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Saturday, June 07, 2003 - Page updated at 12:44 A.M.

Live goldfish in SOU art exhibit draw protests

By The Associated Press

ASHLAND, Ore. — An art exhibit at Southern Oregon University that incorporates live goldfish has drawn allegations of torture from animal-rights activists.

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The installation at the Schneider Museum of Art by adjunct professor Shawn Busse features concrete pillars holding up nine half-gallon fishbowls, each holding black pebbles, plastic ferns and goldfish.

But on the day animal activist Barbara Rosen came to see the exhibit, the goldfish weren't doing swimmingly. Instead, she said several of them were floating belly-up in their bowls.

She said she left the museum and cried.

"To me it's frivolous," Rosen said. "I love art. I've seen every art exhibit there. When art causes living creatures to suffer, that's where I draw the line. Freedom of expression ends right there as far as I'm concerned."

Since her visit, Rosen has been protesting the exhibit daily, standing in front of the student union with a sign that reads: "Stop the Animal Torture."

She said she has gathered more than 120 signatures on a petition to ban the use of live animals in campus art exhibits and intends to present it to university officials.

An SOU custodian, David McAlaster, has also joined her crusade.

"I've seen several (dead fish) out front, one of which apparently jumped out of the bowl and onto the cement and apparently expired there," McAlaster said. "I thought, 'Gee, all these deaths.' That really bothered me a lot. Is an

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art exhibit worth that? All these lives lost?"



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The artist said his exhibition, which is titled "Heaven and Earth, 2003," touches on the themes of threat and danger inherent in modern life. But he said the death of the fish was never intended.

"My goal was never to cause the fish to die or cause them harm," Busse said.

And he said he has taken steps to improve the fish survival rate, using a special solution in the bowls and keeping the fish in an aerated, filtered tank while he cleans the fishbowls and replaces the water.

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In Busse's defense, Schneider Museum interim director Mary Gardiner said these fish are sold as "feeder fish" and they are not generally expected to live long.

Still, protesters said they won't be satisfied with just better care for the fish.

"It's not just the fish that are dying or suffering now," Rosen said. "I'm concerned about the message his exhibit sends young people and the whole community that animals are nothing but art objects and that their feelings and well-being are no more important than a bucket of paint or a canvas to paint on."

Rosen said Busse should replace the live fish with plastic fish, or remove the exhibit entirely.

Miles Inada, chair of the art department at SOU, said he won't adjust policies regarding what can and can't be used in exhibits.

"I think it's an issue that each artist has to address themselves," Inada said. "If the artist was to deliberately harm animals or he was sitting there eating goldfish, it would be a different story."

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