New attempt at censorship

Pontiac, Michigan police cite artist for "obscenity"

David Walsh
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Pontiac police issued the citation and threatened Bourgeau with arrest because of a wall inside The Temporary Contemporary Gallery, perpendicular to the street and barely visible from it, on which the artist had arranged reproductions of nudes, paintings and photographs. All the pieces were *bona fide* "works of art," which have been legally deemed of artistic value. They included works by Courbet, Matisse, Louise Bourgeois, Alfred Stieglitz, Ralph Steiner and many others. There was also a partly-clad mannequin in the window.

Pontiac police officials told a local newspaper that the citation was only issued because of Bourgeau's "lack of cooperation" in refusing to cover up the window. The police made it their business to show up in force Saturday morning, followed by the local media, in an effort to inflict as much embarrassment as possible. Police cars sat outside the gallery as the participants in a forum on censorship and the arts began to assemble.

To keep the exhibit open, organizers were obliged to cover the gallery window with brown paper. The penalty for displaying "obscenity" is 90 days in jail or a $500 fine. A hearing Monday morning was postponed and a new date set at which the artist must appear. The exhibit is set to continue until March 28.

Bourgeau noted that the pieces had all been part of exhibits held in Pontiac over the past several years at his Museum of Contemporary Art. Furthermore, the reproductions had been up on the wall for most of the previous two weeks. During the two-week period in which he was setting up his show, Bourgeau was harassed by one individual, an employee in the building, who accused him of being a "pornographer." The individual threatened to call the police, the FBI and the media. Pontiac police said they were acting on a complaint when they issued the citation.

Bourgeau has now been the victim of two acts of censorship in four months. On November 19 DIA officials closed down the first part of his proposed 12-part show two days after it had opened on the grounds that two of its pieces would offend Catholics and blacks.

One, *Bathtub Jesus* —a doll in a tub wearing a condom—is a reference to the work of Chris Ofili, the artist whose painting "The Holy Virgin Mary" (1996), provoked New York's Mayor Rudolph Giuliani into an attempt to close down the "Sensation" exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum last October. The other, *Nigger Toe*, a Macadamia nut under a magnifying glass, is an attempt to show the insidious and poisonous role racism plays in everyday life. Both pieces are on display in the current exhibit at The Temporary Contemporary.

Pontiac is a decaying industrial town, once a center of the automobile industry, with its share of boarded-up and burnt-out houses, closed factories and otherwise derelict structures. It is the city in which Nathaniel Abraham, the 11-year-old, with the emotional age of a six- to eight-year-old, was arrested and charged with murder as an adult.

Deputy Police Chief Conway Thompson, speaking of the Bourgeau citation, told a reporter, "We appreciate businesses coming to the downtown, but we want them to be morally responsible."

Artists in Detroit and elsewhere, and all those concerned with democratic rights and free speech, need to oppose and defeat this latest attempt at censorship.

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