

On Julie Buffalohead & Nathanael Flink

by: Mason Riddle

What links the artistic practices of Julie Buffalohead and Nathanael Flink together is their instinctual response to make work that reflects aspects of our chaotic contemporary society. The two artists live very much in the present and, thus, they need not forage far for relevant source material. Politics. Culture. Art. Domestic life. The human condition. All fodder for the taking. But rather than making synergistic, like-minded work, even the most cursory glance alerts the viewer their work shares little in common.

Buffalohead's figurative works on paper serve as an exacting but ethereal lens which brings into focus the issues and events confronting contemporary Indigenous peoples. Quiet and contained, her narrative tableaux are populated with anthropomorphized animals and the occasional human, all of whom exist suspended in an indeterminate space. By contrast, Flink's collaged paintings are as frenetic as his mixed media sculptures are unruly. Abstract and undisciplined, they show little reverence for the norms of fine art or the machinations of the contemporary art world. Rather, Flink's work seems to echo the societal disruptions, political chaos, and global uncertainty that hound us daily.

Julie Buffalohead

Buffalohead, who is a member of the Ponca Nation of Oklahoma, has long made work that illuminates the complex relationships between Indigenous people and dominant culture, humans and animals, humans and the environment, and between women and men. Animals often masquerade as humans – and vice versa. Her cast of human and animal characters act out societal codes, issues and mores, which Buffalohead considers relevant to Indigenous people and to current events.

Buffalohead's current work signifies a shift in both scale and focus. She continues to work on thick sheets of Lokta paper, a tactile and often richly hued handmade paper from Nepal. But instead of working across one or two sheets to create a single work, here, she has collaged numerous bits and pieces of Lokta onto long stretches of watercolor paper to create works measuring up to 18-feet in length. Still deploying her hallmark illustrative style, she has carefully rendered her figures in white ink, charcoal, graphite and acrylic paint. Often more ghostlike than flesh and blood, her figures deftly imply the magical and the real, the spiritual and the commonplace all in a single work.

Buffalohead has also introduced a new stylistic element into her current work, a graphic patterning motif based on what is known as "ribbon work." An appliqué technique, created initially by the women of Prairie and Great Lakes tribes in the early 17th century, it originated when Europeans brought silk ribbons for trade. Defined by cutout, opposite patterning, and light on dark or vice versa, the decorative technique quickly spread to other tribes.

Buffalohead has also thematically realigned her finely-honed craft of storytelling, exchanging more personal tales of motherhood and domesticity for narratives that express a more public or political stance. Her gaze is focused on real world events. For example, *You are on Indian Land* is a stylistically lyrical but excoriating response to the 2016 protests and often violent events that surrounded the impending construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline.

To be built near North Dakota's Standing Rock Indian Reservation, the pipeline is a potential environmental threat to these Indian lands. Here, rabbits sit or hop along concrete barriers inscribed with 'You are on Indian Land', barbed wire surrounds the pole of an upside down American flag, and a No Trespassing sign is an authoritative warning. At the left, a deer with a blanket of native ribbon work thoughtfully surveys the rabbits. To the right of the barrier, a coyote in a pink tutu stands on its hindlegs and grasps a star-topped wand, as if to wave away the entire event – and maybe even the colonial history of these lands. The work is a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Buffalohead concedes that her work is, in part, autobiographical. It signifies not only her thoughts about daily life, but also the Ponca Tribe, belief systems and the larger Indigenous culture.

As a member of the Deer Clan within the Ponca Tribe, she often draws the deer image as a stand-in for herself. "My work references my tribe, my clan, and the realness of things, as we – Indigenous people – see it. Our way is different than the way white people see things," she states. Buffalohead also sees the coyote as an alter- ego. Like the rabbit, the coyote is, often identified as a Trickster figure by Native people. The Trickster is a revered and feared shape-shifting being, who can demonstrate positive and negative attributes through various powers.

Stolen Sisters is Buffalohead's poignant response to the disappearance and murder of hundreds of Indigenous women, a very real and ongoing cultural tragedy, in Canada. A general complacency about this horrific situation gave rise to the movement called Stolen Sisters, which has gained visibility and traction in recent years. Here, across an empty expanse that transitions from black to grey to white and back to black, several deer, a coyote and numerous dead ravens create an oblique storyline.

The work raises several questions. If the dead ravens, shrouded in ribbon work covers, symbolize the dead or disappeared women, do the deer, some with ribbon work blankets, represent the complacency of a larger dominant culture? Does the coyote, appearing again in a red tutu, represent good or evil? And does the background color shift from black to grey to white and back to black, symbolize the transition between the worlds of the living and the dead?

Stolen Sisters is an elegant, spare work that demonstrates Buffalohead's skill in addressing difficult and evocative subject matter. She has perfected the uncanny ability of deploying a figurative narrative across an empty, two-dimensional space with no horizon line or background. These expanses of flat negative space have become essential to the power of her storytelling, a way of pacing the viewer's reading of her narratives, which weave together the magical with the real.

For Buffalohead, the coyote as Trickster signifies the complexity of life. "Life is not black and white. Things live in the grey area," she says. "In Indian culture, animals and humans transition between worlds, between the living and the non-living. Humans can become animals and animals humans. Things are simply not just right or wrong."

Buffalohead's work makes this abundantly clear.

Nathanael Flink

Flink's oil on canvas/panel paintings and mixed media sculptures are nothing short of a full-frontal assault on the Nemeth Art Center's expansive gallery space. With its high ceilings, tall windows and long stretches of wall, Flink's work both anchors and activates the space. His colorful, abstract paintings, from a series titled *Interior Exterior*, have been hung, ostensibly, at random. Perched high and low, in small groupings or alone, the paintings convince the viewer's eye to follow them around the space, as if one was on a treasure hunt looking for clues. In fact, this idiosyncratic installation makes clear that Flink has a keen eye for making the considered look random.

Likewise, the floor has been manipulated into something of an obstacle course. Four, plinth-like forms of varying height have been constructed from an array of found materials. Two totem-like sculptures are constructed primarily from oddly shaped pieces of foam. Painted or not, the foam adds to the visual and material mix. And then there is the brightly hued, relief piece that originates on the floor and ends up on the wall, or perhaps it is the other way around.

To be clear, Flink's installation of more than 20 works is an unpremeditated, gut response to the Nemeth gallery space. Experimental and in visual flux, the installation's goal was to "push the boundaries on how the space can be used. It's an exploration of relationships," he explained in an early June conversation at his Minneapolis studio. "I'm building the pieces on-site, and slapping stuff up on the walls, to see what relationships happen. Relationships between various colors, between forms, between form and color. I wanted to push the spectrum on how different materials and color relationships interact."

If you're thinking "Gonzo Journalism," you are not far off.

Flink does not consider this body of work as finished, but rather an idea, an experience in process. It is a fluid state of affairs. The installation is not meant to look like a polished offering in a commercial gallery. Rather, Nemeth provided Flink with an opportunity to experiment - to see how colors, materials, textures and compositions interact and create relationships.

With his sometimes collaged and often effusive paintings, Flink intentionally forces a dialogue with the accepted norms defining contemporary painting, as well as the self-centered velocity of the contemporary art world, with its art-fair-a-day mentality. Ranging in hue from monochromatic black and whites, to a raging pink or a saturated teal blue, these modestly scaled works should be considered in relationship to each other, and not derivative of other art. Flink also suggests they are metaphors for his personal relationships – those with Julie and their child, with friends, family and colleagues. “With these paintings, I am trying to create a sensitivity to the complexity of relationships,” he says.

The four platforms, or plinths, created from scavenged materials were constructed in situ, in the gallery space. Their seemingly haphazard construction from wood, upholstery fabric, velvet, mesh, and luggage straps suggest all manner of things, like furniture, particularly when seen in physical proximity to each other. Like a showroom ensemble. They beg to be sat upon, like a bench. But, no, that doesn't seem quite right. Do they resemble coffins or sarcophagi? Actually no, not unless each was made for a square dead thing. Ultimately, these platforms elude any specific function or identity. They are simply part of and in relationship to the objects in the larger installation.

Flink titled the two foam totem pieces *Prometheus* and *Taurus*, names associated with ancient Greek and Roman sculptures that were carved from marble or cast from bronze. Here, Flink is obviously countering, if not mocking, the Western world idea that sculpture must be solid and permanent.

In fact, the base of *Prometheus* is a blue painting by Flink.

“The painting is holding everything up; it's unimportant as a painting, it just becomes a color,” he says. He also views these works as figurative in their verticality. They are “metaphors or stand-ins for people. Their material shows a fragility, the fragility of people and relationships, versus such traditional sculptural materials as bronze, wood or stone.”

For Flink, his work, particularly the paintings, investigate notions of *Interior* and *Exterior* and how one considers or visualizes the exterior world from an interior place, a process that involves memory. For example, one is inside, trying to remember the outside.

If this seems a little opaque, as it relates to the objects in the gallery, it is. Flink is working through his ideas about the relationship between interior and exterior spaces. Perhaps more accurately, he sees them as a metaphor for the vulnerability of showing one's interior to the exterior world. A metaphor for this exhibition?

Although Flink works intuitively, and his free-ranging ideas and practice may be elusive, he has definite opinions on what an artist should be. "The artist has a responsibility to communicate. To communicate with the world; beyond just making a pretty object that someone wants to buy," he clarifies. "Art should tell you something; do something. It should communicate. I am not interested in being only a commercial artist, an artist who makes things only to sell."

Mason Riddle is a Saint Paul-based writer who covers the visual arts, architecture and design. She has contributed to Artforum, Art in Print, First American Art Magazine, Elle Decor, Hyperallergic, Modern Magazine, Metropolis, Photograph, Public Art Review, Rain Taxi, Sculpture Magazine, Star Tribune, Surface Design, and The Walker Art Center Magazine, among others. Riddle has also curated numerous art exhibitions and is a member of the International Society of Art Critics. She is a Fine and Applied Arts Appraiser and is a member of the International Society of Art Appraisers. She holds an M.A. in Art History and Museum Practice from the University of Minnesota. masonriddle@mac.com



Nemeth Art Center



This activity is made possible by the generous support of our members, sponsors, and Minnesota voters through grants from the Region 2 Arts Council, thanks to legislative appropriation from the Arts and Culture Heritage Fund.