

# Political censorship of art exhibition at California's Pepperdine University

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The forces of political reaction continue their efforts, in countless forms, to stamp out opposition. A ruling elite, along with leading institutions, that has lost its head, feels besieged and sees nothing but a universal “state of rebellion,” lashes out in many cases even against relatively mild protest.

Officials at Pepperdine University, a private Christian institution in Malibu in Los Angeles County, censored and then closed down an art exhibition at its Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art recently, charging some of the artists with including “overtly political content” in their works.

The exhibition, *Hold My Hand in Yours*, according to *Hyperallergic*, featured “a range of artwork that centers hands as symbols of labor, identity, care, and connection. Curated by Weisman Museum Director Andrea Gyorody, the exhibition opened on September 6 and was slated to run until March 29.”

According to the Pepperdine student newspaper, the *Graphic*, those plans were

thrown into disarray Oct. 1. That day, Pepperdine administrators Lauren Cosentino, vice president for Advancement and chief development officer, and Nicole Singer, executive director for Advancement Administration, visited the Museum.

Later that same day, Gyorody informed Elena Mann, one of the artists whose work was included in the show, that her video “Call to Arms 2015-2022” had been turned off at the administration’s request. The 18-minute video is a compilation of various performances by Mann and collaborators over the past decade. As the *Graphic* explained,

Several segments show performers using an arm-shaped sculptural instrument, which functions as a horn. The mouth opening of the instrument is located in the palm of a cupped hand, which covers the speaker’s mouth while amplifying their voice. Four of the sculptural instruments were on display in the exhibition, next to a 10-foot-tall photo collage of Mann and others

using them.

There are references in the video to Donald Trump’s “anti-immigration and anti-labor policies,” the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the hearings on the Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court nomination and the George Floyd protests in 2020. Protesters in the streets of Los Angeles can be seen chanting in Spanish, “We won’t accept a racist America.”

According to the *Graphic*,

Mann said beyond the protest chants recorded in this segment, she does not believe her video installation contains any overt political messaging. Most expressions in the video were “emotive.” ...

Mann, who is hard of hearing, said she has made art about the act of listening for 20 years. She intends to promote peace, dialogue and the act of listening through her work.

In part, Mann’s artwork is about censorship and silencing, which she said made its censorship by Pepperdine administrators ironic.

Another work that aroused the ire or anxiety of the Pepperdine administration was “Con Nuestras Manos Construimos Deidades” (“With our hands we build deities”). The work is a product of the nonprofit Art Made Between Opposite Sides (AMBOS) and created by more than 240 people. Artist and AMBOS executive director Natalie Godinez told the *Graphic* that the piece, which consists of embroideries, woven textiles and ceramic hands, was made in part by refugees and asylum-seekers from shelters near the US-Mexico border.

Pepperdine officials apparently objected to one fabric swatch that reads, in small letters, “Save the Children” and “Abolish ICE.” *Hyperallergic* reports that “officials turned the fabric swatch so that the text was no longer visible and removed a sign informing visitors they could touch the artwork.”

“This was made in community across borders, with the idea that you can touch the hand of the person on the other side of the border,” Godinez told *Hyperallergic*. “By censoring a piece of the artwork and not allowing people to interact with it, it waters down the meaning.”

In response to the school’s acts of censorship, Mann and AMBOS asked that their works be removed from the exhibition. Word spread to the other artists.

The *Graphic*:

By Oct. 8, at least 11 additional artists had withdrawn from the exhibition, despite not facing censorship on their pieces. Eight artists confirmed to the *Graphic* that they were removing their work, while three others were on a list Gyorody sent Mann.

“The silencing of artists, especially when their work addresses urgent social issues, undermines the very purpose of art and education,” said artist Sabrina Gschwandtner, who pulled out of the exhibition in solidarity with Mann and AMBOS on Oct. 5. “It’s clear to me that that’s not what they think at Pepperdine.”

Another of the artists who asked that her work be removed, Stephanie Syjuco, a Filipino-born US artist who teaches at the University of California, Berkeley, explained on Instagram:

In a thoroughly disappointing series of events, a university exhibition I am included in has been officially shut down by their administration a month into its seven month run. On view since September 6, 2025 and slated to be up through March 2026, the group show “Hold My Hand In Yours,” at Weisman Museum of Art at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California, was belatedly charged with including works deemed “political.” After two works were turned off or modified without the artists’ consent last week, a number of us chose to also have our work turned off or removed in solidarity. ...

I stand with the artists and museum workers who fought to keep the integrity of the show, its vision, and the artists’ work intact.

Another of the artists in question, Carmen Argote, asserted in a letter to that museum director Gyorody that

the censorship of Elana Mann’s work and the

collective work of AMBOS being censored is a loss for the students and for the art community, and it signals that the gallery, under current conditions, can no longer function as a place for art.

On October 8, after various negotiations failed, the university announced that the exhibition was being shut down, months early.

Pepperdine University, established in 1937 by “entrepreneur and Christian philanthropist” George Pepperdine, is affiliated with the Churches of Christ and requires nine credit hours of coursework in the Christian religion for graduation. It is listed by one website among the “top 30 conservative Christian colleges and universities” in the US.

*Hyperallergic* observes further that

President Trump and Republicans have ramped up threats to the nonprofit sector in recent weeks. On September 25, Trump signed the memorandum “Countering Domestic Terrorism and Organized Political Violence,” which instructs federal agencies to prosecute nonprofit organizations “engaged in acts of political violence.” Advocacy groups have warned that the memo’s vague language gives the government power to silence dissent and suppress diverging views.



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