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## Ingenuity trumps cohesion in Malia Jensen exhibit

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By **Chas Bowie**

It's hard to imagine a day when the chance to see new work by **Malia Jensen** sounds anything less than tantalizing. The twin engines of Jensen's studio practice -- a marvelous command of diverse materials, combined with a revolving cast of animals that populate her sculptures and works on paper -- have produced a veritable menagerie of smart, irresistible artworks dating back to her inclusion in the 1991 Oregon Biennial.

**"Knee High to a Worm,"** Jensen's new exhibition of small sculptures and abstract woodcuts, contains at least half a dozen top-shelf works from the artist's New York studio. But taken as a whole, "Knee High to a Worm" feels more like a compendium of recent creations than a cohesive statement. Jensen's signature animals and material inventiveness anchor the show, but works about the human body, creative inspiration and socio-economic dread feel out of place, despite their individual merits.

The artist shows her hand, quite literally, in two bronzes from 2008 that reveal every pinch and squeeze of her fingers in the clay modeling process. "Dog Loop," a small pedestal piece, captures the self-immolating bite of a bronze mutt chomping down on his own tail. Jensen's canine ouroboros isn't just compulsively aggressive and absurdly unself-aware, but the dog's self-reflexive bite also creates a physical and emotional closed circuit that shuts it off from the external world.

When viewed from above, "Salamander Maze," a flattish, circular network of lumpy bronze passageways, suggests a crumbling mandala, or the ruins of an ancient sacred site. But approached from the reptilian perspective -- a squat vantage point not for the easily embarrassed -- its diminutive walls appear heavy and imposing, a **Richard Serra** labyrinth for the lizard set.

A third bronze, the softball-sized "Mud Bubble (bursting)," looks like a cross between an antique diving helmet and a gurgling swamp belch. Bubbles, especially those of the bursting variety, have assumed a more sinister connotation in these dire economic times, and Jensen's murky, frozen dome is depicted at the apex of its annihilation.

Nearby, a sculpture crafted from painted walnut, rope and epoxy offers the fantasy of relief from the malaise of "Mud Bubble." "Emergency Brake (ver. 1)," which sprouts matter-of-factly from the wall, would be a welcome

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sight in any of life's trying moments.

Similarly, Jensen's dangling light bulb pieces promise the psychic gift of illumination or inspiration, even though they are as aching wooden as Pinocchio and as brilliantly dim as Jasper John's iconic metal light bulb of 1958.

Anxiety and neuroses thread their way through much of "Knee High to a Worm," but the individual works engage one another only in smaller breakout groups of conversation, to borrow the middle-manager parlance. The good news is that each of the clusters brims with ingenuity, but in a small show like this, one hopes for a more harmonious, choral effect.

*Elizabeth Leach Gallery, 417 N.W. Ninth Ave.; free admission; 503-224-0521, **[www.elizabethleach.com](http://www.elizabethleach.com)**.  
Hours: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays. Closes Aug. 29.*

-- *Chas Bowie*, Special to the Oregonian