Malia Jensen
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I’ve always been interested in what opportunity there is in failure, not as a romantic fetish but as a point of departure and an opportunity for freedom and redemption. Art is a way for a Godless person to practice exercises in the invention and construction of faith. It’s a way to create and sustain meaning when it does not present itself. Working is a quest and a way to exist in the world. The degree of finish and obsessive workmanship dumped into the work is a sort of quid-pro-quo or a measure of what might be wrung back out of it (by the viewer) in interpretations that are as much feelings as ideas.

MALIA JENSEN

A pair of mating ladybugs. Crumpled pieces of fabric. A bear on a journey. Soft dough enveloping a drooping rolling pin. The works in this catalog are part of a highly personal narrative. They tell the story of Jensen’s artistic and individual growth, which began in rural Oregon and followed her bicoastal moves from Portland to New York and back. Some works—like The Bear’s Progress, Sock Fight, and Box of Snakes—embody romantic notions of struggle, rugged individualism, and perseverance; while others point to an interest in the body, sensuality, and aging (see Dough Situation, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Pill Bug, and Old Bag). Emphasized in each are the myriad ways we define our humanity: pinched and folded drapes of fabric evoke the physicality of time passed; a bowl of fruit is both a testament to the simple pleasures of being alive as well as a memento mori; a twisted yet beautiful mass of snakes represents our fears and obsessions; a salamander maze, which was originally fashioned by the artist and her brother out of mud as a childhood pastime, references family history and the translation of memory.

Jensen has long been concerned with commemorating that which is overlooked. Encompassing video, sculpture, and photography, her works unearth beauty in the mundane, humor in the dark and absurd, and redemption in failure. Underscoring this is the artist’s virtuoso marriage of form and content. Commonplace objects such as roosting pigeons and a dish of plums are elevated and monumentalized. The slippage between reality and the spoken word is celebrated, as seen in a silver-patinaed bronze purse seemingly plopped down on a counter and titled Old Bag. In embracing these dualities of splendor and ordinariness, past and present, and even life and death, Jensen’s works offers homage to the things that have shaped us.
Out West (Back East)

Cristin Tierney Gallery
June 7-July 20, 2018

Out West (Back East) is about looking forward and reflecting back at a distinct mid-point in my life. It’s a deeply personal meditation as well as a structure meant to support a broader examination of who we currently are, culturally and politically.
An evocation of maternal feelings and good intentions gone awry. The way disparate entities and conflicting natures fit together and accommodate or bend to the needs or will of another has always been an esthetic obsession and a source of humor and inspiration for me. Creating this piece mirrored those relationships in the very process and its arrival as a complete whole thrills me like a jazz composition. *Mercy, Mercy, Mercy...*
Plums, 2018. salt fired ceramic. 3 1/2 x 12 1/2 x 12 inches.

Modeled after the fruit from an Italian prune I planted over twenty years ago, this tree in particular holds a kind of symbolic weight for me. Its enormity reminds me of my own age and the passage of time, its generous annual yield is proof of the persistence of a life-force, and the sometimes overwhelming requirements of its care inform me consistently of my responsibilities.
I had an untroubled relationship with snakes as a child. Finding them sunning themselves on the warm asphalt after getting off the school bus, I would often wrap one around my arm and carry it up our gravel driveway, releasing it in the orchard to “save” it from being run over. As a narrative for a sculptural object, I’m interested in the power we have to shape an outcome with the mythologies and stories we create around that which we might dread or fear or, conversely, long for and cherish.

*Box of Snakes (salt)*, 2018. salt fired ceramic. 7 1/2 x 10 1/2 x 9 inches.
In my twenties, I planted fruit trees in my own yard, now mature and bearing fruit. I’m obliged to contend with a seasonal abundance, and so I dry and freeze and can and juice and still sweep rotting fruit off the sidewalks. It is both my life and a metaphor, as I feel committed by disposition to take care of that which I planted. As a sculpture, *Fruit and Nuts* honors the life-force and fertility of both the earth and the mind, for what I most endeavor towards is a creative outpouring and a quest to observe human nature and make meaning.

*Fruit and Nuts*, 2018. soda fired ceramic. 8 x 19 x 20 inches.
Cats do this—they curl around each other in loving and supportive ways, a fact I had not realized before seeing it in the ones I happened to live with in NYC, inspiring me to consider that such relationships were possible and normal at a time when I most needed to learn that. *Perfect Circle (Imperfect)* acknowledges both the necessity and the profound challenges of maintaining fellowship and cooperative interdependence during a time of raising divisions in our political, social and cultural climate.

*Perfect Circle (Imperfect)*, 2016. slip-cast ceramic fired with glaze, concrete, and glass. 8 1/2 x 80 x 80 inches.
Blue Drape, 2018. salt fired ceramic.
17 1/2 x 15 x 4 1/4 inches.
I’ve consistently used animals as allegory, and this piece comes from a moment reflecting on a relationship I ardently longed for in my teens and the recognition that it was about as likely as a friendship between a bird and a pill bug. My hope had been that it would save me from who I was at the time but, ultimately, the armor I wore and my tendency to protect myself from interacting with the world is what enabled my observant and analytical nature and my life as an artist. I’m very interested in keeping track of the markers of who we’ve been, especially as they determine and predict where we go or who we become.
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2006-Present
Bathing Skunk, 2014. bronze. 13 1/4 x 8 1/4 x 16 1/4 inches.
Old Bag, 2018. bronze, silver patina. 6 x 19 1/2 x 14 1/2 inches.
Ladybugs, 2012. polished bronze. 6 x 9 x 13 inches.
Is This Your Cat?, 2006. patinated bronze. 24 x 14 x 12 inches.
Pile, 2008. bronze. 36 x 20 x 15 inches.
Untitled #2 (Breast Lick), 2010. carved salt lick.
9 x 9 x 11 inches.
Sock Fight, 2011. bronze. 30 x 45 x 30 inches.
Stalagmite, 2006. bronze. 19 x 10 x 9 inches.
Pigeon, 2006. bronze with patina, enamel.
8 x 10 x 4 1/2 inches.
When asked what kind of bear this was, I would always answer, “a philosophical bear.” As with many bears in film and literature, he represented my untamable nature or something in myself that I had not reconciled. In *The Bear’s Progress*, our own “animalness” is investigated as the character of the bear, clearly a handmade costume with a person inside, wins the sympathy of the audience, appearing more real than the animals around it. As with any journey, the story has familiar markers: the character searches for love and companionship, experiments with drugs and sex, confronts death and is compelled into conflict by the abiding nature of the protagonists, but the story is larger and leaves many unanswered questions.
Malia Jensen (b. 1966, Honolulu, HI) lives and works in Portland, OR. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally at venues and institutions including the Melbourne International Arts Festival (Melbourne, Australia), Schneider Museum of Art (Ashland, OR), Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (Portland, OR), Tacoma Art Museum (Tacoma, WA), Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design (Milwaukee, WI), Holter Museum of Art (Helena, MT), Portland Art Museum (Portland, OR), Mesa Arts Center (Mesa, AZ), Cristin Tierney Gallery (New York, NY), Marian Goodman Gallery (London, England), Richard Gray Gallery (Chicago, IL), and Elizabeth Leach Gallery (Portland, OR). She has been an Artist in Residence at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation (Captiva, FL), Ucross Foundation (Clearmont, WY), Headlands Center for the Arts (Sausalito, CA), and the Portland Garment Factory (Portland, OR); and a visiting artist and speaker at Whitman College (Walla Walla, WA), Southern Oregon University (Ashland, OR), Pacific Northwest College of Art (Portland, OR), and Massachusetts College of Art and Design (Boston, MA). She has completed numerous public commissions in the Northwestern United States, and her work is held in many public and private collections.
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