

Tennessee university cancels long-running Fletcher Exhibit: A further assault on art and culture by the far right

Jane Wise**13 November 2025**

East Tennessee State University's cancellation of the Fletcher Exhibit of Social and Politically Engaged Art marks a new stage in the right-wing drive to suppress political art, part of a broader campaign by the Trump administration and the ruling class to impose ideological conformity and silence dissent.

At the beginning of 2025, East Tennessee State (ETSU) in Johnson City, quietly ended its 11-year relationship with the Fletcher Exhibit [or FL3TCH3R Exhibit, as it is sometimes styled], bowing to pressure from reactionary political forces.

The Fletcher Exhibit, hosted annually at ETSU's Reece Museum since 2013, was founded by the family of Fletcher Dyer—an art student who died in 2009—to encourage socially conscious art and provide a platform for political and personal expression. Its 11th and final showing at ETSU in 2024 featured 60 works critiquing inequality, militarism and the far right. Among them were pieces depicting Turning Point USA founder Charlie Kirk, Senate leader Mitch McConnell and House Speaker Mike Johnson, juxtaposed with fascist symbols and Christian iconography.

These works triggered a torrent of denunciations from Tennessee Republicans and media outlets associated with Turning Point USA, the fascistic organization with close ties to Trump.

Within days of the 2024 exhibition's opening, State Rep. John Crawford and State Sen. Jon Lundberg, both Republicans from Bristol, issued statements condemning the show as "hateful" and "divisive," demanding that the university "take action." US Rep. Diana Harshbarger, who represents the region in Congress, denounced the works on social media as "an attack on faith and our values."

The ETSU chapter of Turning Point USA accused the exhibition of "espousing hate rather than criticizing it." Their campaign was amplified by right-wing media outlets, which circulated images of a collage featuring Kirk and a piece depicting Johnson against a background of swastikas and crosses.

Under this coordinated McCarthyite barrage, the university administration predictably capitulated. In November 2024, the university began asking visitors to sign a liability waiver to view the exhibition. At the beginning of 2025, the Dyer family was informed that the Fletcher Exhibit would no longer be hosted at ETSU.

Carrie Dyer, Fletcher's sister, who co-organizes the show with her parents Barb and Wayne, told *Hyperallergic*, "In some ways, it feels like Fletcher has died again, when the exhibit was stopped. It felt like a second death for me." Wayne Dyer, professor emeritus at ETSU, noted the bitter irony that the university that once fostered his son's artistic growth had now repudiated his legacy. Juror Meaghan Dee, professor of graphic design at Virginia Tech, remarked, "What we lost is another space, another community, another place for artists to connect and share work. We also lost some of our freedom of speech."

The university's retreat is not an isolated act of cowardice. It reflects a national pattern of growing subordination of cultural institutions to far-right political forces.

In February 2025, Donald Trump transformed the John F. Kennedy Memorial Center for the Performing Arts in Washington into a political weapon of his administration, purging trustees, appointing loyalists and naming himself chair, an act that symbolized the

subordination of art to state power. The Kennedy Center has subsequently experienced a massive loss of support and declining ticket sales. (The *Washington Post* recently reported that according to its analysis of ticket sales data from early September through mid-October, 43 percent of tickets for Kennedy Center productions remained unsold.)

Trump's aim, as the WSWS explained, is to enforce a "patriotic, national art ... dishonest and insincere by definition" that glorifies American capitalism and militarism.

The administration's subsequent actions, such as defunding the Institute for Museum and Library Services in March, issuing the "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History" executive order in April targeting the Smithsonian Institution, and eliminating the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and Humanities (NEH) in its 2026 budget, are all fronts in what the WSWS has aptly called a cultural counterrevolution.

Trump's order instructs federal officials to remove "improper ideology" from museums and to enforce exhibitions that celebrate an uncritical narrative of American greatness. His August 19 post on Truth Social declared the Smithsonian "OUT OF CONTROL," demanding it replace discussions of slavery, labor and inequality with "positive portrayals" of the nation.

Drawing on research from the Nuremberg Municipal Museums, the WSWS has compared Trump's policies to the Nazi program of *Volksgemeinschaft*, an attempt to "reverse modern society" and replace class divisions with a mythic "people's community" bound to a single leader and national destiny.

Trump's cultural agenda mirrors this conception almost point for point. His invocation of a "golden age of American art" devoted to celebrating national greatness, his purging of "improper ideology" from the Smithsonian and Kennedy Center, and his demand that art and history serve the glorification of the nation all reproduce the ideological content of the Hitlerite *Volksgemeinschaft*.

The suppression of political art is not confined to Trump's administration. It reflects the reactionary character of the entire American ruling elite, which cannot tolerate any challenge to its policies.

Under the Biden administration, artists who spoke out

against the US-backed genocide in Gaza faced a relentless campaign of censorship and intimidation. Palestinian-American painter Samia Halaby's retrospectives at the Indiana University's Eskenazi Museum was canceled. Lakota artist Danielle SeeWalker had her residency in Vail, Colorado removed.

In response to Trump's widening crackdown, scores of artists and writers have called for nationwide events under the banner of "The Fall of Freedom," scheduled for November 21–22. Organizers are calling on museums, libraries, theaters and bookstores to host readings, screenings and exhibitions opposing the Trump administration's attacks on democratic rights.

The WSWS has warned that such actions, while principled and courageous, cannot halt the drive toward dictatorship if they remain confined to protest politics or subordinated to the Democratic Party. Figures like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez will attempt to channel this movement back into the dead-end of electoral reformism.

The fate of the Fletcher Exhibit in Tennessee is a warning. A university's capitulation to censorship today foreshadows what awaits artists, educators and workers everywhere if the ruling class succeeds in stifling dissent.

The defense of art and culture cannot be separated from the defense of all democratic rights. It requires the mobilization of the working class, the only social force capable of breaking the grip of the corporate and financial oligarchy over political and cultural life. Artists must turn consciously to this social power, linking their struggle for creative freedom with the fight against war, inequality and capitalist oppression.



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