

Britain: “Fear on the Streets” art installation removed from Selfridges’s window

Paul Bond
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Selfridges department store in London last month removed from its window an art installation dealing with the climate of fear being fostered in the aftermath of the July 7 subway bombings and the police murder of Jean Charles de Menezes.

Eleven young professional artists from the Drawing Year programme at The Prince’s Drawing School were each given a window at Selfridges for five days. Controversy arose over Dora Wade’s installation, “Fear on the Streets,” which was first mounted on August 21. A developing installation, the work took as its starting point “what it was like to be in the streets after the bombings.”

The work, which predominantly used stark black-and-white elements, sought to address a number of social issues in the aftermath of the bombings, particularly the officially encouraged atmosphere of alarm. A wooden cage represented the Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), while meter-wide linocut £20 notes bore the serial number ASBO2005; a cordon of mannequins in police uniforms stood in front of a woman pushing a pram; closed-circuit television cameras looked on the scene, and the whole piece was illustrated with stanzas from W. S. Gilbert’s poem *My Dream*:

*The other night, from cares exempt,
I slept—and what d’you think I dreamt?
I dreamt that somehow I had come
To dwell in Topsy-Turveydom!*

*Where vice is virtue—virtue, vice:
Where nice is nasty—nasty, nice
Where right is wrong and wrong is right—
Where white is black and black is white.*

The intention, the artist has written on her website, was to highlight “the gulf that exists between bland commercial shop window displays and external fearful reality.”

As an evolving installation, other elements were added over the course of the show. Most controversially, a Brazilian man was placed in a prone position at the centre of the installation, in an invocation of the police killing of Jean Charles de Menezes. De Menezes, an innocent man, was shot dead by armed police under a governmental shoot-to-kill policy on July 22

For half an hour on August 22, the body of the man in the installation was draped in a Brazilian flag. The artist herself, dressed as a policewoman, stood behind him reading a paper with the headline “New Order: Shoot To Kill.”

It was this explicit statement that first attracted the attention of Selfridges. The company requested that the flag and the newspaper be removed from the display. This was done, but when Wade arrived on the following morning, she was told that the installation had been closed and she was told to remove it.

Selfridges’s press release tried to play down the political implications of this act of censorship, referring instead to their “long and meaningful collaboration” with the arts. The company claimed that the “inappropriate” installation was, in fact, withdrawn because it had failed to meet the original brief, which was for drawing. Dora Wade, though, has told the *World Socialist Web Site* that extensive use of linocuts was always part of her proposal for the installation. The company only raised the medium used as a problem when they saw the content of the piece.

The company’s website trumpets the store’s arts sponsorship over the last eight years. The store has hosted and sponsored many works of art, including one of Spencer Tunick’s mass naked photographs, and boasts of its collaboration with artists. This latest move suggests that this sponsorship is bought at an artistic

price. Selfridges on this occasion has, as Dora Wade puts it, “decided to stop or censor an artist whose work falls outside its own opinions.” Significantly, Selfridges appears to have received no complaints about the display.

As important as the act of closing down an art installation has been the media response to this event. There has not been any effort on the part of the media to defend Dora Wade’s artistic freedom, much less to draw conclusions about a general threat to freedom of expression. Rather, as was seen with the coverage of the killing of Jean Charles de Menezes, the press has acted to play down and conceal such threats. TV and newspaper coverage has stressed instead the question of whether, as the BBC programme “Newsnight” put it, art should “have to defend itself from the accusation that it is...tasteless.”

Joan Smith, writing in the *Independent*, found it “a little surprising” that Selfridges showed the piece in the first place, given the “sensitivities” surrounding the death of de Menezes.

For its part, the *Guardian* merely ran a captioned photo noting that the installation had been removed.

Britain’s newspapers clearly find an artistic depiction meant to express a degree of outrage at de Menezes’s death more distasteful than the fact that he was murdered as part of a shoot-to-kill policy they have almost all endorsed, under the leadership of a police chief, Sir Ian Blair, whom they defend and a government most of them back.

Dora Wade spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about her thinking behind “Fear on the Streets,” and the responses of Selfridges and the media.

She had been considering Gilbert’s “Topsy-Turveydom” in the aftermath of the London bombings and the shooting of de Menezes. There is a situation in London, she said, where “innocent men are killed under the guise of protecting the innocent” and “state executions are said to be just.” However, only the depiction of such events in shop windows is censored.

There is, said Wade, a pervading “silly idea that people are not aware of what’s going on around them,” pointing to the generally positive and serious response from passers-by to her installation. In contrast, within the media, “All of the serious points it addresses have been brushed under the carpet.”



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