

# Artistic beach mysteries

Delight a stranger, leave behind a message, escape the madness of the world

Not too long ago, Sonny the old husky and I were cruising one of our favorite beach trails when I saw something in the distance that looked like a decapitated head on a spike. Curious, I hurried over to inspect and beheld a mannequin's head made of Styrofoam pounded through an iron bolt attached to a crumbling trestle of the South Jetty of the Columbia River.

The mannequin even had a mullet!

It was easily one of the weirder and more amusing sights I've ever witnessed on one of my beach walks. I can only surmise that someone found the head as detritus nearby and then mounted it via a spontaneous and dangerous act of climbing atop the massive boulders of the jetty to reach the trestle.

There is no way I would have done it.

Thank you artist, whoever you are, for your danger. I was utterly fascinated by your effort. You gave me a scare, then a laugh, and I felt better the rest of the day because of your foolhardy creation. Two days later, the head was gone.

Two months later I was back on the South Jetty and beheld a bald eagle perched atop a driftwood sculpture protruding from the pilings. I watched the bird for a good 10 minutes and crept up within 20 feet. He looked very, very old and wise. Then he lifted off, and I saw the whole outstretch of his wings in what felt like was slow wondrous motion. A piece of art had attracted the eagle, and I was the beneficiary of the artist's handiwork.

A kelp fountain. A massive sculpture installation by the Sea God. Fifty cairns left on quarter-mile stretch of ugly riprap. Tributes and memorials in the sand. Driftwood forts of ingenious design. Strange feather and stick mazes. Limpets and hairy tritons decorating burned driftlogs.

Such are some of the mysterious artistic creations I've encountered in my 18 years of inveterate beachcombing on the Oregon Coast. There were others, too many to list here, but the aforementioned ones stand out. I remember their every detail. Sometimes they made me smile; sometimes they blew my mind. I never once didn't come over to marvel at them. They deserved attention and interaction.

I can almost guarantee adults made most of these creations, perhaps with the help of chil-

dren, but in a minority of cases I would guess. It was child's play for adults. You could sense it in the work.

Walking into artistic mysteries on the beach is one of the most exhilarating experiences imaginable, because it means someone is creating them without ever knowing or apparently caring who will see them. This, to me, defines pure art: the artist gives it away because the artist felt compelled to do so. I give away my books to cafes, bars and complete strangers all the time and derive a monumental happiness from the practice.

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All these beach creations are beautiful, enchanting, corporeal and evanescent. They will all most likely vanish with the next high tide or super storm that blows through. So be it. Embrace that quality. It heightens the sheer pleasure of the viewing and contemplation.

I like seeing impermanence in action at the ocean's edge. For some reason, it makes me want to do better, more important, lasting work with people, animals and watersheds. Does that make any sense? See what encountering mysterious art on the beach does to me? Thank you anonymous artists. You made me reflect and reconsider, and this being Oregon, entrance to the gallery didn't cost me a cent. It didn't

cost you a cent, either. The materials were free, too ... and you didn't have to write a damn grant to fund your vision!

Sometimes, through the good graces of my writing, I learn the identity of the creators and the inspiration for their efforts. Invariably, these real stories possess exponentially more magic than anything I could have ever invented as a writer of fiction.

Beach artists, I am one of you now — and an indefatigable one at that. I wasn't my first couple of years on the Oregon Coast. Your art turned me into an artist. Today, I write messages in the sand and build driftwood forts all the time. I leave messages inside forts! Why not? Why not transmit mystery into the world. Why not be mysterious? Why not delight strangers? Why be boring? Boring is boring.

I'll keep making mysterious and anonymous art on the beach for the rest of my life. I honestly believe it is a formidable method to



A massive sculpture installation by the Sea God is definitely mysterious beach art.



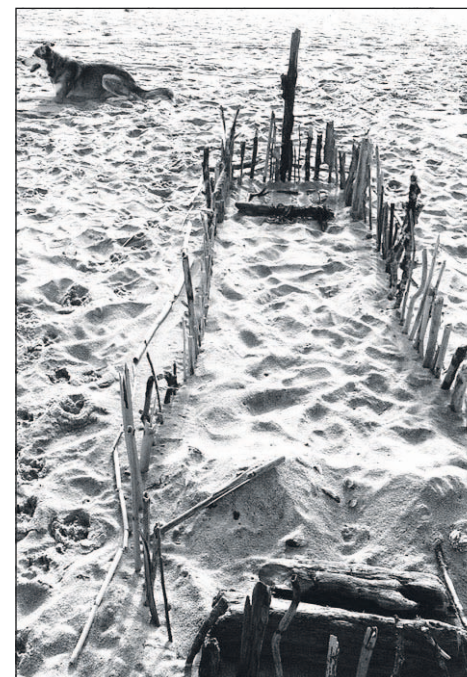
A bald eagle takes flight after perching on a driftwood sculpture protruding from trestle pilings at the South Jetty.

heal the malaise and madness of our world. Action on the behalf of art is consolatory — and revelatory.

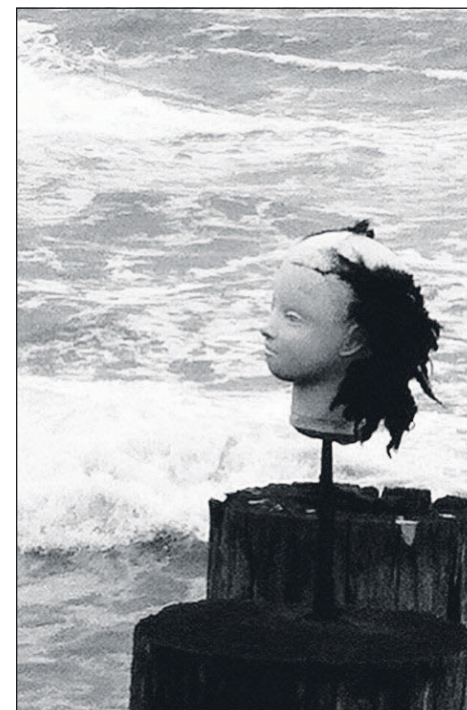
Let me issue readers a challenge: Go to the beach right now and leave behind an artistic mystery. Bring a friend, a team, or go solo. Use only what you find at the beach. Take all day or five minutes. Tell the world via social media or do it in complete silence.

Someone you don't even know is going to prosper by your effort.

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*Matt Love is the author/editor of 13 books about Oregon, including "A Nice Piece of Astoria: A Narrative Guide." They are available at coastal bookstores and through [www.nestuccaspitpress.com](http://www.nestuccaspitpress.com)*



Tributes and memorials in the sand left by anonymous artists inspire reflection and artistry in beach goers.



A Styrofoam mannequin's head made one weird and amusing beach art sculpture.

# the arts

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Story and photos by MATT LOVE