

CRISTIN TIERNEY

PLAZM

Plazm Magazine: Documenting Creative Culture Since 1991

Plazm is a magazine of design, art, and culture with worldwide distribution. Founded by artists as a creative resource, the magazine is now published by the nonprofit New Oregon Arts & Letters.



Malia Jensen by Jon Raymond

When Malia Jensen was little, growing up in the wooded foothills of rural Oregon, an issue of Esquire magazine informed her of a little fact that has stuck with her ever since. Earthworms, her father's magazine reported, feel pain.

Not an esoteric idea, really, or very hard to grasp, but the kind of little idea that can gently work a very large power, growing from the smallest fraction of importance to a breadth and scope that somehow inflects the entirety of everything. Just think how tiny and spread out all that pain is; it adds up in a way. Imagine all the little blind worms in the world, all their thin pink skin bending and writhing and hurting in tiny segments, and then zoom out to where the earth's horizon curves away. From underground where the worms hurt, to the dirt they eat, to the trees and leaves and out into the sky, the pain echoes and multiplies until something wavers and warps and it becomes apparent that things are much different than they were just moments before. When leaves shimmer in

the sun now, they are pretty and in pain. It is delicious, like a loose tooth rubbing against a cluster of nerves.

This kind of gentle yet resounding yet darkly limned effect is one that Jensen has been re-creating in her artwork since beginning to show it in the early 90s. In doing so, the Portland artist has returned again and again to the world of animals—deer, opossums, birds, goats—and more specifically to the world of feelings that lie just beneath their furry faces. To get there, Jensen has often made recourse to the weird art of taxidermy, finding something in its inherent violence, and its futile attempt to disguise it, that dovetails nicely with her own creepy-cute sensibility. In “Beauty Mark” (1994), for instance, the muscular bust of a deer finds its skin rendered in the shiny black rubber of an innertube, neatly riveted along the sinuous contours of the animal’s neck and face in dominatrix-y fashion. A red, circular patch falls on its neck like a hickey, and nubs protrude where antlers once were, neither of which detail raises the piece from its coma of blank inexpression. “Long Mile” (1993) reprises the same fetish-ish surface, lying on the floor in an unnerving lump, its muscles firm but its form all truncated, like a cuddly, mutant fawn seizing up on the forest floor. Unclear whether flayed or bound, both animals present unsettling images of fear cloaked in cuteness, or maybe vice versa. Like an unexpected encounter in the woods, they charge the air around them with spooked tension, then nervous laughter, then tension again.

Among Jensen’s more recent endeavors is a proposed public sculpture, yet unmade, featuring a thirty-foot tall beaver constructed from the wreckage of a demolished Portland, Oregon onramp. Entitled “Rubble Beaver,” the idea crackles with the vaguest of polemical impulses, tapping the almost totemic status of beavers in the Northwest (they’re Oregon’s state animal) to make an ambiguous statement regarding regional identity and the politics of place. Further, in the context of Portland, a city growing in fairly dramatic bounds, “Rubble Beaver’s” slim semiotic valence combines with its gargantuan scale shift to form a clever, even mind-bending, commentary on the telos of urban development. By using the ruins of the enlarging city to memorialize its first land developer, the beaver, Jensen attends to the unpredictably disfiguring effects inherent in both shrinking and swelling, and to the unbreachable gap between time and site. Ultimately, her sort of monstrous monument folds together polarizing discourses of growth and contraction, creation and destruction, industriousness and frivolity, all in a single, dense package.

Like many in Jensen’s menagerie, “Rubble Beaver’s” lattice of sustained tensions can give the illusion of something like inner calm. Like the puns she embeds in many of her titles, Jensen’s objects move with equal force in distinctly different directions, following both irony and sentimentality to opposite yet oddly adjacent endpoints. It’s a trick that turns fitful in a piece like “Pillow” (1994), a wooden chopping block carved in the shape of a fluffy bed pillow. Though it looks demure enough at first—the soft corners, the slight indentation where the head goes—a moment’s contemplation uncovers a devious logic blooming beneath its polished surface. Like a coin spinning on end, the sculpture’s concise visual pun flutters back and forth in the span of a thought, turning from slicing to sleeping, dicing to dreaming, in punishingly lucid revolutions. In a way, its not so

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different from Jensen's other, animaloid pieces, which likewise flash between biting and inviting with the abruptness of real pets.

With no eyes, mouths, or ears, Jensen's senseless animals often appear helpless prey to the sadistic whimsy of their creator. As their materials jar against their shapes—one deer head is upholstered in the red rubber of a hippity-hop toy; another deer, this one a full-body, aluminum-leafed plaster cast, lies broken into three pieces—Jensen's sculptures seem to ache with cruel, unresolved comedy, like cutting remarks left unacknowledged, or punchlines only half-heard. Indeed, Jensen's imagination doubles its dark meanings in almost a sing-song voice, suspending delicate contradictions between sign and surface to unlock both muted horror and strange, mournful longings in the natural world it watches and of which it's part. Sort of like Nature itself, whose self-consciousness never really awakens, Jensen's creatures inhabit a world where emotional need precedes sensual awareness, and where the brute ability to feel, in humans and dumb animals alike, often arrives as something of a miracle.