

Urban and rural Oregonians share basic needs

By T. Lee Brown
Correspondent

“I wanted to get to know the state.”

That was one of Malia Jensen’s motivations when she first proposed her art project “Nearer Nature,” now on view in Central Oregon (*see story, page 8*).

The Portland-based artist was inspired by “driving around the state, meeting people, having conversations,” as she explored Oregon in search of locations to record and install her new video work. It gave her “an excuse to go into some place and have a conversation. I could say, ‘Hey I’m working on this project, can I share it with you? Would you be interested in hosting this in your grocery shop or your bar?’ And from there I could meet their friends, too.”

“I haven’t been able to be as responsible to those relationships as I would like,” she added. “I would like to sit in each one of these towns for weeks and just hang out. I want to live in all of these places. I’m in love with this state.”

Jensen’s work is often playful and unexpected, with a warm, humorous feel. These days, she is concerned that “we’ve so polluted our relationships, of all kinds, that we’re losing the ability to be cooperative, to work together

to sustain ourselves, our lives, our environment.”

Connection to land, nature, animals, and each other appears to be dissolving. People’s attention spans are stretched so thin they don’t take time to understand the nuances of a conversation; instead, they tend toward extremes.

Yet, Jensen believes that separations such as the urban-rural divide aren’t necessarily as wide as people assume.

“I think that we actually have a lot more in common than we’re allowed to recognize,” Jensen said. “When everything is stripped away, we share basic needs.”

Jensen laughed, saying, “The Internet is ruining everything.”

Jensen noted that there are “strangely few opportunities to have random conversations nowadays.” In the past, if someone was lost in an unfamiliar neighborhood, they had to ask for help.

“Now we don’t do that,” she said. “Now we look at our phones.”

Though some letters to the editor in small-town newspapers might suggest otherwise, Jensen believes “rural communities are ahead of the game, never losing touch with the fact that they need each other.”

City people find it harder to meet and converse with

each other.

“Even the word ‘stranger’ seems so heavy these days, dark,” Jensen said. “It almost sounds like ‘intruder’ now.”

Her artwork — installed in everyday locations including a health clinic in the Wallowas, a bar in Maupin, and a feed store in Redmond — offers a conversation starter for artist and viewer alike. The art functions as “something to randomize daily life. It’s like if a hot-air balloon landed in your front yard — it’s something different.”

Jensen believes there are strong reasons for people not getting along with each other. In the past, “there was a societal need for civility and cooperation because we needed each other. If my house catches on fire, my car breaks down, my cows get out — someone’s gonna have to help me.”

Things work out, she said, “if I know my neighbors, I know the people around me, and I’ve been conditioned to help people.” Today, people are not “strengthening that muscle of cooperation

because we don’t think we need it anymore. We just stick our face in our phones. And our phones won’t save us.”

Jensen also believes that many urbanites, whose experience of animals is typically limited to a cat or dog, don’t understand what it means to live, hunt, or raise animals on the land.

“The complexities of living with animals, raising animals, hunting animals — however you feel about that use of animals, farmers and ranchers and hunters are in touch with a certain reality that most city people are ignorant of,” she said.

Teaching at a Portland-area college recently, she encountered a student who was horrified by the idea of hunting but knew little about it.

Jensen said, “If you’re hunting, you’re on the land, you’re interested with and engaged with the stewardship of that land. Most hunters I know have a very strong code of ethics, and identify themselves as environmentalists.”

Animals and land are the most obvious subjects of

“Nearer Nature.” More subtle is Jensen’s effort to engage people with each other, whether serious discussion or casual chitchat while picking up a few bales of alfalfa.

“We have to make space for conversation about the different ways we use the land, why we want to preserve vast swaths of public lands. Those relationships are essential,” she said.

How can people best try to reach across the gaps that have widened between Americans?

“I think that we all need to stop assuming that we know who each other is,” said Jensen. “And allow for not knowing.”

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