

# National Coalition Against Censorship

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## NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors' Equity Association  
American Association of  
School Administrators (The School  
Superintendents Association)  
American Association of  
University Professors  
American Association of  
University Women  
American Booksellers for Free Expression  
American Civil Liberties Union  
American Ethical Union  
American Federation of Teachers  
American Jewish Committee  
American Library Association  
American Literary Translators Association  
American Orthopsychiatric Association (Global  
Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social  
Justice)  
American Society of Journalists & Authors  
Americans United for Separation of  
Church & State  
Association of American Publishers  
Authors Guild  
Catholics for Choice  
Children's Literature Association  
College Art Association  
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund  
The Creative Coalition  
Directors Guild of America  
The Dramatists Guild of America  
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund  
Educational Book & Media Association  
First Amendment Lawyers Association  
Free Speech Coalition  
International Literacy Association  
Lambda Legal  
Modern Language Association  
National Center for Science Education  
National Communication Association  
National Council for the Social Studies  
National Council of the Churches (of Christ in  
the USA)  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Council of Teachers of English  
National Education Association  
National Youth Rights Association  
The Newspaper Guild/CWA  
PEN American Center (PEN America)  
People For the American Way  
Planned Parenthood Federation  
of America  
Project Censored  
SAG-AFTRA  
Sexuality Information & Education Council of  
the U.S.  
Society of Children's Book Writers  
& Illustrators  
Speech Communication Association  
Student Press Law Center  
Union for Reform Judaism  
Union of Democratic Intellectuals  
Unitarian Universalist Association  
United Church of Christ  
Office of Communication  
United Methodist Church,  
United Methodist Communications  
Women's American ORT  
Woodhull Freedom Foundation  
Writers Guild of America, East  
Writers Guild of America, West

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Greg Foley, Asset Manager  
Artspace Jackson Flats  
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tel: 612.812.1999

Dear Mr. Foley,

I am writing on behalf of the Arts Advocacy Program at the National Coalition Against Censorship, an alliance of 56 national non-profit organizations united in defense of free expression, regarding the removal of artworks that depict nudes from an exhibition on your premises. In demanding that these artworks be removed, Artspace has violated the core values of artistic freedom, as well as its mission to nurture the creative well-being of artists who live, work and exhibit in its spaces. We strongly urge Artspace, with its decades-long history of arts advocacy, to develop a set of reasonable exhibition policies that are in keeping with its mission as an organization that fosters the arts.

At the very least, Artspace's demands to remove artworks containing nudity reveals a stunning lack of basic knowledge of art history, where the nude has been a staple for centuries and across cultures. In practical terms, it reveals the absence of a fair and transparent exhibitions policy that would protect the rights of resident artists who agree to exhibit their work at Artspace Jackson Flats. While this exhibition has closed, the ramifications of this incident will undoubtedly affect future exhibitions in Artspace gallery spaces.

Ironically, the exhibition, "Beauty in Every Body," was organized around the theme of body positivity, and it aimed to encourage positive change in attitudes towards gender, self-image and sexuality. Curated by Kristin Harsma, a resident artist in Artspace Jackson Flats who proposed the exhibition last year, the show included over 30 works of art in different media, many of which depict nudes.

It is our understanding that after the exhibition opened, a fellow resident complained to the administration about the nudity, claiming to be acting on behalf of the Somali Muslim community. Since that person is neither Somali nor Muslim, and residents from the Muslim community have not complained about the show, the complaint hardly justifies the removal of artworks.

And yet, in response to this single complaint, Artspace demanded that Harsma alter her show by removing the artworks containing nudes. Harsma then covered the nude portions of several works with pieces of paper bearing the word “censored.” Someone in the building who didn’t have the authority to touch the artworks, covered up several of them, taping directly onto some canvases and possibly damaging them. Artspace responded by demanding that Harsma move the work to a second gallery space where residents would not encounter nudes when leaving or entering the building. The exhibition closed a week ahead of schedule.

If simple nudity was routinely considered reasonable grounds for excluding artwork from public exhibition, vast amounts of art, including many masterpieces, would be off limits. And if we are to remove nudes from art in the public sphere, we will lose some of the most important and edifying artworks of human history, including works by Michelangelo, Titian, Rembrandt, Manet, Rodin, Degas, Modigliani and Picasso, to name but a few artists for whom the nude was central. By removing nudes from public view, we remove access to a living language of visual expression and its centuries-old heritage. But more than that, wrapping the human form in shame alienates us from our own bodies. While this is nothing new, it is puzzling, and the frequency of this kind of censorship poses a real threat to freedom of expression and the robust complexity and fabric of our culture. Certainly, for a space dedicated to art and artists and an exhibition intended to challenge our dominant ideas about bodies and beauty, the censoring of nudes is especially concerning.

Sadly, while Artspace offers a wonderful national program for artists—advocating for their needs by developing affordable spaces in a world where such spaces are rapidly disappearing—in this instance, it has failed to support free expression in the arts and has trampled the rights of artists in their program—the very people it is supposed to nurture. Suppressing an exhibition over a complaint about nudes, where the opinions of a few (or, in this case, one) are foisted upon the entire community, is a form of censorship that casts a chill on future exhibitions and on artists that dwell and function in Artspace residences. However, this can be remedied by developing transparent, reasonable policies and guidelines. NCAC’s Arts Advocacy program is eager to assist Artspace in developing this essential part of its mission in arts advocacy.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Joy Garnett', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Joy Garnett  
Arts Advocacy Associate  
National Coalition Against Censorship

Cc:

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