

# KC STUDIO

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"Animals take the moral lead in Julie Buffalohead's 'Stories of Becoming'"

By Matthew Thompson

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Julie Buffalohead, *Becoming Red*, 2025, oil on canvas, 60 x 84 x 2 1/2" (courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco. photo by Rik Sferra)

In "Stories of Becoming," on view at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, St. Paul-based visual artist Julie Buffalohead conjures a moving tribute to children and motherhood. Despite the weight of their subject matter, the oil on canvas pieces in this collection entwine whimsy and imagination, ultimately conveying universal themes that can remind audiences of humanity's capacity for compassion.

Buffalohead, a citizen of the Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma, earned a BFA from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and an MFA from Cornell University. She "was raised in an urban Indian community" and draws extensively from Indigenous folklore to help populate her work. Her paintings for this exhibition represent a blend of Native American and European storytelling and prominently feature woodland creatures. "I loved the stories about animals and that have consequences," says the artist.

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But it is important to note that Buffalohead is not merely creating illustrations for fairy tales; instead, she uses the art form of the story as a vehicle for her own ideas to highlight the different value systems that inform European and Indigenous fables.

For example, in *Becoming Red*, Buffalohead offers a new perspective on the familiar tale of Little Red Riding Hood. She notes that in the original European version, the vulnerable protagonist sets out by herself into a frightening and hostile world. "As a girl, you have to be careful about what you wear, walking alone in the woods."

The story's ominous implication that sexual assailants are lurking in the shadows and that women and girls who fail to dress modestly are inviting predation still resonates in the modern world, but Buffalohead emphasizes Little Red Riding Hood's power, rather than framing her as a victim. In the painting, the wolf is tasked with carrying her burdens and even faces away from Little Red Riding Hood while wearing her cape. Meanwhile, a band of squirrels descends upon some crimson apples that have fallen from one of the wolf's baskets. Even more significant is the heroine herself, who stands atop the edge of the wolf's cape as she contemplates her first period, ascending into womanhood unencumbered by misogyny or threats of rape.



Julie Buffalohead, *Receiving Growth* (2025), oil on canvas, 60 x 84 x 2 1/2" (courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco. photo by Rik Sferra)

The ubiquity of the story in popular culture makes the piece extraordinarily accessible to young audiences. Children, who might not yet grasp the nuances of Buffalohead's message, are drawn to the familiar characters and vibrant colors. Questions about why the wolf wears a cape or why

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the squirrels are taking the fruit reflect some ways that children have of authentically engaging with the art and deriving their own meaning.

"I deal with heavy topics," she says, "but I try to make it sort of fun and visually enjoyable."



Julie Buffalohead, Ancestral (Honga) (2025), wool, leather, mirrored plaques, bead cones, 60 x 21 x 10"  
(photo by E.G. Schempf)

Buffalohead's commitment to elevating vulnerable and marginalized populations also manifests in pieces like *Receiving Growth*, in which a bipedal deer ladles soup into bowls for a gathering of eager birds, rabbits and mice. The joy engendered by this humble, albeit sincerely shared feast, contrasts with the rapacity of the world's most affluent cohort and the suffering it begets for the planet. *Receiving Growth* reminds viewers of the imperative in many Indigenous cultures to give generously of oneself and to ensure that children and the elderly are fed first. Despite her larger size, the deer patiently attends to the needs of the amassed animals before taking soup for herself.

The Nerman Museum, with its prominent collection of Native American artwork, is a marvelous venue for this exhibition. The understated elegance of the Barton P. Cohen and Mary D. Cohen Gallery affords the pieces an environment in which they can simmer with emotion. JoAnne

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Northrup, executive director and chief curator, describes Buffalohead's show thusly, "The work she created for the exhibition has surpassed my expectations — I'm especially drawn to her work given the way that she interweaves Indigenous and western cultures through feminist storytelling."

Stories of Becoming is a beautiful ode to Mother Nature and a reminder that practicing empathy and kindness for all living things is an impulse worthy of revering.

*"Julie Buffalohead: Stories of Becoming" continues at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, 12345 College Blvd., Overland Park, Kansas, through July 26. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday, Friday and Saturday; 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday; and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. For more information, 913.469.3000 or [www.nermanmuseum.org](http://www.nermanmuseum.org).*

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