gesture, Jensen has elevated skunks everywhere from their lowly, odiferous reputation to a new level of ivory clean. Humor appears in all the corners and crevices of this show, sometimes toying the line of silly. One placard, for the work titled *Mr. and Mrs. Grouse*, even lists the materials as "cow poop."

But it's *Beaver Story* that dominates the exhibition as well. A side gallery is dedicated solely to the history of the beaver. *Beaver Story* is an 8-foot construction of everyone's favorite dam-builder in layered plywood. The size of the piece may seem absurd, but according to Jensen's research it is historically accurate. During the Pleistocene Epoch, most beavers were taller than Shaquille O'Neal. This is Jensen's ode to the beaver stake, as well as a sly anti-fallic statement. It also shows the more insightful side of the show. *Beaver*



BY LAMBERT

Story is a reminder that there was a time when animals had more power than humans.

An even stronger piece, *Spring Tree*, is a walnut trunk lit by bare lightbulbs attached to its limbs. The bulbs create dramatic shadows, of the silent horror-movie variety. While they make a gorgeous image, they also obscure the tree. Back coats and equipment used to power the bulbs cover the tree limbs like a parasitic fungus, diminishing what they're supposed to enhance. While the other works in the show are lyrical, this one is downright mournful. It's as if someone's decided to design a new and improved tree but has forgotten what it is that makes a tree beautiful.

All of *Animalia*, on one level, speaks to the blossoming trend of designer nature. Armed with an ever-increasing knowledge of genetic engineering, humans are poised not simply to control nature but to restructure it. *Animalia* suggests that, as biologic architects, we will not create a Jurassic Park or Dr. Moreau's island, but something along the lines of an Anne Boleyn photo where perfectly plump bubbles replete in a world of impossibly fresh produce and flowers. We will fashion a humdrum of manageable cute. Nature will be comforting, smaller-portioned, pleasant-smelling—a clean, well-lit place.

While many artists have recently addressed people's current relationship with the environment, Jensen is especially qualified to tackle the issue. The 24-year-old artist spent most of her childhood on 50 acres of forested land in the coastal mountains. Since graduating from the Pacific Northwest College of Art in 1989, she has lived in Portland and focused on constructing works about flora and fauna with pre-fab products. In *Animalia*, Jensen presents her ideas with an originality and creativity that won't wash out. **MM**

Oregon

Malia Jensen at PICA

The characters of *Animalia*, Malia Jensen's show of recent work at the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art, inhabit the ambivalent space of the fairy tale where social codes mask a pervasive sexuality. Capitalizing on our uneasy relationship with the natural world, Jensen has assembled a cast of gentle woodland creatures immobilized by choices or mutely aware of their

Malia Jensen, *Spring Tree*, 1999, walnut trunk, sockets, wire, bulbs, 91" x 48", at the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art. (Photo: John Valls.)



inescapable natures. These allegories about carnality, progress and gender roles are pitched from a thankfully unfeminine—yet definitely female—point of view. Do what we might to place ourselves above our animal friends, we are, like them, “stuck in our own natures.” But just how the story gets told depends not a little on who does the telling.

At the entrance to the exhibit is *Mr. & Mrs. Grouse*, a life-size rendition of the game birds bowing and pecking companionably on a shelf. The title recalls the way children's stories not only anthropomorphize the animal world, but also slather everything over with a veneer of respectability. These are not just any pair of birds doing what birds do, but next-door neighbors of the *Little Red Hen*. Except in this instance, they have been fashioned carefully out of cow dung. No substance could be more natural, yet few are less socially acceptable as objects of contemplation.

Mr. & Mrs. Grouse provides a key to Jensen's strategy for constructing meaning. Jensen chooses materials as much for their cultural associations as for their formal power and juxtaposes those with titles that discourage simple readings. Take *Vulpes Fulva Fulva*, a sly sound-play (Latin for “red fox”) in which the central animal has been cast out of fiberglass and finished by an auto body shop to a champagne-colored luster. The bewildered animal confronts a forked path of red wax flower petals vague enough in shape to either resemble tongues, female genitalia or maybe even drops of blood.

According to Jensen, “the fox has in front of it an array of sexual options, questions of vulnerability and indulgence, relationships to beauty and narcissism.” But the paths branching off in a significant “V” are identical; there is no basis on which to make a choice.

Gender confusion animates the pair of oversize humping ladybugs entitled *En Plein Air (Ladybugs)*. Cast in pristine plastic, these white on white creatures caught in the act have been so literally sanitized that they nearly disappear. Equally quiet, but without a shred of sexual doubt, is the seductive assortment of wallets and change purses cast out of soap—a material that vanishes with use. Arrayed on a shelf against the gallery's back wall and displaying all the details of their well-used originals, they are intimate repositories that evoke the origami of female anatomy.

Also cast of soap, the nearby *Skunk Takes a Bath* catches the animal in a meditative pause. The resigned hunch of his shoulders as he pulls himself up from a turquoise pool suggests a moment of clarity in which he sadly realizes that no amount of bathing will rid him of his essential nature. *Spring Tree*, on the other hand, a walnut trunk ooz-

ing electrical wires instead of sap and illuminated by blossoming halogen lights, strives to maintain its “treeness” in the face of that overpowering human intervention called progress. Yet despite its truncation, the weathered surface of its silvery bark reminds us of the kinship among all things biological.

Billed as the exhibit's centerpiece, *Beaver Story* is a giant model of Oregon's state animal fashioned out of rough slices of layered plywood. Jensen confesses to being obsessed with this icon of the region, “the original logger,” ever since she learned that prehistoric beavers commonly grew to over eight feet tall. This monument to that earlier glory sets us wondering about our own evolutionary fate, while inviting a series of word plays that, in the context of the other work, naturally includes the sexual slang. Given the hegemony of the phallic, can anyone blame Jensen for asking “is bigger better for a beaver?” The answer, however, is obviously not, for survival required a considerable scaling down. Meanwhile, outside PICA's new Pearl District home, those other builders, stuck in their own essential natures, scurry about the area's vacant lots busily filling every empty space.

Despite its size, *Beaver Story* resonates less than *Skunk*, the change purses or *Spring Tree*. Yet, taken together, the separate pieces of Jensen's *Animalia* hold each other in a playful tension, well suited to what the show's curator and PICA director Kristy Edmunds calls “our ongoing conflicts with the most primal of issues.”

—Pat Boas

Malia Jensen: Animalia through September 17 at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, 219 NW 12th Ave., Suite 100, Portland.

Pat Boas is an artist and writer based in Portland.

Oregon

'Core Sample' throughout Portland

Without a doubt, *Core Sample* was the largest, most unusual display of art ever held in Portland. During one week, about twenty-four exhibitions of local art organized and produced by artists were held in storefronts, an abandoned factory, at PICA (Portland Institute for Contemporary Art), showrooms and on the streets. In addition to mounted displays there were video and film presentations, individual projects, and performances that occurred throughout the city. There were panel discussions, gallery talks and, of course, parties. It was advertised, tongue-in-

cheek, as "art in a city that has everything except cash." What it has is a plethora of energetic, talented artists, many in their twenties and thirties and some new to Portland, with a can-do spirit. The sluggish economy was no deterrent. In fact, it worked to the advantage of the enterprise as it made possible the commitment and long hours of volunteer work by underemployed artists as well as a supply of empty commodious spaces.

Conceived by Terri Hopkins, the director of The Art Gym at Marylhurst University, Randy Gragg, the architectural critic at *The Oregonian*, and Matthew Stadler, a novelist and publisher, the exhibition of exhibitions came about as a response to *Baja to Vancouver*, currently on view at the Seattle Art



Malia Jensen, *Furse*, 2003, cast soap, 7' x 15' x 20', at Bridgeport Condominiums, Portland. (Photo: Basil Childers.)

Museum. If *B2V* offers carefully selected current exemplary art being produced in West Coast cities, *Core Sample* was its counterpart—a comprehensive, albeit brief, experience of the dynamic mix in Portland. A "core sample" it was, but it can also be thought of as a measure of core temperature. Was its heat a momentary flare-up or does it signify a more permanent strength that will propel Portland into art world recognition?

All the curators of the weeklong shows, with the exception of Stephanie Snyder, director of the Cooley Gallery at Reed College, were artists. Each was free to choose a theme as well as artists. For example, Snyder's *Second Cycle* carried out her interest in cast-off materials and items that have been recycled as art objects. The visual standout was a tall, colorful pillar, *Parade*, created by Paige Sáez with Rose Wooderson from crinkled flowing yarn unraveled from afghans. Malia Jensen, whose conceptually based sculptures appeared in two *Core Sample* shows, curated *Drawn*, which brought together sketches, preparatory drawings and finished drawings by both young and well-established artists. Henk Pander, a longtime painter of large historical paintings in the European realistic tradition, contributed six large ink drawings with the narrative complexity of his paintings. They were a marked contrast to the much younger Kristan Kennedy's felt-tip drawings of penises in various states of flaccidity. A memorable one, of a very droopy member, had the presumed owner's name printed above and the line "I loved you once" spelled out below.

Although one might have expected an overall pronounced tilt toward off-the-wall and abstruse work, that wasn't the case. As might be expected in such a large assortment, the work ranged from sophomoric to superbly thought provoking. There was nothing audaciously ambitious in the manner of New York's annual batch of rising art stars, but a lot that was sophisticated, well conceived and visually intriguing. Many pieces continued the long regional association with craftsmanship and materials, quite evident in Jensen's stark white, beautiful cast soap sculpture of a full-size woman's

purse (seen in *Crafty* curated by Jonathan Raymond). Also notable were two striking pieces in Jeff Jahn's *Symbiosis/Synthetic*, a show aimed at revealing symbiotic relationships, both good and bad, between natural and manufactured co-inhabitants of the world. Both pieces were displayed in the large windows of a corner showroom, where they dramatically represented the curator's premise. Matthew Picton's sparkling, spreading suspended web, *Rubber Parking Lot Drawing #1*, began as cracks in the pavement from which he made castings in synthetic materials. Bryan Suereth's *Unauthorized Plants* consisted of two very large houseplants, their stems wrapped in bright green plastic and their ornamental leaves painted, one in red, the other in yellow.

The largest and best exhibition space, called the Belmont Factory, was located several miles from downtown on SE Belmont Street. Formerly a garment sewing factory, its use was donated by the owners. Ovid Uman, an artist with construction experience, then took on the major design and construction jobs that turned it into a functional, first-rate showcase for art. As an indication of the building's size and scale, the first piece visitors encountered upon entering was an actual 1965, battered Chevy van resting on its hubs, which had been transformed by Bill Daniels into a vehicle with masts and sails that was towing a rowboat followed by an inner tube. At the other end of the 18,000-square-foot space were James Harrison's two towering (approximately twenty-five-foot high) towers constructed from blocks of two-by-fours. In between were spacious spaces for Pablo de Ocampo's large piece consisting of text taken from a U.N. resolution concerning Palestine and written on the floor with grains of sand; *Reallagories*, curator Andrea Borsuk's show of conceptually based paintings (reviewed in this issue of *Artweek*); and *Hunt*, which slyly addressed the action and results of hunting and was organized by Michael Brophy and Vanessa Renwick.

All this and much more made *Core Sample* unique, both a delight and a revelation. Its revelation was in demonstrating that this city has an identity, a vitality, a creative diversity and an indomitable spirit very much its own.

—Lois Allan

Core Sample closed in October at the following Portland venues: Belmont Factory, the Maytag Building, 1039 NW Glisan, Bridgeport Condominiums, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, Independent Publishing Resource Center, The Art Gym at Marylhurst University, the Portland Building, Seaplane, Pacific Switchboard, southwest corner of NE 23rd Avenue and Albarta Street, Holocene and Holocene Satellite.

Lois Allan is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.