

# Artists use masks to explore *location, isolation & transformation*

Contributed by Jennifer Durr  
Art Center East

LA GRANDE — Featuring the work of two Oregon artists — Matt Fagan of La Grande and Tony Fuemmeler of Portland — “Missing Your Face: Masks of Location, Isolation & Transformation” will be on display May 7 to July 3 in the Art Center East Main Gallery at 1006 Penn Ave., La Grande.

The exhibit was originally intended as a collaboration between artists on opposite sides of Oregon. The COVID-19 pandemic shifted and enriched the exhibit’s focus as the artists created masks in response to their changed worlds.

“I was cast as the representative of rural Oregon,” said Fagan, who grew up in Coos Bay and spent two decades living in Chicago and Portland before coming to La Grande. “How was I going to represent Eastern Oregon as both a resident and, to some extent, an outsider?”

Fuemmeler, the artist representing urban Oregon, found himself grappling with a similar question. Given that he grew up on a farm in rural Missouri then moved between small, medium and big cities throughout the Midwest and Northwest, his life experience no more easily boils down to “urban” than Fagan’s does to “rural.”

Fagan’s work took shape when he began imagining his masks as residents of a fictional place called Big Town. Functioning as a sort of “funhouse mirror” of La Grande, his masks avoid making fun of rural living, instead focusing on things in and around La Grande that bring him joy and would yield the most appealing results, while encouraging him to examine his own attitudes in the process.

“Making these masks became my primary coping strategy for living during a pandemic,” Fagan said. “I focused on finding things to get excited and laugh about — because to me, that’s what is compelling about the work. I’m motivated by the challenges, but especially by the potential for humor.”

The results are the whimsical, mysterious and often magical satire of someone looking for ways to create lightness from a heavy year.

Fagan added, “Having a process that constantly focused my attention on positive aspects of my environ-

ment was probably more helpful and healthy than I even realized at the time.”



Art Center East/Contributed Photo

A mask created by Matt Fagan for the Art Center East “Missing Your Face” exhibit reflects the artist’s focus on “the potential for humor” in a world changed by the pandemic.

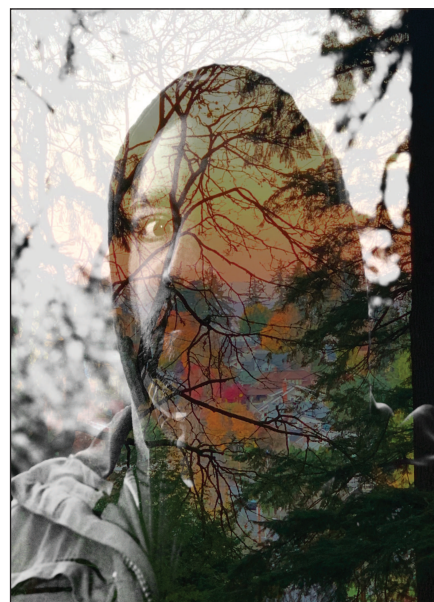
Fuemmeler has been making masks intended for stage performance most of his artistic career, weaving aspects like fit and wearability into his work’s more conceptual elements. When the pandemic put professional theater on an extended pause, Fuemmeler was prompted to reconsider his process.

“I had the opportunity to look at the idea of masking, relationship and transforma-

tion through new lenses,” he said. “I began to make work that was less concerned with performability and more with expression.”

Expression is the name of the game when it comes to masks. They can heighten, deepen or add nuance to viewers’ understanding of their own emotional landscapes.

Unlike sculpture — an entity seemingly contained by its own reality — masks are unique in the way they invite themselves into the viewer’s world, beckoning the viewer to try on (figuratively or literally) their persona.



Art Center East/Contributed Photo

The “Missing Your Face” exhibit at Art Center East includes the artwork of Tony Fuemmeler, which embodies the idea that masks give us new ways of seeing ourselves and our world.

Masks, Fuemmeler explains, are a powerful tool for inviting transformation and provide new ways of seeing to both ourselves and our world.

His work for this exhibit addresses that connection between persona and place.

“I’m exploring layers and superimposition as a way of expressing places in the part of Oregon I carry with me and that I am a part of,” Fuemmeler said, “as well as the interior spaces I have been occupying more of during the pandemic.”

Fuemmeler’s work also delves into the abstract for this exhibit with a set of figures that lack a specified narrative. Depending on moment or mood or the eye of the beholder, the artist said, “They can represent an aspect of Portland, fears about oceans rising or forest fires, viewpoints only found here, and more.”

Adds Fagan about this mutable quality of masks: “I think I have just always appreciated the opportunity that masks provide to become something entirely different from what I can accomplish with my own rather limited face.”

Find out more about this event and others at [www.artcentereast.org](http://www.artcentereast.org). Current gallery hours are Wednesday through Friday from noon to 5 p.m., and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Gallery admission is always free and open to the public. Exhibits can also be viewed online via the art center’s website, thanks to a partnership with John J Howard Real Estate.

Art Center East programs are supported by its members and funded with donations and grants from sponsors and foundations.

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WEEKEND OUTLOOK



**FRIDAY**  
High 76 Low 50  
Partly sunny



**SATURDAY**  
High 65 Low 41  
Not as warm



**SUNDAY**  
High 55 Low 34  
Showers possible