

Police seek to censor painting from Brixton Riots exhibition

Paul Bond

11 November 2005

Police officers have visited an art gallery in south London requesting the removal of a painting from an exhibition. The Bettie Morton Gallery in Brixton is hosting an exhibition, *Fall/Uprising*, which consists of seven new paintings by artist Kimathi Donkor. These mark the twentieth anniversary of riots in Brixton and Tottenham, when widespread alienation and disaffection erupted in violence in predominantly black working class estates.

Donkor specialises in paintings of historical scenes. His last major show, which is currently on tour, consisted of paintings about Toussaint l'Ouverture and the Haitian slave revolt.

The two officers, in plain clothes, arrived at the gallery at 5.30 p.m. on November 4 while gallery owner Bettie Morton and volunteer Rab MacGibbon were hanging the paintings for the opening of the show the next day. The officers showed their badges and identified themselves as Sergeants Turner and McGarry. They said they were responding to complaints from the public about nudity in the painting *Helping With Enquiries 1984*, which shows a naked man being beaten by police officers. They requested that the painting be removed from display. Morton refused.

Bettie Morton told the *World Socialist Web Site* that *Helping With Enquiries 1984* was barely visible from the windows of the gallery. She wanted to know how this painting had been drawn to the police's attention, pointing out that the exhibition had not even opened when the officers visited. In fact, she said, Donkor had only just finished some of the pictures and it was too late to photograph them for inclusion on the gallery's web site.

In a statement, the police said they had received a complaint on November 3 from a member of the public

about a work on display in a glass-fronted gallery that could be seen from the street. The officers were from the Brixton Town Centre Team, which deals with community issues. During their visit they talked a lot about responsibility to the community.

This encouragement of self-censorship in the guise of "responsibility" is a line increasingly being pursued within the arts, as witness responses to *Behzti*, *Jerry Springer—the Opera*, and the recent decision by Tate Modern to withdraw John Latham's *God is Great*. Morton, pointing out that she too is part of that community, said, "I've done nothing wrong."

The exhibition was promoted on the gallery's web site <http://www.bettiemortongallery.co.uk> and on the artist's web site <http://www.kimathidonkor.net>, with details from other paintings, which also depicted the police as well as the anger felt at the time. *Madonna Metropolitan* shows a black woman surrounded by officers, one of whom is gesticulating angrily at her, while in *Under Fire* an officer with a handgun is firing at a woman at point-blank range. In *Coldharbour Lane 1985*, youths with their faces masked hurl stones at officers.

Immediately after the police visit, Morton put up a sign indicating that some of the images in the exhibition may cause offence. However, during the course of the discussion the officers had suggested that the artist had "an agenda" about the police—indicating that the nudity was not their main concern. They were keen to emphasise how different community policing is now from 20 years ago. This is in the context of attempts to give the British police unprecedented repressive powers.

Morton has refused to withdraw any paintings from the exhibition, saying that it marks the twentieth anniversary of nationally important events, represented

by an artist committed to works representing historical events accurately. “The true artist,” she said, “will have to depict events truthfully.”

Donkor himself has also expressed scepticism about the complaint against the nudity, pointing to Marc Quinn’s huge female nude statue currently on display in Trafalgar Square. Instead, he told the web site artdaily.com that “underlying this encounter there is a more fundamental issue about human rights and freedom of expression.”

The riots of 1985 were sparked by repressive policing, resulting in the deaths of two elderly women in working class housing estates in London. Donkor said he was “amazed” that the police were now prepared to engage in “such a clear act of self parody.”

When Morton refused to withdraw any paintings, Sergeants Turner and McGarry left the gallery. They said they expected to make a return visit. If that is the case, both the gallery and the artist have said they will seek legal advice. The police have not said whether they intend to pursue the matter further.

At a period when the powers of the British police are being broadened, any work of art that deals with such questions is likely to come under official scrutiny and attempted censorship. It is vital that any such attempt is opposed.



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