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.
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 manic 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.
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 surrogate 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.