

# National Coalition Against Censorship

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*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

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February 11, 2019

Dear Mr. Collins,

As a national organization dedicated to promoting free speech, including freedom of artistic expression, we are concerned by the removal of three paintings from an exhibition held at the Cary Senior Center due to fears that patrons might find them offensive. We strongly urge the Town of Cary to restore the paintings to the exhibition and to adopt clear guidelines for artists and administrators to prevent similar arbitrary actions from occurring in the future.

It is our understanding that these three paintings were part of a solo exhibition of paintings by US-based Chinese artist Bing Weng, who submitted 10 sample works through your Open Call process. A jury reviewed the submissions approximately one year in advance, and awarded Bing Weng a solo exhibition at the Cary Senior Center based on the ten sample images. While there are a total of 38 paintings in the exhibition, there was no notification of further vetting by the Town and no explicit restrictions on content.

Soon after the show was installed and before it opened on January 25, the artist received an email that she must remove three of her paintings due to their political theme, citing "the Town's desire to not offend facility patrons." The works were then removed, put in storage, and replaced with three of the artist's still life paintings.

Town administrators explained that they removed the three paintings because their political content was "inconsistent" with the ten images the artist submitted for review. They also said that because the Senior Center is a multi-use facility in a public government building, the three paintings were inappropriate because patrons of the senior center are a "general audience" that does not expect to be challenged by political artworks at the center (as opposed to encountering them in a museum or gallery).

While government officials can decide whether to invite an artist to present their work or not, once they have done so, administrators cannot remove works for subjective reasons related to viewpoint, nor may they remove works after they have been installed based on the fear that they may offend some viewers. Under the First Amendment, the government may not suppress speech or artistic expression in order to avoid offending someone.

Our courts have time and again reaffirmed that those administering public venues cannot impose their subjective viewpoints to exclude work they do not like or for fear of the heckler's veto. To exhibit a work of art is not to endorse the work or the vision, ideas, and opinions of the artist; it is to uphold the right of all to experience diverse visions and views. To suggest that patrons of the Cary Senior Center are unable to handle politically themed work underestimates them and the breadth of their interests, and by removing these three paintings it prevents them from experiencing and judging the works for themselves.

Moreover, through these three paintings, Bing Weng addresses human rights abuses that she felt forced to remain silent about at home in China. While here in the US we celebrate freedom of speech, the Town's lack of clear guidelines and its abrupt removal of the works warrants a comparison to the way such works are dealt with in China, where artists and curators are left guessing, never knowing exactly what might provoke government censorship, and rendered mute and powerless once it occurs.

We urge the Town of Cary to immediately restore Bing Weng's three paintings to the exhibition at the Cary Senior Center and to extend their display for an additional week, if possible, so that the works have a chance to be seen. We strongly recommend that it draft clear and concise guidelines for its bi-annual Open Call so that in the future, artists and administrators can clearly understand the parameters and limitations of its exhibition requirements. We also recommend that an additional vetting process be put in place to ensure that the Town can review and approve the final selection of works to be exhibited before they are installed.

We request your response by the end of the day tomorrow, Tuesday, February 12.

Sincerely,



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National Coalition Against Censorship

Cc:

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