

Travois
Julie Buffalohead

This catalog was co-published by Dreamsong, Minneapolis and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco on the occasion of Julie Buffalohead's exhibition *Travois* (May 16th - July 6th, 2025) at Dreamsong.

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Photographs of Julie Buffalohead's artworks, installation views of *Travois* at Dreamsong, and portrait of the artist in her studio, all by Rik Sferria, courtesy of the artist, Dreamsong and Jessica Silverman.

Abbreviated Biography

Appearing, 2025. Rawhide, beads, dentalium shells and fabric. 12 x 20 inches.

AN ORAL HISTORY OF TRAVOIS

I have always had a close connection with animals, they are my teachers, and they are a large part of my work. Animals are prominent in Native stories. Native people believe in an equality between the human and animal worlds, they came before us. The attachments we have to animals are mysterious and in Native stories they become metaphorical to spiritual and philosophical beliefs.

When I begin a painting, I pour a wash of color onto the canvas, creating an abstract field which suggests space. After, I work in two ways. Either I have a mental image of the complete work already, or I begin to improvise by looking to what the background suggests. In this work I am using gesture and looseness, dry brushing, and impressionistic marks, using paint in a different way than I have in the past.

On *Ancestral (Honga)* (2025)

I've done a lot of research into my tribe and their history. One of the events that native elders still discuss is that in 1877 the United States Army forced the Ponca to march 500 miles from where they lived in Northern Nebraska to Oklahoma. There, they were put in an internment camp, told not to leave, and finally told to 'pick out land.' It was an incredibly hard journey. During the two years interned in the camp, a census was taken, and they realized that over a third of the tribe had died during the journey and in Oklahoma.

I have this census and have studied it over the years. It interests me as a record of my genealogy, and for the Ponca language that expresses the traditional names of these people. This document is a connection to the past.

For *Honga*, I wrote all the recorded names onto individual mirrored plaques, which I sewed onto the dress. The names are the English translation, and are only the male members of the household. Buffalohead, who is my great-great-grandfather, is included. It is a colonial structure. The names of the women and children were not recognized in the census, they didn't view them as important. I wanted to give recognition to these people in some way, to show that their lives mattered. These are represented by the blue tags for women and metal cones for children. They had to sacrifice a great deal.

Ancestral (Honga), 2025.
Wool, leather, mirrored
plaques, bead cones. 60
x 21 x 10 inches.

There are seven hundred and thirty-nine pieces made and attached by hand to the dress, as my response to the Ponca's displacement. The labor is symbolic of the toll taken on the tribe. This number reflects the seven hundred and thirty-nine people who survived what is basically a genocide. Over the time it took to make it, this work became personal. Each individual name is a connection with each person.

I inscribed the word *Honga* on the belt. It means many things in the Ponca language. One is 'ancestral,' so it's talking about people from the past, but it also refers to people in the future because it means 'leader' as well. I thought it was the perfect word for what I'm trying to convey.

When you go into a museum and you see a Native dress or a Native object, it's not just a garment or an object. They gave a spirit to it. Each person made it differently, and it gives it a sense of identity. When I see them, they have a presence, it's not just a utilitarian thing. I wanted that presence to be in this dress.

On the series of reliefs

Since I was young, I have worked with traditional crafts using leather, sewing and beading. I have made dolls and beaded bags, and in graduate school, I worked with sinew, porcupine quills, and buffalo rawhide. After school, my drawing and painting practice became the focus, and I became known for that. During these earlier years, I did not feel the freedom that I do now to exhibit my work with traditional materials. Now my secret is out. I feel a deep respect for the craft traditions of all our tribes. Part of my hesitancy, my protection, has to do with presenting work in a way that is not exploitative of our culture.

I am particularly interested in origin stories from matrilineal tribes. These stories describe creation as an emergence from a hole in the ground or falling from a hole in the sky. The shapes in these sculptures illustrate birth, coming from a woman. These reliefs were labor intensive to make. They have layers. For the outer layer, after soaking it, I shape buffalo rawhide, offcuts from an Indigenous drum maker. The inner layers are made with materials that are significant to me - beads, dentalium shells, abalone, and a traditional way of wrapping porcupine quills around rawhide. The beaded figurative images, of caribou for example, also reference forms from petroglyphs.

On *Ishtinike* (2025)

This painting is about families. The death of both my mother and my father within the last several years is symbolized by owls. Another mythical character to the Ponca tribe is called *Ishtinike*, taking the form of a monkey. A kind of trickster figure who comes in and makes a mess of things, here he is picking an old wound.

Ishtinike, 2025. Oil on canvas. 46 x 84 inches. [full image p.21; detail p.22]

On *Oblivious* (2025)

This one brings together different elements to compose my own narrative. Primarily, I depict the figure of a woman wearing headphones and another figure is prowling below, a supernatural being. The Ponca name "Wakqdagi," is understood to be an underworldly creature, a hybrid of a panther and a reptilian creature. Other tribes had various names for the same mythological animal. The water panther protected the lakes and rivers and required an offering and a ritual if a person wanted to enter. An armadillo is licking the woman's eye. It is as if she is deliberately unaware of what is going on - tuned out to the world. That is what I was thinking about in this painting.



Oblivious, 2025. Oil on canvas. 42 x 66 inches.
[full image p.25; detail p.27]

On Travois (2025)

My father was a historian, a professor at the University of Minnesota. He helped start the first American Indian department in the nation and was its first director. When he was young, his older brother came back from World War II, traumatized and an alcoholic, and he shot my Dad's dog. On Indian Reservations, there's a lot of strife and painful histories. I wanted to resurrect the dog and my Dad's spirit in this particular painting. The dog has a traditional travois, because Native people only used dogs for a long time as their beast of burden, and dogs to Native people were very important. When we were little and my Dad came home, we would have the whole living room full of forts built out of cushions. I include the cushions here. The animals represent us kids. I have the dog pulling this as a travois. I added an Oklahoma license plate with the year 1946, as a memorial. It's about resurrection. A lot of my work is about that - resurrecting a spirit or resurrecting a story.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Julie Buffalohead (b. 1972, Minneapolis, MN) is a member of the Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma. She received her BFA from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and her MFA from Cornell University. She is the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships including the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, Lillian Orlowsky and William Freed Grant, Guggenheim Fellowship, Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant, and the McKnight Foundation Fellowship for Visual Arts.

Buffalohead has had solo exhibitions at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts; Denver Art Museum; Highpoint Center for Printmaking, Minneapolis; the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, Santa Fe, NM; and the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, New York.

Her work is in the collections of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Denver Art Museum; Davis Museum, Wellesley, MA; Field Museum, Chicago; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO; Eiteljorg Museum, Indianapolis, IN; Detroit Institute of Arts, MI; Weatherspoon Art Museum, University of North Carolina, Greensboro; Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT; among others. Julie Buffalohead is represented by Jessica Silverman, San Francisco.

Portrait of Julie Buffalohead in
her studio, St. Paul, MN.



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