

artSCAPE

fall

'08

...your guide to midcoast arts, culture & heritage discoveries



Michael Branca in his studio
Photo by Seth Kelley

artSpeak “”



Michael Branca

Enter the Bath studio of Michael Branca, and your eyes will almost certainly be drawn first to the impressive display in the middle of the room: his bookcase of cassette tapes. “I should really cover that up,” he says. “It’s like, everyone comes in here to look at the art, and that’s the first thing they notice.” His eclectic musical collection, and the attention it pulls from his art ironically mirrors one of the underlying tenants of his work – exploring the “human feeling of (dis) connectedness” with nature and the world. Just as someone might enter a studio full of art and first be struck by cassettes, Branca often finds his inspiration by connecting with subjects that are not always meant to be noticed. An interestingly shaped log. Dead bugs on a windowsill. An overflowing bag of recycling.

That paper bag, brimming past capacity, was committed to canvas under the title, “Bouquet (Recycling).” Why paint it? Partly for the challenge, but more so because “It spoke to me, I responded to it, and I painted it.” By giving artistic expression to that one bouquet-esque bag, Branca opened up a whole new world of possibilities. For while the first bouquet was unplanned, it made him ask, “What can I do with that theme?” Now there are fourteen pieces in his bouquet series, ranging from flowers in a blender to work lights in a vase, with the potential for more to be manufactured or happened upon.

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Likewise with the dead flies. Branca put them in a box that read “Free” on the outside and “Help Yourself” on the inside. It was a joke, a one-liner that spawned an international project. As it turned out, all it took was laminating them, adding a €25 price tag, and Mike’s Real Dead Bugs were born. He started a bug drive, and contributions came in the mail to help form a collection of formerly crawling, flying, and wriggling creatures from nineteen states, seven countries, and five continents. The bugs, of course, begot bug art with several oil paintings and small assemblages coming to life before the project lost steam. “The Real Dead Bugs are really pretty dead right now,” Branca said, but as with anything that has inspired him, he won’t count the book the closed. He’s considering a retrospective show or, just maybe, another international bug drive.

As for the interesting log, it too has found new life on canvas, posed leaning on a pillow with a backdrop of red cloth, a wooden take on the traditional recumbent nude. That’s his latest painting, with another one on the easel. With such a constant diversity of subjects, inspirations, and themes, how does Branca answer one of the questions most frequently posed to artists – what kind of art do you make? He doesn’t have a simple answer. He has resisted falling into a niche. He moved away from the bugs in part because of the limitations of the subject matter, and in part to avoid being labeled as “the bug guy.” Beyond bugs and bouquets, just look at his mixed media work with catalytic converters. His collection of miniscule drawings and paintings framed inside keyholes and other tiny items. His handmade road signs. Or his landscapes – yet another major focus of Branca’s work, and one the best representations of the connectedness he seeks with his subject matter. These works are painted on location, en plein air. The paintings lack the refined quality and clean marks of his studio work, but they are an even simpler and more accessible exploration of the human relationship with nature. Branca invites others to join him on these painting expeditions, leading backcountry art trips for “artistic adventurers and adventurous artists.” The trips are, at this

point, more an ambition than a full-fledged operation, but all it takes is interest. He offers day, overnight, and custom trips, and from October 16-19 he is leading a trip to Katahdin Lake with support from Bates College Museum of Art. The trip is open to the public, and Mike welcomes you on his artistic explorations into nature and the world in which we live.

Find out more at www.mikebranca.com and meet Michael Branca during the 3rd Friday ArtWalk, Sept 19, 5-8pm at Bruce Goodwin studio, 48 Oliver St.

Seth Kelley is a junior at Bowdoin College majoring in Art and Theater/Dance. He was a Community Matters Fellow at Five Rivers Arts Alliance, summer 2008.

I Dream of Building a Cabin for Richard, so There We’ll Make Books

He gave me a stack of that paper he makes. He’s also made his own hair of cobweb, moonlight—he crushes cloud-fiber in his palm with the pad of his thumb, puts it on his head—when he pulls off his wool hat, his hair is a mess that looks edible, to deer.

Someone lost a stone wall in the woods. I’ll hide a house behind it and tell him it’s always been there. I own that land. He’ll live there free, and he must love trees; he’ll be high, hanging veils. He’ll have his beautiful woman with him. We’ll work. He’s convinced me to use the pages he makes.

by Stephen Petroff, 1994

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the word



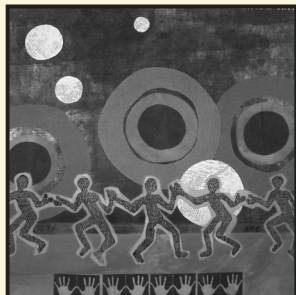
SEPTEMBER

09/20| Family Arts Festival | on the Brunswick Town Mall, 10am-4pm. Performances all day from the Blues Buzzards to the Bath Municipal Band Dixie Combo. Hands on workshops for all ages: Make “Muck Monsters” out of clay, learn Wet on Wet Watercolor techniques, harness the sun to make sunprints. Join the drumming circle, learn a new dance. It’s the 12th annual “art free for all!” Contact: 798-6994, www.fiveriversartsalliance.org.

OCTOBER

10/06-11/03| 10 X 10 on 10/10 at Points of View Art Gallery | Part of the benefit show for Arts Are Elementary - a variety of media and artists offering works for sale to benefit the arts program in Brunswick elementary schools On view: 9am-5 pm. Reception Friday, October 10, 5-8 pm. 18 Pleasant St, Brunswick. Contact: 725-8920

at Right: “Keep Me in the Loop, Number III” by Natasha Kempers-Cullen



NOVEMBER

11/08| THE CAPITOL STEPS | Who won? Who lost? Find out from The Capitol Steps. This troupe of former Congressional staffers travel the country satirizing the very people and places that once employed them. Montgomery Theatre, Morse High School, Bath. \$35/\$45. Contact: 442-8455. www.chocolatechurchcharts.org

performance spotlight



10/04 | “Words and Music” Martin Perry, piano

Kanbar, Studzinski Hall. 7:30pm. Martin Perry will perform Charles Ives’ monumental, audacious Piano Sonata No. 2 “Concord, Mass., 1840-1860” inspired by American literary masters. Also on the program will be Frederic Rzewski’s 1992 work De Profundis. \$20/door; free/ Bowdoin ID/Friends. Contact: 798-4141, www.bowdoin.edu/music, www.martinperrypiano.com

heritage highlight



09/13 | Celebrate Bowdoinham

Everything Bowdoinham in honor of the town’s 246th Birthday. 10am-9pm. Parade at 10, huge Farmer’s Market, “Bowdoinham Best” Exhibition, New Fiddle Fest. Waterfront Park will be busting at its seams with arts, craft and great live music. Stay for fire juggling by Poistar. Mailly Waterfront Park, and Main St, Bowdoinham. Contact: www.bowdoinham.com or 666-5531