

“Political censorship at its most blunt”

Interview with artist Diego Marcial Rios, whose paintings in San Mateo, California show were taken down because of police objections

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Officials in San Mateo, California suspended an entire art exhibition in July after complaints from police officers about two paintings by veteran, Bay Area-artist Diego Marcial Rios. The scheduled six-week exhibition went on display July 17. Several days later the show and all exhibitions at the city's galleries were canceled.

In an email, Rios was told, “Some of your paintings have caused concern amongst city employees both at city hall and at other facilities.” The *Art Newspaper* explained that members “of the municipal police department took offense to Rios’s paintings, particularly two that drew attention to instances of police killings of people of colour. One of them contains a red figure with his hands raised and a skull where a face would be under the words ‘Stop Killing Us’; the other shows a skeletal police officer holding what looks like a taser while running above the words: ‘Will Kill Blacks and Mexicans Cheap!’”

Rios recently spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the incident.

Erik Schreiber: Can you tell us briefly about your background and about how you became an artist?

Diego Marcial Rios: I’ve been an artist my entire life. I’m in my 60s. My professional art career started at about age 11. I started illustrating international and national magazines at that age. I’ve been at this a long, long time. I’ve had maybe 500 exhibitions in the last 30 years. I have artwork in many American museums, as well as museums abroad.

I’ve also been a political and social activist since I could walk, since the time of Cesar Chavez. I grew up on the picket lines. My parents were political activists and would bring the family along and have us involved with political actions. My earliest memories, as a boy of three or four years old, are of participating in an antiwar protest. I marched with the United Farmworkers.

ES: What are your goals as an artist?

DMR: I’m a political artist. The artwork is designed to inspire political thought, to increase discussion among people and to document my current thinking.

ES: What are the central concerns or themes in your art?

DMR: Man’s inhumanity to man. Social injustice and corruption. I’ve seen the world. I take on the subject in my artwork.

We live in a society and a world that is unjust. The capitalist system is vastly unjust, and it’s particularly unjust and brutal toward the lower socioeconomic classes. Poor whites, poor Mexicans, poor blacks, or individuals of color who don’t have money or authority are sincerely abused by the system, and this is wrong.

ES: Who would you name among your major artistic influences?

DMR: The number one is José Clemente Orozco. He was a famous Mexican muralist who produced a fantastic mural I saw as a small child that vastly affected me: *Man of Fire [Hombre de Fuego]*, 1939]. I was inspired by that at age three or four. I looked at that and I was never the same again. I knew I wanted to work in social justice and I also knew I wanted to be a political artist.

ES: How did the exhibition at the San Mateo City Hall come about?

DMR: About two or three years ago, I sent some pics to an open call for artists. They eventually got back to me and said, “Hey, do you want to show some of your work at the City Hall Art Gallery?” I said, “Okay.” As agreed, I came to the art space with the work I said that I was going to bring and I hung it with my assistant. I hung 20 paintings at the City Hall Art Gallery, but the city has various other art sites. They have a site at the library where they show artwork, and they have another site in the interior of the city hall.

One or two days later, I got a strange email from Fox News. The email said that that the artwork had been taken down because of the objections of a couple of individuals in the police department. I was stunned, because I wasn’t informed of that at all. So, I called up these guys and said, “What’s happening here?” It took a number of telephone calls.

I found out later that they had taken down the entire art show due

to a couple of police officers objecting to the subject matter of two pieces. One was called *Please Don't Kill Us*. The other was called *Will Kill Mexicans and Blacks Cheap, Have a Good Day*. I'm a political artist. What do they expect? I hung political artwork. These pieces pissed off a couple police officers, and because of that, they took down the entire show. Not only did they take down my show, but they also took down all the other work currently up and running in the city. Everyone's art show came down due to the objections to my artwork.

ES: What about future shows at city galleries?

DMR: To be honest with you, these guys are a bunch of amateurs, at least in their behavior toward professional artists, which is not good. They sent some sort of a lame letter saying, "We're revising our selection process for the future, and as a result of that, we had to take down all the shows." That's just their lame, administrative excuse for taking down some artwork due to the political subject matter. A couple of police officers got pissed off at a couple of artworks that made them upset, and they took down all the work as a result.

I talked to a gentleman from the library system. He told me they'd taken down the artwork from the libraries as well, as well as some other places. Again, the same root cause of it was censorship by the police department. This is censorship, and political censorship, at its most blunt.

ES: Have you ever encountered this kind of thing before?

DMR: I've been a political artist for 30 years. You're always going to have some people objecting to the subject matter and my perspective, and the iconography of the work could also offend people. But no one's ever taken down the work. If they ever had an objection to it, I always offer to switch it out. I did that at this gallery. I very graciously contacted them and said, "Just get back to me, and I'll switch out the pieces. No big deal." Have I ever had anything like this happen before? Never before.

They had to take down everybody else's artwork, too, because they didn't want me crying "racism." I'm the only colored guy who had artwork up. If they had just taken down my artwork, they would have had people jumping and yelling, "You guys are a bunch of racists." To avoid that happening, they did something that is almost equally stupid: they took down everybody's artwork. These guys were amazing. They would have been better off buying an art gallery and having the exhibition shown there, rather than [inviting] the international as well as national attention this current activity [has gained]. They didn't have to go about this. They took it upon themselves to do this.

They don't have the right to take down artwork just because a couple of people have objections to it. I mean, what's the purpose of art? The purpose is to inspire beauty, to inspire thought and to inspire communication. A couple objections from some police officers doesn't give those police officers the power to take down an entire show. Again, that is censorship and cultural oppression at its most blunt.

ES: How will you respond to this act of censorship?

DMR: I contacted the ACLU and another large organization. I simply protested it. That's all that I can do at this point—and not work with them again. I got back my artwork and I took it out of there.

But one thing that I know has to be done is that we have to bring attention to this. This is an injustice. With injustice like this, you have to bring attention to it, so they don't do it again. [Attention] is the last thing they wanted, and that's exactly what they got. I'm so completely stunned that they were as stupid as this. Two large publications in London published articles on this stuff. When you say the name San Mateo, people are going to say, "Oh, those bigoted individuals over there." They couldn't have done a worse publicity job for their city.

ES: What are your thoughts about police violence and about the role of the police in general?

DMR: The role of the police is to keep the classes in line, by and large. Who takes the brunt of this? Poor whites, blacks, and Mexicans. Unfortunately, the African Americans take the absolute brunt of all this police brutality, and it's not going to stop. Black Lives Matter never went far enough. To make an effective change in the police department, you have to start from the ground up. The way the system is, the prison-industrial complex, they can make superficial changes here and there, but you're still having blacks murdered all the time. You're still having poor whites, the lower socioeconomic strata mistreated and brutalized all the time. Look what's happening with the Mexicans. Talk about brutality at the border. The police exist as a mechanism to keep the classes in sync.

ES: How has this episode affected your approach toward your art?

DMR: I continue to do what I'm going to do and continue to show, publish and all that. But I'm going to make sure that people remember this happened, so it won't happen again. It didn't affect me in the least. It's taken up some time. Big deal.

ES: What larger points would you like to make in relation to this incident?

DMR: Individuals who are oppressed must fight for their freedom however they can, either with writing, art or peaceful protest. Individuals who are oppressed have to make change. To make that change, use what is at your disposal. But never give up. Please study Marxism and socialism. When I was a boy, I started reading Trotsky. I started reading Marx. It'll certainly give you a sharper perspective and a very objective way of looking at the world. And it's a very constructive way of looking at the world. You look at the world in terms of economic strata, and that gives you a lot of power. Knowledge is power.



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