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Many sides of Bridgeport are reflected in new show

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Musings on Bridgeport's past and present — both grim and glorious — are the subject of a new exhibition that opens today at the Barnum Museum.

"Cleaning Up Controversy" — an exhibit of about 45 paintings, photography and mixed-media works by 10 Bridgeport area artists — opens with a free reception from 5 to 6:30 p.m. Acoustic guitarist Beth Bradley will perform and refreshments will be served. Free admission to the museum will be offered during the meet-the-artists special event.

The show is the brainchild of artist Rachel Moore of Trumbull, the museum's program director.

Moore, a graduate of the School of Visual Arts in New York, said she developed the exhibit as a way to examine some of the stereotypes that plague the city, while focusing on Bridgeport's diversity, history and current challenges as it goes through the revitalization process.

Featured are works from Sally Bradley, Susan Breen, Suzanne Kachmar, Lynn Knobel, Marion Najamy, Mia Lipstick, Yolanda Petrocelli, David Ryan, Mary Witkowski and Moore. Moore, whose parents were divorced, grew up splitting her time between her mother's home in Trumbull and her father's Bridgeport apartment. "From the time I was quite young, I've heard negative talk about the city, often from people who did not spend much time here. "Bridgeport is a city, and as a city it has its crime and its problems. But this negative reputation" in many instances "is not deserved," she added. "Frustrated with the attitude of others toward the city," Moore approached Barnum Museum director Kathy Maher with the idea of an exhibition that examined some of those stereotypes.

When Maher agreed to the proposal last summer, Moore sent out invitations to area artists.

"I initially wanted to keep it to five artists, but decided to expand the number when I got such a positive response and saw their works," the curator said.

"I didn't know what to expect, so I kept my mind open."

What the artists saw in Bridgeport, she said, "was a lot of beautiful things."

From Suzanne Kachmar, for example, comes several views of Bridgeport's coastline and Long Island Sound, as well as portraits of Bridgeport's colorful characters.

Several of David Ryan's arresting photographs focus on "the beauty in the city's discarded old factories, bridges, and lots" and he presents "them as what they are now: the physical imprint of thousands of lives that have come and gone in this city, outlasted by these structures constructed around, beneath and over them."

For painter Susan Breen, her expressionistic paintings are done in "recognition of [Bridgeport's] many problems, and my strong belief in its potential." Her work references aviation pioneer Gustave Whitehead, the city's thriving flock of monk parakeets and its lighthouses.

Moore has a huge untitled piece in the show — 84 inches high by 60 inches wide — done on a "reclaimed hinged canvas" that she intercepted on its way from storage to the museum's dumpster. Moore covered the canvas in old newspaper clippings on top of which she painted the likeness of a huge head of a rather unctuous-looking man, representing all those who want to make a quick profit on Bridgeport's boom without truly believing in the city. The Barnum Museum is at 820 Main St. in downtown Bridgeport. For additional information, visit

www.barnum-museum.org or call 331-1104. Museum hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; Sundays noon to 4:30 p.m. Admission is \$5, \$4 for senior citizens and college students and \$3 for children 4 to 17 years of age.