

RACHEL DENNY'S FINE-ART TEXTILE TAXIDERMISTRY

SWEATER WEATHER



STORY JAMES FARRELL

Rachel Denny's life-size sculpture "Snag" (2023) is partly inspired by the bucks in the Oregon wilderness. "In spring, they have tatters of velvet fur that they rub off their antlers," says the artist. >>



Rachel Denny lives in the dense forest of Oregon's Cascade Foothills. Surrounded by nature, she draws

on animals for inspiration. "They elicit an emotional response right away," says Denny. "Whether it's positive, for a graceful deer, or some people are repulsed by snakes. Everyone has an emotional reaction to seeing an animal."

Her fascination with animals comes from a childhood in the wide-open spaces of Montana and the woods of rural Idaho. "When I wasn't outside running around, I was inside reading or drawing." She dreamed of being an illustrator before exploring printmaking and photography. In the early 2000s, her first gallery shows were multi-media sculptural boxes incorporating prints, collage and

beads. At the time, she shied away from animals as subject matter. "It didn't seem serious. Like I was going back to my childhood," says Denny. "But it was what I was attracted to, and I found that everyone can relate to them."

Her first animal sculpture was a life-size deer of hand-hammered lead. Denny then developed the "Domestic Trophy" series, her take on wall-mounted taxidermy heads. >>

Denny, pictured here in her studio surrounded by her animals, finds materials themselves inspiring. "I recycle fabrics and I can felt or darn them if they're ripped or torn," she says. "I do a ton of sewing as well."

*"Spring Catch" (2023)
is a glorious life-size
bear, fish in its jaws, in
brilliant blue, a joyous
piece, referencing the
bounty of nature and
the cycle of life. >>*



"I was interested in the texture," says Denny. "And the idea of a feminine coverlet over these masculine hunting trophies was a fun juxtaposition." Art blogs highlighted the series early in her career, propelling her to where she is today. Since then, her animals have migrated across the country, populating multiple galleries and appearing in installations for clients like the Portland International Airport and Hyatt Regency hotels.

Usually life-size, the sculptures often have wood frames, depending on the fauna's requirements. Denny often uses a polymer clay to flesh them out and upholstering

techniques to cover them with recycled materials, from cable-knit wool to denim. She doesn't only use textiles, though—an upcoming show incorporates aluminum from discarded cans. A July 2021 exhibit featured a lynx's head with a pelt of burnt matches, perhaps referencing the human-caused Riverside Fire that burned through >>

LEFT: Denny hand-sews hundreds of beads on the piece in the image. "It's slow work," says Denny, "but I love the end result: A shimmering halo of beads that abstract the form." RIGHT: The silver "Alpha" (2023) is inspired by a real-life she-wolf in Yellowstone.



PHOTOS FROM LEFT: MARIO GALLUCCI, RACHEL DENNY



Mt. Hood National Forest in 2020. Denny was among many forced to evacuate. "It was an awful feeling, not knowing if our home still existed," she says. "We were lucky."

Denny's covered animals reflect our impact on the world around us. "We like everything manicured," she says. "We adjust everything to our liking, which is not always great. The forest around me is logged so frequently, it's hard to find a tree that's over 100 years old." Hopeful colors and beautiful craftsmanship clothe topics like innocence, predation and conservation. It's a delicate cable-knit ecosystem. Pull one thread and the whole thing can unravel.

But a sense of play is vital to the balance. Denny herself is full of contagious humor when she discusses her

work, using words like "comedic" and "absurd." A hare sports a timeless preppy look. A bear flashes in beads and sequins, ready for a night on the town. "I love how we become childlike when we see animals," she says. "Everyone has that intake of breath. 'Ooh, there's a deer!' It can leave you awestruck." Denny's work captures those moments of wonder: a glimpse of wildlife through the trees, before it disappears. ○

Denny's mixed media sculpture "Star Grazers" (2023; 54" x 54" x 7"), features sheep grazing. "There is recycled wool in the grass. I find that a little comedic," says Denny, joking about returning the material to its original owners.

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