

CRISTIN TIERNEY

ARTFORUM



Malia Jensen, *Worth Your Salt*, 2020, HD video, color, sound, 360 minutes.

Malia Jensen

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Denaturation was implicit throughout Malia Jensen’s “Nearer Nature,” her solo exhibition at Cristin Tierney. The show featured five kiln-cast glass sculptures, four perched on reclaimed wooden blocks and one on a concrete block, set atop white pedestals. Each form represented a part of the body—a breast, hands, the stomach (interpreted here as stacks of doughnuts), a foot, and a Brancusi-inspired head. The objects are actually fabricated replicas of carved salt licks the artist placed in various habitats across Oregon as offerings or lures for the fauna—such as deer, elk, birds, and cows—that became unwitting collaborators in her project. Jensen mounted eighteen motion-triggered cameras that surveilled the action over the course of a year, recording animals tasting and inspecting the sculptures on location. The resultant six-hour video, *Worth Your Salt* (all works 2020), was compiled by a team of editors and presented in the space. Audio from the Oregon landscapes competed with the din of traffic on the Bowery, where the second-floor gallery is located.

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From studio to West Coast wilderness to fabrication lab to East Coast gallery, these works are multivalent translations many times removed from their more organic, bucolic environs, just as each body part is severed from its whole. In addition to obvious tropes of impermanence and decay, displacement was an uneasy phantom haunting Jensen's presentation, which took two years to complete. While the press release suggested that the video footage offers "an immersive opportunity for contemplation," the clamor of Manhattan pulled the plug on any zen tranquility that might have been conveyed in a more peaceful environment. And though the city's aggro vibe did at least throw the natural setting of Jensen's project into sharp relief, what was more frustrating was that we did not see the remains of the original sculptures here, only their reconstructions. Yet, as such, the absent forms, whether destroyed or partially decomposed, achieved a certain conceptual deathlessness, while their reconstructed offshoots became material memento mori.

Westward thoughts in this eastern US gallery loomed like daydreams, conjuring visions of escape to what we often naively refer to as "a simpler life" (but is really a quieter one with fewer challenges and consequences—a problematic fantasy, that). In one reading of the familiar Bible story, Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt for looking back at evil Sodom as she and her family fled the city for more virtuous pastures and to spare themselves God's wrath (during pandemic times, they would have been driving a U-Haul). I am reminded of this passage from Donna Haraway's 2016 book, *Staying with the Trouble*: "Grief is a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying; human beings must grieve *with*, because we are in and of this fabric of undoing."

The sculpture *Hand (with Plum)* depicts a gesture of offering that could be either innocent or malefic—what are the conditions of the gift or bribe? Is its intention to nourish or to sicken? Peeling back another layer, one apprehends Indigenous land and the upheaval wrought by settler conquest and greed. Our tread is heavy: We can't *not* interfere at this point. The installation of video equipment in a forest or a field, the placing of salt licks in natural (preserved) habitats—such actions are intrusions, even for the sake of art. The viewer was keenly aware of these torques and of the irony of artmaking on stolen land, which must now be preserved through conservation efforts. The animals in the videos bear witness from the captivity we call wilderness, where they are placed under surveillance. There is no forest deep enough to escape the fact that there is no refuge from ourselves. Or from each other.

— Charity Coleman