

National Coalition Against Censorship

Burnsville Visual Arts Society
Board of Directors
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Christopher M. Finan
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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

May 31, 2018

Dear Members of the Board,

As an organization dedicated to promoting free speech, including freedom of artistic expression, we were concerned to learn that the Burnsville Visual Arts Society (BVAS) removed a painting from their current exhibition at the Ames Center because its subject—police violence against people of color—offended some board members. In voting to remove this work, BVAS has denied support to an artist member and missed an opportunity to show artwork that thoughtfully broaches an urgently relevant topic. Its decision to remove the work runs counter to its mission to “encourage our members’ artistic growth both professionally and personally and to advance the value of the visual arts in our communities.” We strongly encourage BVAS to restore the painting to the exhibition before its closing date.

It is our understanding that in March, BVAS issued an open call to its members to submit their work for display in the “Art Fete” exhibition (May 9-June 14) at the Ames Center in Burnsville. Soon after BVAS member Annie Young delivered and installed her work, she received an urgent call to remove it before the exhibition’s opening reception. She immediately removed the work, and BVAS allowed her to replace it with another piece.

The painting Young removed, *cause of death: implicit bias*, sports a yellow banner bearing the words “Qualified Immunity” below which the figure of a child casts an enormous black shadow. The shadow wields a gun and displays a chest full of bullet holes in the shape of a peace sign. Above the figure is a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice.” Two more columns of text are culled from statements made by Benjamin Crump, the civil rights attorney representing the families of African American victims of police violence, including Michael Brown, Tamir Rice and Trayvon Martin. Among these excerpts is the poignant question: “How many more black men will be killed by police officers before real change is implemented in the way America polices communities and people of color?”

Young created her painting in response to events described in news stories of violence by police against unarmed people of color in order to call attention to this ongoing tragedy. However, BVAS board members, offended by what they believed to be police bashing, voted to remove the work. But claims of offense do not in and of themselves provide adequate justification for censoring artwork, and in this era of intense political polarization, many artworks may be offensive to someone’s viewpoint.

Also, by removing Young's painting, BVAS sets a precedent that could usher in demands to remove artworks that may be at odds with some individuals' beliefs, subjecting future exhibitions to pressure from members of the board and the community alike.

We strongly encourage BVAS to weigh the implications of removing a work due to the discomfort of some viewers, even when these include some of its own board members. Rather than suppress a provocative work, BVAS could choose instead to uphold their mission to promote "the beauty, thought, and peace the arts provide" by honoring the diverse viewpoints of its members. We urge the board to find a way to restore Young's timely painting to the exhibition; in addition to reinstating the work, BVAS should establish a set of transparent guidelines that will help protect their own curatorial decisions as well as the rights of individual artists—their artist members, whose member dues they collect—artists whose vision and growth they are committed to supporting. We would be happy to help BVAS draft such a set of guidelines.

Due to the brief timeline of the exhibition, which closes after June 14, we request a response to this letter by Monday of next week (June 4). We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Garnett', with a stylized flourish extending from the end.

Joy Garnett
Arts Advocacy Associate
National Coalition Against Censorship

Cc: Brian Luther, Executive Director, The Ames Center
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