National Portrait Gallery in Washington bows to right-wing censorship

Niall Green
3 December 2010

In an act of prostration before Catholic extremists and the Republican Party, the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., removed an art work from one of its exhibitions on Tuesday.

The piece, *Fire in My Belly*, by artist David Wojnarowicz, is a four-minute video that was part of the Hide/Seek exhibition. The show, running from October to February 2011, focuses on sexuality in American portraiture.

The video piece deals with Wojnarowicz's homosexuality and infection with HIV/AIDS. Among several images with a religious theme, the art work features an eleven second-long section depicting a small crucifix with ants moving over it.

Defending the piece, gallery historian and co-curator of the exhibition David Ward told CNSNews.com:

"*Fire in My Belly* is an example of political engagement in artistic form with the AIDS epidemic by an artist deeply concerned with the exploration of our response to that medical and societal calamity. That it is violent, disturbing, and hallucinatory precisely replicates the impact of the disease itself on people and a society that could barely comprehend its magnitude."

Wojnarowicz died of AIDS in 1992, at the age of 37. *Fire in My Belly* can be viewed on YouTube.com.

Wojnarowicz's video, and the exhibition as a whole, came under attack from the Catholic League, a religious lobbying group not officially part of the church, which condemned the display of what it called "blasphemous" and "homoerotic" images.

Catholic League president William Donohue claimed the work was "hate speech" "designed to insult" Catholics.

Donohue wrote to the House of Representatives and Senate appropriations committees asking them to reconsider future funding for the Smithsonian.

Several Republicans, including incoming Speaker of the House John Boehner, joined the attack on the exhibition.

"Absolutely we should look at their funds," Georgia Rep. Jack Kingston, a Republican and member of the Appropriations Committee, told Fox News.

"If they've got money to squander like this—of a crucifix being eaten by ants, of Ellen DeGeneres grabbing her breasts, men in chains, naked brothers kissing—then I think we should look at their budget," Kingston continued.

Incoming Republican House Majority Leader Eric Cantor called the exhibition an "outrageous use of taxpayer money and an obvious attempt to offend Christians during the Christmas season."

In response to this filthy campaign, National Portrait Gallery director Martin Sullivan was called in to discuss the exhibition with Richard Kurin, an undersecretary for the government-maintained museum system, and other senior Smithsonian officials.

Announcing the removal of Wojnarowicz's work, a statement from Sullivan read, "I regret that some reports about the exhibit have created an impression that the video is intentionally sacrilegious. In fact, the artist's intention was to depict the suffering of an AIDS victim. It was not the museum's intention to offend. We are removing the video today [Tuesday]."

Responding to claims of political capitulation, Sullivan insisted, "The decision wasn't caving in. We don't shy away from anything that is controversial, but we want to focus on the museum and this show's strengths."

The opposite is the case. As is increasingly common, the far right in America has been permitted to exercise a veto over what is or is not "acceptable" in public life.

Despite the fact that the censorship of the exhibition

© World Socialist Web Site

was clearly an intrusion into the independence of the Smithsonian from direct political meddling and an attack on the First Amendment separation of church and state, the Obama administration has not lifted a finger to defend either principle, preferring to assume its usual position of kowtowing before the most reactionary forces.

The Catholic League, founded in 1973 to campaign against "anti-Christian" messages in the media, has launched several crusades against artists and entertainers who it disapproves of, including recent attacks on comedians Bill Maher and Kathy Griffin, and filmmaker Kevin Smith.

The League does approve of some art, defending Mel Gibson's vile *The Passion of the Christ* against charges of anti-Semitism.

Behind the Republican support for censorship and the acquiescence of the Democratic Party lies the shared class hostility of the American elite for critical expression and their growing hostility to the very idea of publically funded art.

Commenting on the censorship of Wojnarowicz's video, John Boehner's office suggested that any state spending on art in a "tough economy" was unacceptable:

"American families have a right to deserve better from recipients of taxpayer funds" Boehner's spokesman said, adding that such expenditures are "symbolic of the arrogance Washington routinely applies to thousands of spending decisions."

"Smithsonian officials should either acknowledge the mistake and correct it, or be prepared to face tough scrutiny beginning in January when the new majority in the House moves to end the job-killing spending spree in Washington," Boehner warned.

This sentiment was echoed by Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies at the right-wing Cato Institute, who commented that, "If the Smithsonian didn't have the taxpayer-funded building, they would have no space to present the exhibit, right? In my own view, if someone takes taxpayer money, then I think the taxpayers have every right to question the institutions where the money's going."

In reality, the Hide/Seek exhibition was funded by private donations, a fact made necessary by the woeful lack of government support for the arts in the United States.

Nor was it ordinary "American families" and "taxpayers" that attacked the exhibition, but the self-appointed guardians of morality in the Catholic League, an outfit that has dismissed allegations of child abuse by the Catholic Church as "hysteria" and claimed that most incidents that abuse victims reported were "not draconian" and "acceptable at the time."

The Obama administration's deficit reduction panel, made up of Democrats and Republicans and established to cut a minimum of $200 billion in discretionary government spending by 2015, has proposed a massive cut in federal funding to the Smithsonian.

The commission's co-chairs, Erskine Bowles (Democrat) and Alan Simpson (Republican), suggested that the budget for the Smithsonian be cut by $225 million—almost one-third of its entire annual federal grant, but equivalent to a day and a half's expenditure on the war in Afghanistan.

To make up the shortfall, the commissioners advised that admission to one of the Smithsonian's nineteen museums, free since the institution was established in the 1840s, should be priced at $7.50 per visit.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site