



34

Malia

Jensen

IMPRINT



Written by Sasha LaPointe

When Malia Jensen shared with me a formative animal encounter, I was transported to the artist's childhood home, between the mountains and the sea, in rural Oregon. The scene is dreamlike: A quiet meadow sloping towards a creek. Alongside it, a dense mixture of fir trees and conifers climb the hillside, a place where Malia spent much of her time. On her way into the woods she'd visit a crabapple tree at the edge of her path. Amid the tall grass still studded in beads of dew, she'd find the outlines of recently sleeping deer, who had just been there, their forms still imprinted in the damp grass, encircling the trunk.

There was no encounter beyond this quiet acknowledgment. The deer never revealed themselves beyond the imprints beneath the tree. But this quiet watching felt meaningful, built on trust. When she tells me the story, I can't help but visualize the shapes of deer in grass, a stunning image that celebrates a respect for the natural world. A daily

# CRISTIN TIERNEY

understanding between the child and the animal, one that seems to say, I see you, I know you're here.

As a writer, I have always been drawn to visual artists. The poet in me is constantly seeking out imagery that pulls me in, ignites something in me. This quest has been lifelong, has brought me to countless galleries and spaces to marvel at a carving, or cry at a glass case housing a cedar woven basket. This foraging for art is born of a curious admiration. I'm in awe of the story an object can hold, the way a painting stays with you. It's a beautiful kind of haunting. Perhaps it's as simple as understanding the piece as its own kind of story, something created, something sacred, told in a language without words. It is an invitation, a quiet engagement between the artist and the viewer and it feels private, sanctified.

Malia Jensen's work honors this sacred collaboration between the artist and the viewer. Her sculpture, as well as her work with video, invites you in, provokes thought, and asks us to consider the natural world around us more closely. In an era of late-stage capitalism, the depletion of our natural resources, it's important to examine the absurdity of human objects. As a Native woman this conceptualization is important to me. So is humor. We often say in my community that laughter is necessary, is the medicine needed under the crushing weight of historical and generational trauma. It's no wonder Malia's work resonates with me. The artist defines humor as the classic redeemer of pain. When I came across her "functional art" piece called the iCan, a literal metal can and a string cord, packaged to mimic Apple's sleek branding, I laughed so hard I had tears in my eyes. As someone who routinely experiences anxiety around the throwaway culture we find ourselves in, who has nightmares of mountains of discarded tech and piles of e-waste, the iCan soothed something in me. Those few moments of laughter were a welcomed softness, a way to exist in the world that didn't feel crushing. In that brief exchange was a connection, a kind of healing. To be reminded we are not alone in this world is to be reminded of our humanity. It threads us together under the same blanket. That kind of art, like laughter, is potent medicine.

This invitation for engagement has forever been at the root of Malia's work as an artist. One sculptural experiment, from her childhood next to a creek, was a mud maze built atop an old stump where she and her brother would watch salamanders crawl along the low walls. Malia's maze wasn't necessarily a scientific endeavor, or one that sought control. The salamanders could escape at any time. The image of the maze is particularly moving to me for its placement along the surface of a cut tree. There's something deeply poetic about it. I imagine the exposed stump, the rings you can count in order to learn how long the tree had

# CRISTIN TIERNEY

been growing before it was chopped down. Then I imagine Malia inviting nature back to it, building something new. Many years later, while living in Brooklyn, New York, and surrounded by concrete, Malia remade the salamander maze and had it cast in bronze .

The maze makes me think of the imprints of deer along the meadow grass. How the artist, even as a child, understood something about nature and connection. And that connection still speaks through her work. \* And I think this is where my gravitation towards visual artists deepens and becomes more personal. Malia Jensen uses artwork to mend trauma, as a way of reshaping what was lost or harmed into something beautiful. I think of my own experiences with grief and loss. I think of the traumas we as humans share collectively across the planet, and how necessary these tools are for healing.

Another of my favorite pieces of Malia's, Wrecking Pet, is a bronze hamster-turned-wrecking ball. When I asked her to share the meaning behind the unexpected juxtaposition of something as innocent and innocuous as a pet hamster and something as destructive as a wrecking ball, I once again found myself moved by the artist's intentions. Malia described our tendency to ignore the low rumblings of discord and pain, lurking within the safe space of the family unit, emotionally shapeshifting until the root is lost. I was fascinated by this examination of family complicity, something the artist referred to as a conspiracy of agreement. It got me thinking about how we consider or perhaps take for granted that these agreements are set in stone, locked down, backed by a long-standing tradition of the nuclear family, and how American culture has projected this version of family as the solid and unbreakable way. Wrecking Pet suggests just how precarious this scaffolding can be, how easily it can all be blown apart and reduced to rubble. The artist asks us to then extend this theory outward, to imagine how it applies to community, to society, to currency. There's something freeing in admitting the fragility of these systems put in place without our explicit consent.

Malia's work asks that we stop and consider objects both mundane and meaningful. It asks that we examine the value we place on things, and the value that can be found in quiet observations of nature. In this way, her work feels decolonial. It challenges early settler ideas around a necessary separation between humans and nature. Settlers tried to create this fear of nature, this dominion over the natural world. Malia Jensen's work attempts to dismantle that, asserting that humans are a part of nature, even as we destroy and exploit it. She sees the imprint in the grass and does not fear it. She sees the delicate wrecking pet in us all.