

# ARTFORUM

## 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 opining, 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

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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*