

Censorship of Southend UK art installation points to rising suppression of art and critical thought

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The censorship and forced removal of an art installation in Essex, following complaints and threats by Conservative councillors, marks an ominous escalation of attacks on democratic rights and artistic expression in Britain.

'An English Garden, by Gabriella Hirst, was a rose garden installation at Shoeburyness, near Southend on the Essex coast, reflecting on "the violent legacies and historical traumas of atomic armament" as they play out in domestic settings. It was attacked by Conservative councillors as a "direct far left wing attack on our History, our People and our Democratically Elected Government".

Britain's first nuclear weapon was assembled close to the site in 1952, and then shipped to indigenous territory in Australia for testing. Australian-born Hirst wanted to invite reflection on the "devastating" impact of 12 British nuclear tests on indigenous lands between 1952 and 1963. Aboriginal communities at Maralinga, Emu Field and Monte Bello Islands were exposed to the tests and displaced by them.

Hirst wrote that the garden "reflects Britain's historical and ongoing identity as a colonial nuclear state." She described Britain's imperialist programme as "gardening the world," in its cultivation of claimed territory for the needs of the empire. Her project was prepared over several years.

In 1953, to mark public interest in nuclear technology and the Cold War, German rose-breeder Reimar Kordes created a rose variety of *Rosa floribunda*, "Atom Bomb." After early success, the variety fell from popularity—unlike, as Hirst and curator Warren Harper note, nuclear weapons and their accompanying political rhetoric.

In 2020 the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Yearbook recorded a worldwide inventory of 13,400 nuclear weapons, 3,720 of them deployed with operational forces. Hirst and Harper noted the Johnson government's lifting in March this year of caps to its stockpile of Trident nuclear warheads by 40 percent, writing that "We are still one minute to midnight."

Hirst and Harper set out to bring the "Atom Bomb" rose, now "arguably nearing extinction," back into circulation as a way of drawing attention to this history and its present political manifestation. They sourced a cultivar and set about propagating new generations of the variety. They produced an instruction guide, "How To Make A Bomb," to encourage what they describe as "civilian horticultural agency" that will provide "space for reflection and diffusion of atomic-era anxiety, soothing the mania of living in the age of constantly undulating nuclear stand-off."

Southend-based artist charity The Old Waterworks (TOW) have been hosting the *How To Make A Bomb* project for nearly three years, providing a base for the propagation and allowing Hirst the opportunity to conduct further research.

TOW have produced an artist's book of the project, which was due to be incorporated into the Estuary 2021 exhibition. Under a commission from TOW and Metal, a project for the artistic transformation of buildings of historic significance into cultural community hubs, Hirst installed *An English Garden* in Gunners Park, Shoeburyness, for which Metal had secured the appropriate site licence. The exhibition was due to last until the end of August.

The rose garden centred on a display of "Atom Bomb" roses, fringed to the south east by "Cliffs of Dover" irises, a variety also cultivated in 1952. On the garden benches around the flower bed were brass plaques pointing up the history of British nuclear armament locally and internationally and drawing out symbolic associations in horticulture. Photos of the work can be seen at the artist's website.

On June 21, a group of local Conservative ward councillors began a systematic campaign of complaints about one of the plaques, calling its content offensive and unpalatable. The plaque accuses Britain of making a choice "to direct considerable resources towards industries of violence instead of those of care" and repeats Hirst's description of its "ongoing identity as a colonial nuclear

state.” The councillors issued a 48-hour ultimatum to remove the plaque. Otherwise, they said, the Council would intervene to censor it and launch a national media campaign of vilification.

They intensified pressure on TOW, Metal and Hirst, demanding the alteration of the plaque’s text under supervision. TOW said this “undoubtedly would have changed the content and meaning of the artwork, shifting the work’s intentions and putting words into the artist’s mouth.” If this did not happen by 6pm, June 23, the councillors threatened to “take action against the work.” Little of this correspondence has been published in full, but Metal described the threat as one of bringing “national attention highlighting what was their fundamental misreading of the work.”

At the head of the councillors involved in this assault on democratic and artistic expression is James Moyies, director of the Vote Leave campaign for the east of England, and formerly a UKIP councillor. He was expelled from UKIP for simultaneously supporting the Conservatives, confirming the unanimity across the far right of the ruling class.

TOW said they were unaware of any other negative responses to *An English Garden* prior to the councillors’ intervention. They said that Moyies’s comments “grossly misinterpret the artwork and provide inadequate and vague justifications with no satisfactory evidence.”

Moyies has claimed the work was “inappropriate in a council-owned site,” although the licensed and authorised installation seems to have been on privately leased land. The attack on the installation was not conducted by the council, but “on behalf of Southend’s Conservative Group of Councillors.” This raises questions about the scale of threat and intimidation that led Metal to withdraw the work on 23 June.

TOW said there had been “no positive engagement” from the councillors, “who threatened to play out the dialogue across the media, bypassing all attempts of reasonable discussion.” Metal said they took their decision to remove the installation “to protect the wellbeing and mental health of our small team of staff and volunteers in Southend from possible adverse effects that might arise from any ‘action’ taken against the work based on a distortion of the actual meaning of the work and our intentions for including it within the programme for *Estuary 2021*.”

Metal’s capitulation to this blatant act of censorship enabled Moyies to say, with repulsive smugness, the “situation was amicably resolved.”

Hirst, who opposed the removal, wrote on Facebook, “Seemingly said government and its global scale nuclear arsenal was not considered robust enough to endure the airing of historical facts and critique via a rose garden art

installation.”

TOW spoke with dismay at the victory granted to Moyies and his cultural thugs. “Art is meant to spark debate, provoke thought and encourage new ways of seeing the world, it should not be shut down because what it proposes does not align with the views of individuals, particularly when based on extensive research and historical facts.”

History, they wrote, “is not simply a celebratory fanfare and it is everyone’s right to be able to explore the nuances of this shared history and how it has ongoing impacts today.”

The Southend incident is only the latest in a rising wave of censorship and suppression of artworks. At the same time as the Southend events were being reported, footage emerged of a police raid at East London arts complex Antepavilion. The target was a rooftop installation by the Project Bunny Rabbit collective, *All Along the Watchtower*, targeted because it resembles a bamboo and cable structure used by climate action group Extinction Rebellion at protests.

Artist Damian Meade posted CCTV footage on Instagram showing the vast and aggressive June 25 raid, conducted under Section 18 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984.

The Metropolitan Police said they were taking “proactive action” against potential Extinction Rebellion activity. Meade commented that the police raided Antepavilion “with the intention of removing [*All Along the Watchtower*] (but failed).”

Five people were arrested, all later released. They included building owner Russell Gray, arrested for “dangerous driving” when he arrived on his motorbike to find out what was going on. The police, he said, “thought resemblance to a structure used by Extinction Rebellion in some demonstrations, somewhere was enough.”

The turn outwards to historical and political realities by artists like Gabriella Hirst and Project Bunny Rabbit is a healthy and encouraging development. Its urgency is only underscored by the use of ever-greater weapons of censorship and repression against any form of critical expression or thought.



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