

MALIA'S 'ANIMALIA'

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If you visit the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's minimalist space this month, you're probably not expecting an encounter with nature, "red in tooth and claw." But that's what Malia Jensen's always fascinating and often compelling new exhibition, "Animalia," delivers -- at least in part.

Next to an 8-foot-tall beaver made out of horizontal sheets of plywood and among seven other sculptures of mating ceramic ladybugs, contemplative fiberglass foxes and lounging birds made out of cow dung, looms a 7-foot-tall walnut tree trunk. Neatly plumed and hilariously retrofitted with electrical wires and sockets, the once-magnificent hunk of wood now emanates only an unnatural, sepia-colored glow.

One could rightly interpret the sculpture, called "Spring Tree," as the sum of its disparate parts: nature and industry in a quirky, humorous embrace that touches on our region's ambivalence about them on the cusp of a new century. But the halogenically bright-and-flashing sculpture is a deeper cultural puzzle, a metaphor that opens the door on a host of other impulses that have nothing to do with sacred forests or the dire desires of the big, bad city.

"Animalia," PICA's third exhibit in its new gallery inside Wieden & Kennedy's luxurious offices, may take its cues from the dueling worlds of roaming animals, primeval forests and city buildings. But it finds its truer, and deeper, meanings in the landscape of the human condition.

For anyone who's familiar with the work of Jensen, 34, who's been one of Portland's more critically lauded artists since she graduated from the Pacific Northwest College of Art in 1989, such multiply layered illuminations are a matter of course.

Consider some of the Hawaii-born but Oregon-raised Jensen's previous sculptural works. Filtering a genuine wonder of the natural world through a post-Pop conceptual lens, she's fashioned everything from a taxidermist deer form wrapped in a flannel print of Elvis Presley to a naughahyde-upholstered birdhouse hiding a small ceramic wolf.

But aside from their distinctly Northwest love of craft and dark strain of humor, Jensen's nature sculptures are really vehicles to meditate on such non-flora-and-fauna dilemmas as carnality, gender roles and a postadolescent sense of emotional dread.

More often than not, in "Animalia," those oblique metaphors hit their mark, revealing Jensen's mordant, observational voice and only occasionally descending into a facile predictability reminiscent of the work of 1980s art provocateur Jeff Koons.

Take "En Plein Air (Ladybugs)," for example. In what could easily be interpreted as a borrowing from Koons' kitschy, intentionally shallow Pop concoctions, Jensen captures two plasticcast polka-dotted bugs locked in an oh-so-compromising mating position. Usually Jensen would come out the better in a comparison to Koons, the former stockbroker turned art kingpin. But here, she seems to emulate Koons' transparent attempts at unveiling the perverse banality behind reality- attempts which are themselves thin-blooded descendants of Marcel Duchamp's influential appropriations of "everyday" objects.

Far more poetic but even more Koonsian and just as flat is "Vulpes Fulva Fulva," an installation that presents a cast fiberglass fox resting a bit too pensively in front of a delicately littered path of paraffin-made petals. Striking out into more heart-tugging terrain than usual, Jensen tells us that the slickly fabricated metallic fox has many "sexual options" ahead of it, with the flower petals symbolizing that Pandora's Box of "vulnerability and indulgence, relationships to beauty and narcissism . . ." If Jensen knows how to wield double-edged wit to ambiguous effect -- as in "Spring Tree"-- she has yet to master the more blunted and difficult weapon of sincerity.

Still, most of the time, Jensen hits the bull's-eye -- or something close to it-- as in "Mr. and Mrs. Grouse," a slightly meanspirited zinger that plays like a swift, underhanded punch to the gut. Creating what looks like a boringly quaint scene of two birds-- the eponymous Mr. and Mrs. Grouse --Jensen's banal pastoral homage ascends to perversely persuasive heights when the viewer realizes that the birds are made out of cow dung.

Then there's what could be the show's most seductive piece, a series of soap sculptures that simmer with a number of elusive meanings. Laid out on a small shelf on the gallery's back walls, several pasteleored soap bars molded from real wallets and

pocketbooks await examination. More than recontextualized cleansing products and moneyholders, the soap sculptures become "elevated" cultural repositories, touching on issues of personal privacy (private information carriers offered up in a public space) and the paradox of money (so dirty yet "cleaned up" here).

Jensen was originally a painter and switched to making sculptures several years ago. What distinguishes both the good and less successful works in this exhibition is their sustained level of superior craftsmanship -- part of the Northwest tradition. The sculpture that will impress, even awe, most viewers will be the steroidsized toothy beaver at the center of the gallery. Hunched over, its paws raised bunny-like, the dopey but lumbering beaver seems to be begging for food.

"Beaver Story," as the brilliantly hilarious piece is called, gathered momentum in Jensen's mind after she found out that the Northwest beaver once stood a proud 8 feet tall before being cut down to comparatively Lilliputian size by the quirk of evolution. It's a tale of the environment, full of ironic twists and turns that resonates for obvious reasons. Jensen calls the beaver the "original logger" and references other similar evolutionary fates. So, fittingly, Jensen recreates the ancient towering beaver by building one out of sheets of horizontal plywood, and painstakingly, if imperfectly, gluing them atop one another.

For a deeper view of the sculpture's orientation and even a bird's-eye glimpse as to how Jensen's mind works, walk a few paces farther into the gallery's project room. There, Jensen has gathered many of her exploratory works for the piece, including a clay model of the beaver and a group of X-rays that map out the proportions of each plywood layer. Jensen's cheeky sensibility emerges in several jokes interspersed amid the neat clutter of roughly drawn sketches and various kinds of outlines. Look, in particular, at the wall opposite the X-rays and you'll notice a smirky but somehow touching photograph of the clay beaver passing through the X-ray machine.

Whether or not you're moved by, or can laugh at, the photograph of the little beaver passing bravely through the futuristic X-ray portal, might well predict how you respond to the exhibit as a whole. Jensen's work can be funny and touching, even a joke without a real conclusion. But its power depends on whether you accept Jensen's sculptures as pointless parodies or nifty allegorical tales.

That said, it may be helpful to remember that, historically, the greatest public objection to art-- from film to music to visual arts -- has been its perceived inscrutability. For Jensen, maker of complex puzzles, that can't be a soothing thought, especially coupled with our prevailing desire in both life and in art for tidy, comfortable resolutions.

Indeed, Jensen's not an artist who intends to propose answers in her work, only questions. It's a sign of the budding complexity of her artwork that often those questions take us to the threshold of deep emotional considerations. But it's also a sign of its quirky but skin-deep texture that it sometimes fails to morph into anything more complex than a pithy joke.

Still, if you're unwilling to buy into "Animalia," consider it in light of PICA's status as an arbiter of local cutting-edge taste. Four months ago, French conceptual artists Alain Bublex and Marie Sester had the honor of inaugurating the new PICA space with their slick, avant-obscure show "Fictional Cities." Freely employing such media as video projection to often ponderous effect, Bublex and Sester's urban-futurist musings were predictably fitting as PICA kicked off its marriage with the local advertising kings that house the gallery.

But even though Jensen's a completely unknown name beyond the region, this third show at the new space strikes at the core of PICA's aspirations: giving local artists a museum-level venue to show their most ambitious work.

Appropriately, PICA executive director Kristy Edmunds has high hopes for the exhibition. A catalogue is being produced, and Edmunds is talking to several curators at prestigious experimental art venues around the country so that the show can be seen outside of Portland.

That's an important consideration for many reasons, but mostly because it helps to raise public expectations for local artists, galleries and museums while also attempting to project art made here into a national orbit. Within that larger context, there's no question that "Animalia" is the right sort of question for PICA to embrace.

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3 color photos

Photo Caption: Summary: Malia Jensen's menagerie of sculptures is full of tricks, twists and sometimes deeper meanings.

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