

San Francisco gallery owner attacked by right-wing thugs

Richard Phillips
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In a serious assault on freedom of expression and democratic rights, Lori Haigh, the owner of Capobianco Gallery in North Beach, San Francisco, was spat on and knocked unconscious last week for exhibiting an artwork highlighting the torture of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison. The assault came after two weeks of escalating threats by extreme right-wing elements.

Created by Guy Colwell, the monotone painting, which is entitled *The Abuse*, features two grinning American soldiers standing next to three naked Iraqi prisoners. The detainees are hooded and have electric wires attached to their bodies. Another US soldier is leading a veiled Muslim woman out of a torture chamber. The only color in the monotone painting is the red, white and blue of the US flag on one of the soldier's sleeves and blood dripping from an Iraqi prisoner's neck.

Colwell, whose picture was a late addition to a month-long exhibit of his work at the gallery, is well known for his social realist style, comic books, and antiwar activism in the San Francisco area. He was jailed for two years in 1968 for opposing the Vietnam War. *Inner City Romance* (1972), his first comic book, is a biting depiction of political repression and ghetto and prison life.

"Apparently, some people are quite shocked by my painting," he told a local reporter. "I don't know why they're not equally or more shocked by the pictures they are seeing on television of the actual torture taking place."

Haigh began receiving threatening phone calls soon after she displayed Colwell's painting in the front window of her small gallery on May 16. A few days later garbage was strewn outside the building, which was also splattered with eggs.

Although Haigh removed the picture from the front window the harassment continued, with about 200 hostile voicemail and email messages, including six death threats, during the next week. "I think you need to get your gallery out of this neighborhood before you get hurt," one menacing phone caller said. Other messages accused her of being a coward and anti-American.

Last week a man wearing a fisherman's cap and a fatigue jacket walked into the gallery, pretended to look at the pictures and then suddenly walked up to Haigh and spat in her face. Two days later another man knocked on the front door of building and then punched her in the face, knocking her out and breaking her nose. Haigh has filed reports with local police but no charges have been laid as yet.

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Last Saturday local artists and writers staged a protest outside the gallery. North Beach poet Jack Hirschman told the crowd that Haigh's injuries and the threats against the gallery were an assault on freedom of expression. "The attack is not only on the gallery but on art. If they close it's not just (one artist) that is censored but all artists," he said.

Haigh, who is a single parent, has decided to close the gallery indefinitely because she is afraid for the safety of her two young children. The 39-year-old gallery owner told the local media she was not trying to make an antiwar protest: "I'm disheartened and disappointed. I don't want to have a gallery if I can't show artists like Guy Colwell. Their art reflects the world around them."

Artists, writers and all working people must condemn the assault on Haigh and her gallery. The attack is a clear attempt to terrorize and silence any artist or

intellectual opposed to the ongoing US-led invasion of Iraq. Indeed the denunciations, death threats and physical assault on Haigh are entirely consistent with the techniques employed by those guilty of torturing Iraqi men and women.



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