

Rolla artist brings South Peace activism to Winnipeg

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DAWSON CREEK – Karl Mattson, Rolla-based artist who has been outspoken in the past about oil and gas activity near his farm, had a showing of his “Life Pods” and other artwork at a gallery exhibition in Winnipeg last weekend.

Mattson’s work—sculpture constructed and welded from found objects such as oil and aviation fuel tanks, is a direct statement in opposition to what he thinks is inadequate emergency response preparedness measures for rural residents in oil and gas industry-affected areas.

“The pipeline right across the road, 34 yards from my art studio, has been approved to have a concentration of high pressure sour gas, quadrupled, and you know, if that ever had a leak or an earthquake happened and busted the pipe, I am living in a low area here,” Mattson told Northeast News.

“I just sort of worry about what sort of plan there is for rural residents who have always been here and are just kind of forced to deal with the changes that are happening.”

Mattson’s Life Pods are self-contained breathing apparatus, like portable bomb shelters: one to hold a small family, one (which also happens to be Mattson’s own future coffin) to hold one person, and a third, which is still under construction.

“I’m not totally anti-industry,” Mattson said, “but I do think there needs to be better safety, better transparency with the infrastructure that’s put in—with the companies, with the community. I think there should be more public awareness of what’s actually happening under the ground, what things are made of, and regular updates, not just farmer-to-farmer. I think it should be [public meetings]. ... regulations are set by government but, I think it’s just not transparent enough for the rural resident.

“I’ve actually asked for why can’t we have basic survival equipment here on my farm, and an alarm system for certain percentages of H₂S that waft through, or if there’s a leak, so we can take care of ourselves. Because there are safety checks along the lines but they don’t always work, we know that from South of Pouce, there was a big incident there. A quarter of a mile from here there was a leak of a surface casing, that was very serious, an H₂S monitor went off in my house.”

The two completed Life Pods were displayed at LANTERN gallery in Winnipeg over

the weekend of Jan. 23.

Paul Zacharias, curator of LANTERN, said that Mattson's work will be of interest to Manitobans as the province is experiencing its own issues with fracking activity and transparency.

"A lot of environmentally-minded people are really excited to get to meet him," said Zacharias.

"There is some fracking that occurs in the south-west of the province, it's not very well known that it actually happens, and how much is going on, and whether there's been any water table damage that's occurring. It's very unknown, so people are thirsty for this kind of dialogue, cause they can see that it's been cut out of our mainstream media."

Mattson said that while he is not normally an outspoken activist, verbally, his art is his way of making a statement that will be seen and heard.

In his experience, rural residents tend to be brushed by by industry.

"I guess [since] we're rural residents, because we're not a concentrated group, like in a city, it's easy just to push by, and it makes you feel a bit expendable, they just have to deal with you and keep marching on," said Mattson.

"When I ask questions, I get responses, but I'm just not happy with the responses, and then where do you go from there? Like, I don't want them to increase the concentration of sour gas next to my home.

"I'm not really great with keeping documents or speaking publicly or anything like that, but I am concerned about these things, so my artwork is my way of speaking that, and getting invited to go to Winnipeg is pretty exciting."

Mattson's first Life Pod was featured in a the 2013 feature-length documentary *Trouble in the Peace*, and the Pod was on the roof of the two rivers gallery in Prince George for a year, where it was an interactive installation.

There are two more exhibitions coming up for Mattson's work: a show in Grande Prairie in March 2016, and another in Williams Lake in October.

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