

# HYPERALLERGIC

"For Julie Buffalohead, Animals Express What Words Cannot"

By Emily Wilson

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Julie Buffalohead, "All Are Welcome" (2022), oil on canvas, overall: 60 x 124 inches (photo Rik Sferra; all images courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco)

**There's something very funny — and unsettling — about Buffalohead's paintings of animals engaged in human situations.**

SAN FRANCISCO — Animals feature in the seven oil paintings and nine ink drawings from 2022 in Julie Buffalohead's show, [Noble Coyotes](#), at Jessica Silverman gallery. A coyote with a prop arrow through its head rides a toy rocking horse in "Antihero"; a coyote, a badger, and a bobcat sleep alongside and warmly interact with a pail of snakes in "Free Snakes"; and a group of ermines inside a fenced-off area hold signs proclaiming "All are welcome here" and "Private community, no trespassing," as other animals look on and an approaching coyote offers its tail in "All Are Welcome Here."

Buffalohead, who lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, told *Hyperallergic* she started working on the painting in the aftermath of the police murder of George Floyd. The artist noticed lots of yard signs in her suburban neighborhood. She was pleased that people showed solidarity, but she wanted more. As a citizen of the Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma, growing up in a white neighborhood she felt unwelcome, isolated, and ostracized. The contradictory signs in the painting reveal that more than words are needed to change these conditions.

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"We really want to say we support Black Lives Matters," Buffalohead asserted. "But we don't always want to make the sacrifices or do the things that need to be done in order for people of a different race and culture to feel like we're on the same standing."

The coyote offering its own tail in "All Are Welcome Here" represents her as a child trying desperately to fit in and sacrificing herself to gain acceptance.

"It wasn't till I was much older that I realized what a waste that is, and maybe the important thing is to embrace your own identity rather than worry about trying to be accepted," she noted. "I need a way into these feelings, and the entrance tends to be, 'I'm going to make this about these cute animals, but they're really not cute,' and the viewer has to open up to a place of discovery."



Julie Buffalohead, "Connect Four" (2022), ink drawings on handmade watercolor paper, paper size: 22 3/4 x 30 3/4 inches  
(photo Phillip Maisel)

Like a lot of Buffalohead's work, there's something very funny — and unsettling — about this painting. These qualities come naturally to her.

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"A lot of native people use humor as a way to talk about things," she said. "For me, it was always a way to draw people into a story that had sort of serious undertones, and I feel like that's how life is – we're constantly moving through things that are serious and things that are funny, and why not paint what life is about?"

Animals were characters in many of the stories that Buffalohead heard as a child, so it felt natural for her to tell stories with them in her paintings. That's one of the things that drew Jessica Silverman to the artist's work when she first saw the paintings in a Minneapolis museum a few years ago.

"When I first started doing studio visits with her, I was pregnant, and I felt really deeply connected to the narratives around motherhood and birth that she was articulating in her paintings," Silverman related. "In our show, she's brought the human figure back into the work more frequently, but the cast of characters and the narrative are really held in place by the animals."

Motherhood shows up in Buffalohead's ink drawings, inspired by her childhood memories, as in "Connect Four," where a bear sits on the ground while rabbits play the game Buffalohead often enjoyed with her cousins growing up. Her mother, she said, was always nearby watching over them, like the bear.

Care is also depicted in the painting "Isle of Dogs," in which a woman lies on the ground and a muskrat brushes her hair. The painting resulted from Buffalohead's feelings about her mother's aging, and about caring for the woman who has always taken care of her.



Julie Buffalohead, "Antihero" (2022), oil on canvas, 52 x 84 1/4 inches (photo Rik Sferra)

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The muskrat is a cultural hero for a lot of Minnesota tribes, according to Buffalohead. An oft-repeated story tells of various animals diving deep into water, seeking some earth to make new land. Some, like the loon and the otter, couldn't hold their breath long enough. Then the muskrat tries.

"They think he's this lowly little figure, and he goes down there forever, and when he finally comes up they can't believe it and they see he has a piece of the earth in his little paw," she explained. "He's an underdog, and I always view my mother as this underdog figure. She always was the person fighting for other people and fighting for us as kids, and there's this character brushing her hair and taking care of her."

Two of the large oil paintings, "Antihero" and "The Noble Savage," reference stereotypes. In Buffalohead's interpretation, the latter — depicting a coyote in a pink dress watching as other animals offer trinkets to an archetypal Native American figure — invokes the condescending Age of Enlightenment notion that Indigenous people are childlike and embrace nature. The former — of the coyote riding a rocking horse and holding a headdress — calls upon images from 1940s and '50s Westerns in which Native Americans are portrayed as villains on horseback with headdresses and weapons.

"It's largely a construct that was invented by White Americans back in the day because they wanted to essentially take Native land, and it was a justification," Buffalohead stated. "That stereotype of the Indian headdress is seen everywhere. You see it on motorcycles and boxes for produce. And when you look at different tribes like the Iroquois and the Seminole, they don't look like that construct."

Buffalohead's artwork is loose and gestural. Particularly for her expressive backgrounds, she pours the paint, sometimes spreading it with a squeegee, letting it go where it wants and relinquishing control. She also lets the painting come to her, starting with no clear idea.

"You're taking different visual elements and piecing them together and building upon things, and that's how stories are made," she said. "It's become where I have an idea or just one figure and everything evolves, and a lot of times I don't know where it's going to go."

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Julie Buffalohead, "Free Snakes" (2022), ink drawings on handmade watercolor paper, paper size: 18 1/4 x 24 inches (photo Phillip Maisel)



Julie Buffalohead, "The Noble Savage" (2022), oil on canvas, 52 x 84 1/4 inches (photo Rik Sferra)

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Julie Buffalohead, "The Kinship Stones" (2022), oil on canvas, 44 1/4 x 84 1/4 inches (photo Rik Sferra)

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