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# ART ON THE EDGE

DAWN STETZEL DERIVES HER ARTWORK AND INSPIRATION FROM HER ENVIRONMENT

By DWIGHT CASWELL

“There can be a grace to living on the edge, teetering on the brink, standing on shifting ground,” says artist Dawn Stetzel. “This place of unease is a place of change, and its discomfort can spur innovation.”

Stetzel was one of two artists selected by a jury of arts and environmental experts to participate in the inaugural Coastal Oregon Artist Residency, a program developed jointly by Astoria Visual Artists and Recology Western Oregon, the local trash and recycling company. Her task: to wander the Astoria Transfer Station and Recycling Area in search of materials with which to create sculpture in a studio space provided by Recology. The results, shown last month at a temporary Underground Gallery in downtown Astoria, included a “floathouse,” a survival suit with backpack ladder, and the high point of the show, her “Wind Assisted Chair.” She is currently working on a life raft made entirely of discarded coolers.

Stetzel is an anomaly in her family. Her mother was “very creative and super supportive,” she says, “but I had no example or role model for what I was doing.” She graduated from the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth with a Master of Fine Art, but how did she get from there to a pile of trash in Clatsop County? There were a lot of stops along the way, including shows and residencies in North Carolina, Texas, Brazil, Australia, China, the Sou’wester Lodge in Seaview, Washington, and points between.

“I was looking for my connection between art and science,” Stetzel says. “I was connected



Artist Dawn Stetzel installs her survival suit in a temporary gallery space in downtown Astoria in early October. The survival suit included a backpack with a ladder.

to ethnobotany” — the study of the relationship between humans and plants. “I’ve always looked at plants and the natural world for my work, and I’ve found materials for my work in the natural world.”

In an odd way the, let’s be frank, the dump was a logical extension of this.

“In a general way,” she says, “I was looking for a connection to my environment, and to live

lightly in a place. It makes sense to use things that have been left behind.”

As for her work in the AVA show, “I had no grand vision for the show. I was just trying to do the best work I could do at the time,” she says.

Stetzel’s work, derived from her environment, changes as the environment does. “What comes out is what I care about at the

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FIND OUT MORE ABOUT DAWN STETZEL AT  
[WWW.DAWNSTETZEL.COM](http://WWW.DAWNSTETZEL.COM)



PHOTO BY DWIGHT CASWELL

Dawn Stetzel sits in her “Wind Assisted Chair” functional sculpture, which features an old school desk and an umbrella.

time,” she says. Today she is living in a place that expects a tsunami and her work reflects, “what it’s like to live here, where there’s always a threat, a sense of danger.”

Stetzel’s work is a kind of conversation she is having with herself, her environment, and the people who see her work. She says, “I’m most interested in hearing visceral responses or stories that come from seeing my work. The input of viewers about how it reads helps me to grow as an artist and as a human.”

“The relationships we have

with each other and our environment are not perfect. This is a point of sadness,” the artist says, “but I have a hopeful acceptance of this tenuousness.” Her creations are both whimsical comments on society and serious observations about humanity and both natural and manmade worlds: She wishes for “a reconnect with each other and the environment that we desperately need in order to survive.”

“I hope that there is universality in the work,” Dawn Stetzel says. “I can sense it, and I hope that viewers will show that universality in how they respond.”