

Faculty, students oppose censorship of artist at University of North Texas

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Ruling elites and leading institutions everywhere are on the offensive against democratic rights and freedom of expression, including artistic expression.

The powers that be feel under siege. They rightly sense the vast disaffection of their populations, particularly the younger segments of them. For example, depending on the poll, some 68 to 75 percent of voters under 35 in the US disapprove of Donald Trump's administration. What percentage of the younger generation actively *despise* the would-be dictator and wish to see the downfall of the present government is not recorded. The pollsters remain discreet in this regard.

On university campuses, the crackdown on critical thought continues. Sharp and legitimate criticism of Trump, of ICE, of Israel's genocide, of the illegal war against Iran ... any and all of this is now termed a "disturbance," a "disruption," as though anything important has ever been learned or accomplished except through "disturbance" and "disruption."

One skirmish in the ongoing war:

In February, at the University of North Texas (UNT) in Denton, in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, officials canceled a solo exhibition of Brooklyn-based artist Victor "MARKA27" Quiñonez, nine days after its opening.

The show, "Ni de Aquí, Ni de Allá" ("Neither from here nor from there"), was on display at the university's main College of Visual Art & Design (CVAD) Gallery.

The *Art Newspaper* reports that

the exhibition was closed without advance notice, and its street-facing windows were covered with brown paper.

The exhibition included large-scale translucent paleta sculptures embedded with handcuffs and firearms, an illuminated paleta cart bearing the phrase "U.S. Department of Stolen Land Security" and paintings juxtaposing Indigenous iconography, pop cultural imagery and references to contemporary

border politics. A public reception had been scheduled for 19 February and the exhibition was to remain on view until early May.

The exhibition originated at the Boston University Art Galleries in September 2025

and featured sculptures and mixed-media works from Quiñonez's I.C.E. Scream series, which include large sculptural paletas (Mexican popsicles) and implicitly critique the violent enforcement activities of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Ice).

The closing down of the show is an obvious and blatant capitulation to ultra-right Texas state authorities, who have gone on a rampage against any hint of social opposition or left-wing ideas.

Online art magazine *Glasstire* reports that Quiñonez was "completely caught off guard" by the closure and cancellation.

[Quiñonez] said he noticed the sudden absence from social media and that a banner advertisement had been removed from the UNT website, but that inquiries on the state of the exhibition to Stefanie Dlugosz-Acton, CVAD Galleries Curator and Director, received no response for several days.

The ultimate reply from the CVAD

stated that UNT had terminated its loan agreement—a standard document for exhibitions

insuring all artworks during transport, installation, and exhibition—with Boston University Art Galleries, and “is making arrangements to return the exhibit to Boston University,” and that “Any activities associated with the exhibition are no longer necessary.”

Quiñonez’s publicist released a statement, which asserted in part that the exhibition’s

removal, without transparent explanation, raises urgent questions about artistic freedom, academic responsibility, and whose stories are permitted to occupy institutional space...

Universities have historically functioned as sites for dialogue, critical thinking, and the exchange of complex ideas. The cancellation of this exhibition interrupts that dialogue.

Faculty at the university, which has more than 50,000 students, responded angrily to the exhibition’s closure. Members of the CVAD addressed an open letter to UNT President Harrison Keller “expressing concern about what they characterized as a lack of transparency and the potential erosion of academic standards.”

Graduate students followed up with their own statement, asserting:

This decision does not stand in isolation. ... [T]here has been a troubling pattern of interruptions and cancellations affecting exhibitions on campus. These actions have created an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear among students and employees. This has had a chilling effect on free speech across the college. Many now question whether presenting challenging ideas in their artwork or even discussing recent censorship events could expose them to retaliation.

Students organized a candlelight gathering outside the shut-down gallery. “Flowers, electric candles and handwritten notes were placed on the floor beneath the papered-over windows,” according to one report.

University officials have not publicly explained or justified the act of censorship. However, writes the *Art Newspaper*,

some speculated that the decision was related to the shifting political landscape for public higher education in Texas. Since the 2023 passage of Senate Bill 17, diversity, equity and inclusion offices and programming at public universities have been targeted as administrators across the state have navigated heightened scrutiny over campus events and exhibitions.

According to transcripts obtained by *Glasstire*, in February meetings, Karen Hutzler, the dean of CVAD, said that the exhibition’s cancellation was the result of an “institutional directive” that came from higher-ups.

She reportedly said that while CVAD has its own policies, these are ultimately superseded by the university’s authority.

The disgraceful episode has not passed off quietly, to the credit of the artist and the angry students and faculty. CBS News reported April 10 that a mobile billboard, mounted on the back of a truck driving around the campus, “carries a five-word message that has sparked conversation among students.” It reads in large letters: “UNT ADMIN CENSORED MARKA27’s ART.”

Quiñonez, the National Coalition Against Censorship and the American Civil Liberties Union organized the billboard campaign. A QR code links to a statement from Quiñonez and shows images of the art removed from the university gallery.

The university has not directly addressed the mobile billboard. In a statement about the exhibition, UNT officials told CBS News Texas that “after careful review of multiple considerations, the decision to conclude the agreement [with Boston University] was made by university leadership due to concerns about the potential for disruption to the educational environment and the possible impact on university operations and resources.” Again, that dreadful possibility, “disruption”!



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