

**NATIONAL  
COALITION  
AGAINST  
CENSORSHIP**

**ARTS  
ADVOCACY  
PROGRAM**

November 15, 2019

Jim Gash, President  
Pepperdine University  
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Dear President Gash,

As an alliance of national non-profit organizations united in defense of academic and artistic freedom, we were disturbed to learn of the plan to quarantine a Pepperdine student's artworks from a forthcoming exhibition because they depict nudes. In doing so, the university would effectively discriminate against the student, stigmatize the artworks' content, and infantilize the audience. We strongly urge you to install these artworks in the main exhibition space alongside the other works in the show as originally intended.

It is our understanding that the student, Alessandra Guth, who is a senior and an art major, produced a series of seven photographic works that reference The Seven Deadly Sins. The works are intended to encourage discussion around themes of the human body, religion and sexuality, and depict fellow students' nude bodies (without displaying their faces) printed on canvas and suspended in frames. Administrators have decided to sequester Guth's works, and will install them in a mobile art gallery adjacent to the main exhibition space for the night of the opening reception on November 21, after which, the mobile gallery will be moved off campus. Thus, while her peers' work will be on view for the remainder of the semester, after the opening, Guth's work will no longer be on display and effectively censored for the duration.

Since these works' depiction of simple nudes is neither obscene nor pornographic, removing them from their cohort is unreasonable and needlessly discriminatory. If simple nudity were routinely considered reasonable grounds for excluding artwork from public exhibition, vast amounts of art, including many masterpieces, would be off limits. And if we were to remove nudes from art in the public sphere (which includes museums, churches and public squares), we would lose some of the most important and edifying artworks of human history, including works by Michelangelo (e.g. the Sistine Chapel), Bernini (e.g. public fountains of Rome), Titian, Rembrandt, Rodin, Degas, Modigliani and Picasso, to name but a few artists for whom the nude was central. By removing art that depicts nudes from public view, we remove access to a living language of visual expression and its centuries-old heritage.

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

**NCAC PARTICIPATING  
ORGANIZATIONS**

Actors' Equity Association  
AICA-USA  
American Association of  
School Administrators  
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 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  
Dramatists Guild of America  
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund  
Educational Book & Media Association  
First Amendment Lawyers Association  
Free Speech Coalition  
Freedom to Read Foundation  
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  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Council of Teachers of English  
National Education Association  
National Youth Rights Association  
The NewsGuild-CWA  
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  
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 Sexual Freedom Alliance  
Writers Guild of America, East  
Writers Guild of America, West

complexity and fabric of our culture. Certainly, for a university dedicated to nurturing the inner and intellectual lives of its students, censoring artworks over their depiction of nudes is especially concerning. By quarantining and then removing these works, the university runs afoul of its mission to nurture the creative and intellectual wellbeing of its students and the core values of academic freedom. When they show their work publicly, art students have the experience of speaking to more than a group of art school insiders. The response to art displayed on a college campus should be the same as the response to ideas voiced in the classroom: discussion and debate, not censorship.

In 1990, the participants of the 'Wolf Trap Conference on Academic Freedom and Artistic Expression' adopted a statement of principles in support of artistic freedom on campus. The statement, intended to strengthen academic commitment to artistic freedom, was endorsed by the American Association of University Professors and has been endorsed or adapted by many individual colleges. It remains relevant today:

*Attempts to curtail artistic presentations at academic institutions on grounds that the works are offensive to some members of the campus community and general public occur with disturbing frequency. Those who support restrictions argue that works presented to the public rather than in the classroom or other entirely intramural settings should conform to their view of the prevailing community standard rather than to standards of academic freedom. We believe that "essential as freedom is for the relation and judgment of facts, it is even more indispensable to the imagination." In our judgment academic freedom in the creation and presentation of works in the visual and performing arts, by ensuring greater opportunity for imaginative exploration and expression, best serves the public and the academy.*

<https://ncac.org/resource/1990-wolf-trap-conference-on-academic-freedom-artistic-expression-statement>

We strongly encourage you to install Guth's artworks in the main exhibition space as intended. Please inform us of the action you will take to reaffirm Pepperdine University's commitment to academic freedom. Do not hesitate to call or write to us if you need assistance, guidance, materials or further information. We request your response by next Friday, November 22.

Best regards,



Joy Garnett  
Arts Advocacy Associate  
National Coalition Against Censorship

Cc:

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