

# National Coalition Against Censorship

Burnsville Visual Arts Society  
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Christopher M. Finan  
*Executive Director*

## 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 'JG', with a stylized flourish extending from the top right.

Joy Garnett  
Arts Advocacy Associate  
National Coalition Against Censorship

Cc: Brian Luther, Executive Director, The Ames Center  
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