

## Artistic Nature

Sand City's newest gallery leverages the area's environmental appeal.

By Kelley Calvert

**T**ucked in Sand City's industrial fabric, Fine Art Base could almost be overlooked—if it weren't for all the cars outside its inaugural exhibition.

Inside the well-hidden structure, the space opens to high ceilings and art that, as the mission for the exhibition lays out, "challenges the viewer to examine current ecological issues."

In the main gallery, distinct black and white images of driftwood are arranged in nonlinear patterns to reveal a grander portrait of textured branches and logs. In a small room to the left, styrofoam packaging "peanuts" create a strangely comforting cave-like installation out of artificiality. To the right a huge encaustic underwater kelp forest, seems to move with the wine-sipping, conversation-buzzing crowd, a collection of many of the county's most familiar faces. Out of the crowd and the art—provided by Margo Mullen, Tracy Parker, David Wilkinson and J.R.

Uretsky—both the intriguing exhibit *Art + Environment* and an animated atmosphere emerge. Is this a mini-urban art scene?

Wilkinson and Elizabeth O'Malley, founders of Fine Art Base, mingle with the crowd, barely able to disguise their excitement. Wilkinson saunters from patron to patron wearing a smile, his long sandy hair pulled tightly behind him. Soft spoken and articulate, O'Malley chats up the locals in a flowing dress of autumnal tones with her cherub-like red hair flowing past her shoulders. Together, the couple embodies a bohemian *je ne sais quois* that fits the context.

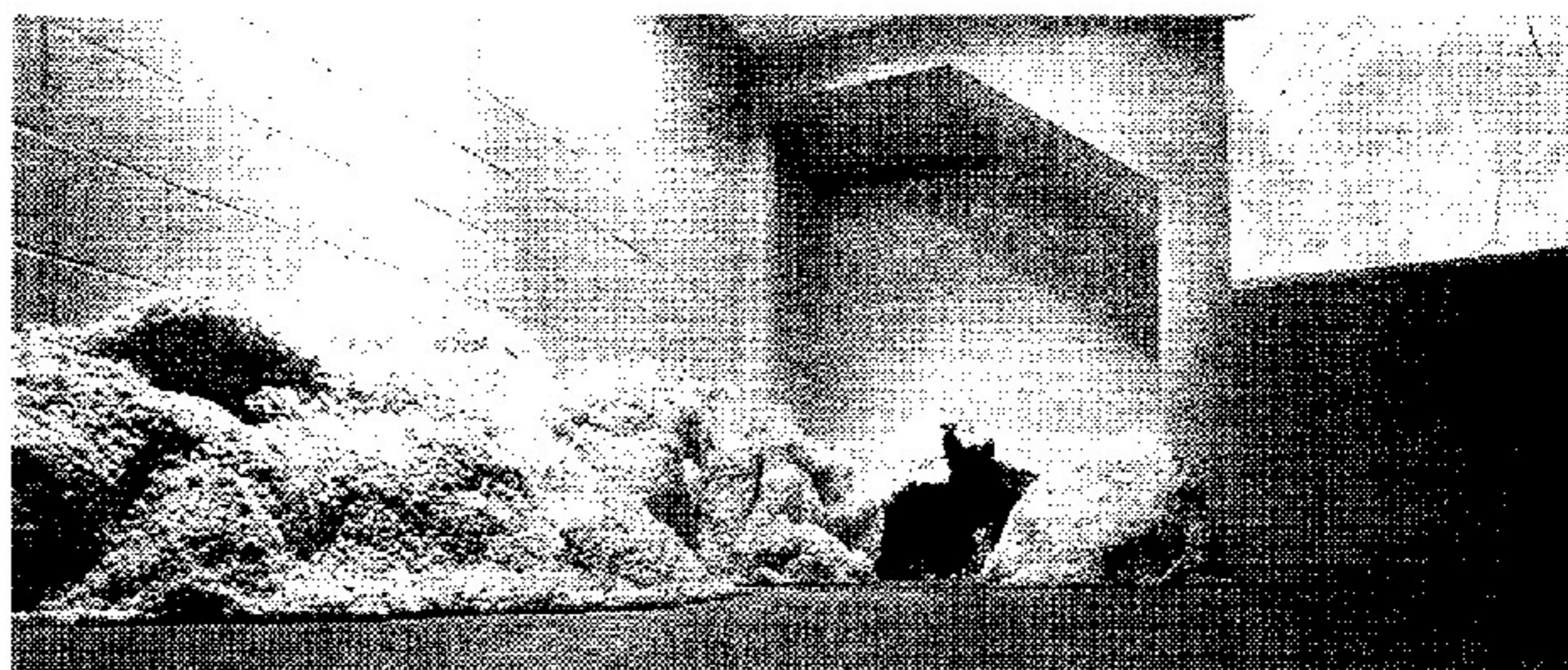
Wilkinson has been pursuing photography for 15 years and is building a darkroom at FAB. O'Malley has trained in art and design at Parsons, Pratt, Otis College of Art and Design, UCLA and the School of Visual Concepts in Seattle; she and Wilkinson arrived in February with further art-enriched jaunts in Paris and New York City under their belts. City life had its perks, but the duo had felt increasingly distanced from a core need: "We wanted to reconnect with nature," Wilkinson says.

O'Malley was particularly pulled by the area's eco innovations: "What drew

me back to California was the leadership it was showing in environmental change—I wanted to contribute to that."

FAB's debut exhibit accomplishes this by inspiring consideration of where the natural world, humans and our toxicity converge. In one piece Mullen pulls technology into the equation, with a grid of tiny shells embedded in a frosting-like blue surface to create what looks like a digital memory chip from further away. Nearby, another of her pieces transmits a starker conception: the remains of sea kelp washed ashore are frozen onto canvas, isolated. But overall this is not a haunting exhibit of the Pacific's plastic gyre or smoke stacks—note the photograph of Irish graffiti in the work area that reads "Hope"—it's a little more optimistic and abstract.

The synergy between art and environmental awareness created at Fine Art Base's first exhibition will grow with upcoming events. The next work-



Allegory of the Cave: J.R. Uretsky's "Fruit and Labor" uses loads of bright green packing "peanuts."

shop at Fine Art Base, given by Michele Muennig, explores non-toxic forms of oil painting. Meanwhile, with their photography exhibit, *The Point Lobos Project*, Wilkinson and O'Malley are encouraging artist to experiment with a singular piece of nature. "It's a good excuse to go to Point Lobos often," Wilkinson says.

"We're trying to contribute something to the history of art on the Peninsula," O'Malley says, "in a more contemporary way, allowing artists to contribute to that vision." ✦

**Fine Art Base** is located at 652 Redwood Ave, Sand City. Its inaugural exhibition *Art + Environment* is on display until the end of the month; the Non-Toxic Oil Painting Workshop will be held May 2-3. Submissions to the Point Lobos Project accepted until May 2. [www.fineartbase.org](http://www.fineartbase.org)