

## Hark, who swims there?



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL BRANCA

**THE FORMER GUARD STATION** at Brunswick Naval Air Station has been transformed to The Gatehouse Gallery by students in Michael Branca's Introduction to Visual Arts course at Southern Maine Community College in Brunswick. Although people entering the former base are no longer required to check in at the guard station, some drivers can't help but slow down for a look at the unique gallery. The exhibit runs through May 9.

## 'Fish' greeting, not guarding, at Brunswick Landing

BY RACHEL SHELLY  
Times Record Staff

### BRUNSWICK

**M**uch of the former Naval Air Station has a post-apocalyptic feel, remnant interior spaces that recall, not a former military base, but traces of the ordinary domestic rituals that sustained the people who made their lives here.

A plastic shopping cart corral holds its arms out expectantly to the empty commissary parking lot.

Blue and red water cannons tilt their heads to the woven-rubber ground where kids once splashed in the Rec Mall waterpark.

Around the corner, the Rec Mall drive-through window reflects the faces of an 8-year-old boy and 6-year-old girl exploring during their recent spring break. They order cheeseburgers and make-believe a transaction, pantomiming payment before they "drive"

away.

That's how the dozy guard station, relieved of its sentry duties at the old base, emerged April 4 as a giant aquarium brimming with "found art" fish.

In the hands of Southern Maine Community College adjunct art instructor Michael Branca's Introduction to Visual Arts students, the gatehouse that once stopped vehicles for security clearance now slows them with surprise.

Is that a barracuda in there?

### A school of soda bottle fish

"Submit a proposal for the artistic transformation of the gatehouse," Branca's assignment read when he gave it back in January, at the beginning of the spring semester.

It could have been Spencer Bernier's lava lamp.

Or Sarah Poulin-Myshrall's "old-style" café.

Other ideas, like a beach hut, a

greenhouse and even SMCC's mascot, the Seawolf, didn't make the cut for Branca's 13 students, who each answered the assignment in their own way but had to work together to select just one.

The class went through a couple of rounds of presenting and voting on each others' ideas before deciding on Teresa Pottle's "Aquarium."

"Mike asked us what we could envision (the guard station) as. Aquarium was actually brought up by a few students when we talked about it in class and I decided to go with it," Pottle said in an interview with the entire class last week.

According to fellow student Julianna Heald, "A lot of other ideas would have required carpentry or money."

"And we had a zero budget," Paula Ursoy added.

Once the idea was chosen, the class worked collaboratively to

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**STUDENTS** in Michael Branca's Introduction to Visual Arts course at Southern Maine Community College in Brunswick, Paige Bruce, left, and Whitney Libby, explore the aquarium display set up in The Gatehouse Gallery, the former guard station at the entrance to Brunswick Naval Air Station, on April 17. Until May 9, the sea creatures in the fantasy aquarium, made from found and recycled materials, will greet those visiting Brunswick Landing.

## FISH

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envision and create the many different elements that would come together for the final installation.

"We did a previous assignment on found-object sculpture and with no budget, this turned out to be a logical way to design the fish," Branca said.

Dakota Brown made a fish out of a hula hoop.

Trash bags, water bottles, plywood and sequins also show up in the display as seaweed and all manner of fish.

"One of the things we had to ask was are these going to be botanically correct fish? Is it a fresh water aquarium or a salt water aquarium? In the interest of creativity, we went with a fantasy aquarium," Branca said.

Students could use the materials of their choice.

Against a painted mural backdrop, a 6-foot-long papier mâché barracuda mingles with a school of soda-bottle fish blowing sculpted bubbles hanging from the ceiling.

### Establishing an identity

But SMCC isn't the only establishment at Brunswick

Landing. Its neighbor, Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority, holds the task of converting the majority of the former base for post-military uses.

"I started thinking about this idea for a Gatehouse Gallery last fall," Branca said. He pitched it to Jim Whitten, dean of SMCC's Midcoast Campus, who directed Branca to MRRRA's deputy director, Jeff Jordan.

"I was talking to Jim over at the main building one afternoon and this art professor came by and Jim introduced me. He said he wanted to do an art installation in the old guard house. I thought it was a great idea," Jordan said.

Once Branca's students settled on the aquarium idea, they put together a proposal for MRRRA's March board meeting.

Pottle's original idea had a fisherman in a boat on top of the installation.

"We were a little concerned about the fisherman, and we said 'let's stay off the roof,' but aside from that we thought it was really cool," Jordan said.

The guard station is not part of the property transferred to SMCC when the

Navy left, so the installation needed to reflect Brunswick Landing as a whole campus, Branca said.

Jordan explained, "Whatever we do, we want it to fit in with theme. We're trying to set a tone.

"Brunswick Landing is a college campus, a business park and a residential area all in a fairly prominent location. We're still in the process of establishing an identity."

The college is an important part of that identity, Jordan added.

"I was coming back from the pool a few weeks ago and the students were out there in a big round circle and it seemed like they were having a good time. We may be open to other ideas, since there's not a lot of art on this campus," he said.

That's good news for Branca, already imagining what students might come up with for the Gatehouse Gallery next semester. And the semester after that.

"The thing that has been great to see is the spirit of play in the group. It's been an explosion of creativity," Branca said.

That's a lesson plan most teachers want to repeat.