

Malia Jensen: *Nearer Nature*

— *Sara Krajewski*

Editor Stephanie Snyder invited Portland Art Museum Curator Sara Krajewski to interview artist Malia Jensen about her major work, *Nearer Nature*.

SARA KRAJEWSKI: The title of the project, *Nearer Nature*, has me thinking about the relational and about proximity. Who is nearer to nature or needs to be? How do we move toward nature and what is that relationship like?

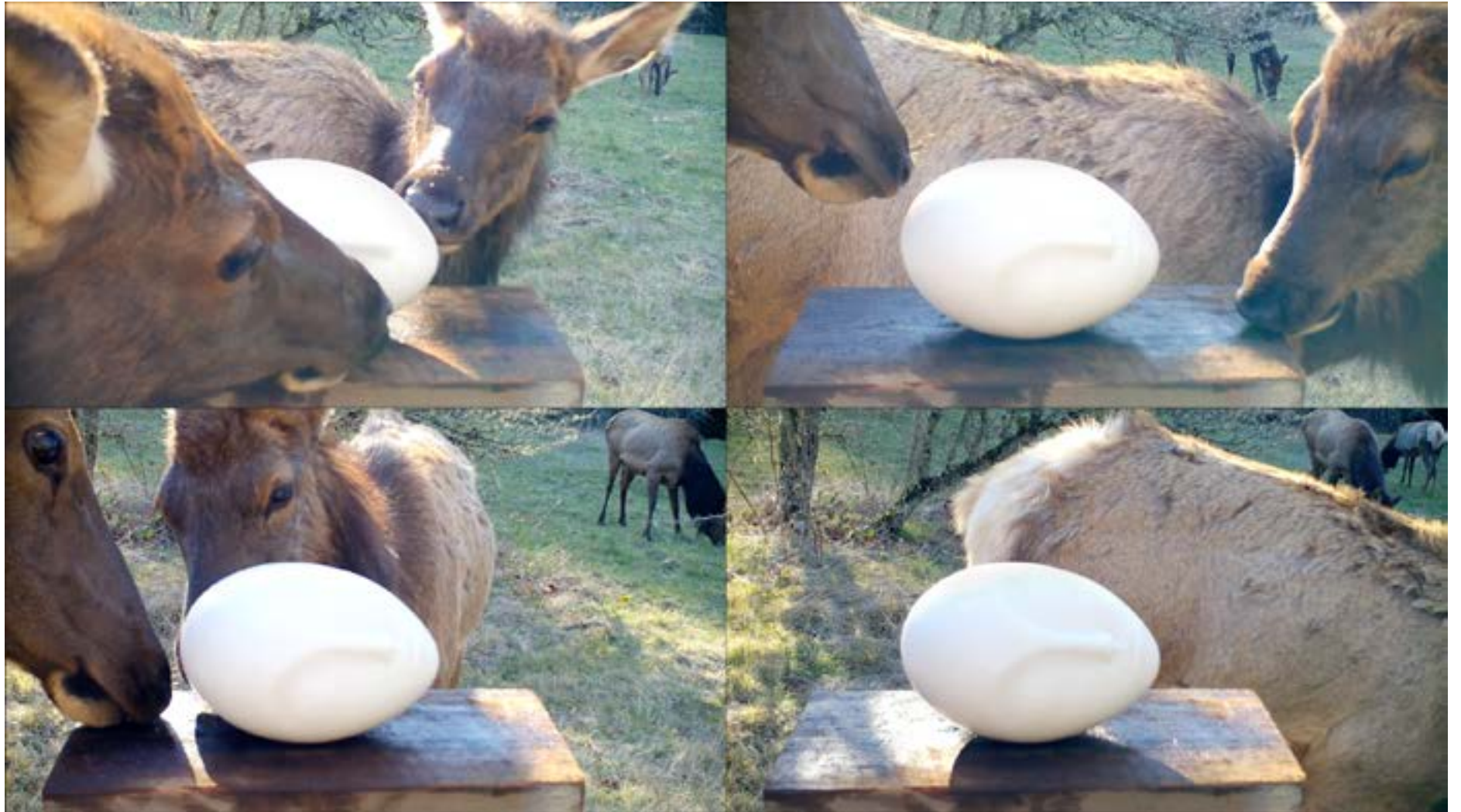
MALIA JENSEN: In part the title describes my own literal action of getting out of the studio but I also enjoy how the slurry alliteration of *Nearer Nature* feels awkward to say. Just saying it requires an effort that feels foreign but implies genuine longing. Getting closer to nature could mean ten-mile hikes or simply being attentive to what you eat. How much energy and cosmic technology did it take to produce that fish? Or that rhubarb? How did humans (and animals) figure out what was edible and what was harmful? I'd like to think that we can still cultivate that level of instinctual knowledge and connection if we pay close attention. It's not meant to be prescriptive, but if you spend enough time

with the six-hour video (*Worth Your Salt*), it's my hope that you end up discovering someplace new.

SK: There are so many ways to dive into this conversation. For me, nature acts like a foil in the work. It can mean following the wildlife into an as-yet-unknown destination or, in the literary sense, acting as a character whose qualities contrast or challenge aspects of another, in this case, us humans.

MJ: That's a good way to express it. I'm interested in our persistent tendency to place ourselves outside of nature. The video can act as a stage, or space, for contemplation. I'm definitely trying to set up a situation in which the viewer might follow an unanticipated idea and gain insight simply by watching. So much can come from just letting your mind wander, and we don't do it anymore because we reach for our phones. Nature has always been a protagonist for me, going back to my childhood spending countless hours in the woods "thinking," which meant poking around in the forest floor or sitting in a tree for hours. It wasn't about making up specific stories but I remember being very conscious of trying to foment relationships with my fellow occupants of that world, imaginary or real. I'd like to support the dying art of daydreaming.

Malia Jensen, *Worth Your Salt*, 2021. Video still, Tualatin Mountains camera location





Nearer Nature Project ©Malia Jensen 2019

Malia Jensen, *Nearer Nature*, 2019. Installation map and project information card

SK: One of your first actions in *Nearer Nature* was to carve six salt sculptures, depicting a head, breast, two hands, a foot, and a suggestion of a stomach (via a dozen donuts) before placing them in six locations across Oregon to draw in wildlife.

MJ: Ha! That was my best trick. The animals are already there, and the sculptures are actually meant to engage a human audience. The placement of the pieces loosely implies an image of a reclining woman across the state, alluding to the interconnected system we are a part of, and placing the human body at the mercy of the animals.

SK: Why salt?

MJ: I've always been drawn to elemental materials, and salt is as complex metaphorically as it is essential to the function of human and animal bodies. I started working with livestock salt-licks when I was living in Brooklyn, New York, in a huge, rustic studio. It had massive iron-framed arched windows and sixteen-foot ceilings, and was such a picture-perfect crumbling beauty that a good part of my income came from renting it as a location for fashion shoots. I often had to protect my work from becoming background props, and making artwork there sometimes felt like a performance of being a sculptor, like I was a character in a set. Carving the salt blocks was the equivalent of leaning into a cliché music cranked up, zipped into my coveralls with chisels and hammers and salt flying everywhere, laboring over a series of gorgeous breasts. In 2010, I took several of the breasts to a friend's cattle ranch in New Mexico and made a video called *Salty*. Both *Worth Your Salt* (2020) and *Salty* are essentially Westerns, aspiring

to describe big, important relationships with spare gestures and an excess of time. I also enjoyed the grandiose humor embedded in lavishing all this work on something then giving it over to animals. There's a proxy sacrifice happening that I think of as an acquiescence to nature.

SK: That's interesting that you frame it that way. After the animal interactions with the carved salt sculptures you cast them in glass, capturing the beautiful decay and surrender to the elements. The sculptures are so central to the project overall, but they aren't the primary focus of the video. Why is that?

MJ: As much as I loved carving them and as crucial as they are, they're not really the subject of the project. I didn't want people to walk away once they "got" the setup. My hope was that the viewer would be drawn in by the beauty of the natural world, and a view into the private lives of animals. The cast glass sculptures weren't planned but at a certain point when I was checking the cameras in Nehalem, I was taken aback by how beautiful the hand offering the plum had become as it eroded. Glass has the perfect metaphorical associations of fragility, allowing me the chance to commemorate the "used" artifacts as odes to human vulnerability.

SK: Salt is ever present, even when it's invisible. It's the physical element found in all of the elements here: humans, the wildlife protagonists, and the landscape we all inhabit. Can we get really granular (ha!) about this choice of material? I'm curious about the "minimalism" of these utilitarian white blocks being transformed into beautiful, curvaceous forms that invite interaction. Placing these body parts in the untamed environment,

and subjecting them to the sensuality of licking, touching, and consumption by wild animals suggests a feminist subversion of an art historical landscape tradition that's been white-male dominated. Do you think of this piece as a feminist work?

MJ: Get granular! Perhaps it's an inherently feminist action, wielding heavy hammers and chisels, carving sensual female body parts out of solid white blocks and giving them over to "innocent" wild animals. I wasn't consciously setting out to produce a feminist work but my intention of elevating corporeal knowledge and restoring authority to the power of intuition fits solidly within that framework. Humor also has its own subversiveness and you could say there's an Arte Povera aspect to the feed store materials as well as an element of slapstick at play. Employing salt as a self-deprecating comic device (deer licks breast, elk tickles foot, bear bites hand, etc.) and using trail cameras also undermines some art world elitism, and expands the conversations I get to have around the project. I loved being asked by hunters and fisherman what kind of cams I was using, or being politely informed that they really liked the video but were just using it as a scouting tool. Obviously I did not reveal my camera locations!

SK: Let's talk more about the video editing and pacing that is really central to *Worth Your Salt*. It appears spontaneous, as if it's live surveillance footage, but you've made a technically complex piece composed from many thousands of short clips captured by motion-activated cameras. Can you share the process of constructing it and what formal and aesthetic decisions you were making?

MJ: The first and most important decision I made was to build the video into a grid. Setting the footage into quadrants invokes the ubiquity of surveillance but also keeps the piece moving. Your eyes flicker over it, finding small actions and subtle connections, making even the slow parts compelling.

Regarding the construction of it, there was a basic math problem of braiding together footage from two or three cameras at all six locations, eighteen cameras total with very different amounts of footage. The first group of cameras, set on the Brancusi-esque head location, was only twenty minutes outside of Portland and began recording early in 2019. Some of the other cameras, the Ashland and Joseph cameras for example, were installed later in the summer and subsequently captured less footage. Combining all of it required a system that was somewhat mechanical, enabling us to build the sequences without actually watching all the clips. The passage of time was the organizing principle, keeping everything sequential and allowing the changing seasons and shifting light over a full year to become a felt experience for the viewer. Dividing the screen into four sequences also created the opportunity to show four times as much footage at once; thus the six-hour video is actually twenty-four hours of footage. The frames change at slightly staggered intervals, allowing the clips to play out consecutively, overlapping like a round, a structure that I think supports the mesmerizing and consoling effect of the work by removing the element of suspense.

SK: Who did you work with to sort, edit, and assist with the project?

MJ: Having financial support that enabled me to hire people was absolutely crucial, and enabled me to get behind my conviction that art

Malia Jensen in her Brooklyn, New York studio, 2010. (Photo: John Muggenborg)



Malia Jensen in her Brooklyn, New York studio, 2010. (Photo: John Muggenborg)





Malia Jensen, *Nearer Nature*, 2019. Carved salt sculpture, Donuts, installation view, Sisters, Oregon

is part of an economic engine. Tiff Harker came on as project manager and we assembled a small crew of assistant editors, but I worked most closely with editor Ben Mercer. A few key friends helped me check the cameras in the further-flung locations, but most of the time it was a solo adventure, collecting the (SD) memory cards, lapping the state periodically and using the time to scout locations and businesses that might be willing to show the rough cut. There is a social dimension built into the project that echoed the overall vision of *Nearer Nature* as a reconstruction of an earthbound, tactile network.

SK: Animals have long been a subject of your work but your approach you've had to this piece feels different to me because the animals have a unique agency within it. They aren't being transformed or translated into sculpture; they're caught in the act of just being. Can you talk more about the simple but powerful act of observation that this piece fosters and how you arrived at this central pillar of the work?

MJ: When I started writing the proposal for this project in late 2018, it was compelled by a desperate drive to slip something broadly loving through a door that was closing. One comment I often heard from young people was that their favorite parts were when a variety of animals occupied the screen at the same time. I liked those moments too, and I think it's because we've become so accustomed to discord that seeing a squirrel and a deer on the same patch of ground feels wondrous. Slowing down enough to tease out the nuances and find connections requires an incredible effort. Different interests are not mutually exclusive, and there are so many things that should and can bring us together.

SK: Absolutely! When we created the online exhibition on the Portland Art Museum's website, you had hoped to make the video a balm to soothe our anxieties about so many things: the pandemic, politics, mass protests. Could you elaborate on what it meant for you to make the work accessible on the very same digital platforms that can be so distracting and alienating?

MJ: When we first began talking about sharing the video, the focus was on the mounting anxiety and dread around COVID-19. Ironically, the whole *Nearer Nature* project began as a drawn-out metaphor for inescapable interconnectedness, and then suddenly everything was upon us. There was just no place to turn that wasn't an emotional hazard. People were shut indoors with their families, or alone, facing fears and massive uncertainties, and although this project might have been a drop in the bucket, it felt like something I could contribute.

SK: Nature and art can be powerful tools for healing in both big and small ways. Do you see *Nearer Nature* working in this way for viewers?

MJ: I certainly hope it does. We're so used to the constant anxiety of thinking "What awful thing is about to happen next?" There's a fine line between shutting down and taking a break, and I think it's important to find ways to sustain ourselves without turning away from what's difficult.

SK: While we're talking about animals and humans, another relationship considered in *Nearer Nature* is our connection to the land, both literally and symbolically. Am I right to think this is about a physical as well as spiritual, even political, relationship to the facets of this specific place—that is to say, Oregon?

MJ: One of my favorite camera traps was installed on the Nehalem River Estuary, a site at the water's edge of a salt marsh. The camera was strapped to the upturned root-slab of a fallen tree, facing west. In the foreground you see a beautifully gnarled and faded piece of driftwood—salal and cedar saplings growing on top—and beyond it the shifting tidal landscape. At one point in late summer, a flock of band-tailed pigeons arrived, making an annual visit to a mineral deposit in the soil exposed by low tide. Another camera nearby recorded an elk calving just out of frame, a May event apparently predictable nearly to the day. The animals that are here now are directly related to the animals that inhabited this same place hundreds, maybe thousands, of years ago. We're inextricably bound to these life cycles and patterns.

SK: A big part of this project for you—that isn't easily seen in the final video—is the connections you made with people in the locations where you produced the work. I know it has been important to you to create bridges between different backgrounds and ways of thinking—because issues of land use and environmentalism are important to people on “both sides.” Often, the way these concerns are framed exacerbates the divide between urban and rural. You've called this piece a “Trojan horse,” a contemplative artwork that unpacks so much more as it opens up. When you were out in the field, how did you go about sparking these conversations?

MJ: Early in the project I had so much car trouble that I decided it was part of my practice. I had a 100-mile conversation with a tow truck driver and learned about his badass grandmother who started the tow company in the

1960s. I had a flat tire on an isolated road in Wasco County, and a man and his grandchild eventually stopped (as I was tightening the lug nuts!) and we talked about his family's tradition of camping every fall to watch the wild turkeys in the Tygh Valley. The requirements of the project also created more straightforward ways to engage: May I install this saltlick breast and camera on your land? Would you be willing to host this video in your store, bar, school, restaurant, mental health clinic, chocolate shop, etc.?

SK: Over the course of the project, you brought the video into the communities near where you had placed the cameras. Tell me about some of these locations and how these screenings (twelve in total!) and the people you met shaped the whole project.

MJ: This was the beating heart of the whole project. One location resulted from a chance encounter in Tygh Valley where I met a group of Oregon Health Science University (OHSU) scientists on a fly fishing retreat. I was installing the breast sculpture along the White River and we struck up a conversation. Amused to find a stray artist in the woods, they invited me to join them for dinner and stay at the cabin they were renting. We had a spirited conversation about the intersection of art and science, among other things. OHSU later agreed to host the video on a screen normally used for infographics, letting the sound of elk calls and coyotes echo through the corridors of the Department of Molecular & Medical Genetics.

The video was also installed at the 100 year old Tygh Valley General Store, and in Maupin at the Riverside Restaurant where, at one point, I met a couple who planned their lunch visits (arriving early or late) so they could get the table right in front of the screen. Everyone was incredibly

Malia Jensen, *Nearer Nature*, 2019. Video Installations: (clockwise) Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School, Portland, Oregon. Courtesy KSMoCA; The Riverside, Maupin, Oregon (Photo: Eric Edwards); Oregon Health & Science University, Portland, Oregon; Southern Oregon University, Ashland, Oregon (Photo: Heather Watkins)



Sara Krajewski



Malia Jensen, *Worth Your Salt*, 2021. Video still, Nehalem Estuary camera location

generous with their time and willingness to take a chance on this unanticipated art project.

SK: You were awarded an Oregon Community Foundation Creative Heights Initiative grant to produce *Nearer Nature*. This program was created to support risk and encourage innovation in artistic practices. How has executing the *Nearer Nature* project challenged you and pushed you in new directions?

MJ: Working outside the comforts of my studio, testing my own vulnerabilities, and making space to say “I don’t know” felt important. I challenged myself to go beyond using a familiar visual language to describe situations, or posing unanswerable questions toward inhabiting metaphor. I wanted to re-complicate my own way of seeing things, and move beyond examining the mechanics toward affecting the machinery. Just because we connect to the natural world (and each other) differently does not mean we are not connected. To try to describe the uncountable ways we are part of—and reliant on—the natural world is impossible. It’s everything. Helium is mined! How often do we think of that when we buy someone a balloon? Being able to explore and share some of this fragile world has been an honor. The project would not have been possible without the support of the Oregon Community Foundation, and to say I’m incredibly grateful barely touches the surface. Producing *Nearer Nature* has had an enormous effect on my work, and it continues to change my life. I’m also deeply thankful to everyone who got involved in many and different ways. Thank you for the opportunity to have this conversation.

Malia Jensen (b. 1966, Honolulu, HI) is a Portland-based multidisciplinary artist recognized primarily for her work in sculpture and video. Jensen’s materially-varied studio practice marries the tactile authority of the handmade with underlying psychological narratives and a genuine quest for harmony and understanding. Her work is represented by Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York. Jensen’s *Nearer Nature* project received support from the Oregon Community Foundation’s Creative Heights Initiative.

Sara Krajewski is the The Robert and Mercedes Eichholz Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Portland Art Museum. Her recent exhibition projects include: *Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal...; We.Construct. Marvels.Between.Monuments.*; *Josh Kline: Freedom*; and *Placing the Golden Spike: Landscapes of the Anthropocene*.



Malia Jensen, *Foot (detail)*, 2020. Kiln-cast glass, etching ink, white oak and fir base, 8×13,5×11,5 in. (Photo: Lauren Shimel)

Malia Jensen, Wasco County, 2019.



Sara Krajewski