

Federal agents visit "anti-American" art exhibition in Houston

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In an obvious attempt to intimidate voices of opposition, federal agents visited the "Secret Wars" exhibition at the Artcar Museum in Houston on November 7. Agents from the local FBI and Secret Service, presumably members of the agencies' Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF), told a museum employee that they were responding to complaints of "anti-American activity" at the gallery, insisted on touring the show, took notes about its content and asked about the museum's directors and its financing.

Officials at the Artcar Museum, an alternative art space founded in 1998, began planning the show several months before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the resulting US military action. In a statement on the museum's web site, Artcar's director James Harithas explains that "'Secret Wars' is an exhibition investigating artistic dissent to covert operations and government secrets. The artists here have retrieved evidences, personal and public, that call into question the good intentions of classified information and COINTELPRO tactics." [<http://www.artcarmuseum.com/secretwars.html>]

According to curator Tex Kerschen, in a telephone conversation, the exhibition of 18 works extends from the "overtly political to poetic, mystical expression." It includes Tim Glover's *Flag* (1991), an American flag constructed from steel, paint and oil, presumably a response to the Persian Gulf War. A number of pieces are explicitly critical of the "oil industry and the military-industrial complex." The exhibition's organizers also included material from CNN, the White House and other sources, in the wake of September 11, to the effect that the war in Afghanistan would be conducted secretly. An essay by Noam Chomsky, the radical critic of US foreign policy, is also on display.

Kerschen noted that there had been "a few isolated

hostile reactions" about the disrespectful treatment of George W. Bush in some of the work, for example, but that there had been no outcry from the local media. The museum receives no public funding.

This reporter spoke to Donna Huanca, a University of Houston art student and the museum staff member on duty the morning of the JTTF visit.

She said: "They must have known our schedule. We open at 11, but I was here alone at 10:30, still sweeping the floor. They were all dressed up, in suits, with leather portfolios. I knew this wasn't the art crowd. I told them we weren't open yet. They showed me their badges, one from the FBI and the other, Secret Service, and they said, 'Oh, we're actually here because we got reports of anti-American activity at the museum.' I said, 'Anti-American? The first amendment guarantees freedom of speech.' And they said, 'We're just here to look. We've had several reports.'"

"I let them in. They seemed puzzled by the exhibition. They were going to go on their own, but I gave them a tour, gave them some background to certain pieces which might offend some people. One piece has George Bush senior in the belly of the beast. There are fighter planes in flames. They weren't listening to me. The FBI agent—he was older—pretended to be sincere, making small talk; the Secret Service guy, a jock, went around on his own, smirking, taking notes

"They were asking me questions: who ran the museum, who funded the museum, how many people came in, what do our directors do for a living. I gave them the directors' names, because this is a public space, the names are in the museum's brochure. This puzzled them too. They wanted to know why it was called 'Secret Wars.' They asked me: 'Do you feel this is anti-American? Do you feel this is threatening?'

I said, ‘What are you talking about?’ I tried to explain about art, about how it is the only history that we’re going to have left. I tried to explain that this was art that isn’t shown other places, because there are corporate directors on the board. They were evil-looking, insincere. They were here for an hour.

“I found out later that the FBI went to the University of Houston art department the next day and interviewed the secretaries. I don’t know whether it was because of me, or because of two artists in the show, David Krueger and David Graeve, who are also there.

“My immediate reaction was fear. I was pale when Tex got here. I felt they were going to try and sabotage the museum, to discredit all of us. Basically, they were saying: ‘We are watching you.’ You hear and read about what these people will do to get what they want. It’s their way of trying to intimidate us. It’s McCarthyism all over again, only this time it’s ‘terrorism.’ We could all be called that, because we don’t share their views. Freedom of speech is the most treasured thing, and there isn’t that freedom any more.”

Kerschen added: “I see this as a kind of testing of the waters, seeing how far they can go. They want to put into effect all the police-state measures they can before there is a public backlash. Because what they can put into effect now, they won’t take back. ‘Anti-American’? It’s preposterous in every sense.

“The visit [by the federal agents] has galvanized a lot of people who were keeping quiet before. We’ve had repeat traffic, people are more confirmed in the suspicion that what the government is doing is not above board. I think people feel that if they are extending the term ‘terrorism’ to small folk-art concerns, they must be extending it in every direction.”

The exhibition runs until December 21.



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