



22 February 2023

Heather Everhart
Director and Curator, Law Warschaw Gallery
Macalester College
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Saint Paul, MN 55105-1899
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Sent via email

Dear Ms. Everhart,

As organizations committed to upholding the free exchange of ideas in educational and artistic settings, the National Coalition Against Censorship and the College Art Association are deeply concerned by Macalester College's handling of its exhibition, *TARAVAT* by Taravat Talepasand. We urge you to remove the exhibition protest materials from the doors of the gallery, apply neutral language to the exhibition content advisory, and to convene an opportunity for the controversial elements of the exhibition to be explored publicly and in depth. If the College is unable to stand by its exhibition programming and generate open dialogue around it, it fails its students as well as the exhibiting artist.

Taravat Talepasand is an established Iranian-American artist whose work has been shown in venues across the United States and internationally. Her work is known for its applying a feminist, counter-culture lens to the tropes and images commonly associated with Islam and Iran. It is our understanding that some elements in her mid-career survey at the Law Warsaw Gallery upset some members of the Macalester student body because of the ways they juxtapose themes of overt sexuality, protest, and Islamic piety.

Because Talepasand's work intends to challenge convention, it is understandable that some viewers find it shocking or distasteful. While the College has a responsibility to acknowledge and respond to these critiques of the exhibition, many of its approaches to this controversy have been problematic. This includes the irony of veiling with black curtains an exhibition addressing (among other things) enforced modesty, and the one-sided perspective in the public apology issued by the College. However, we would like to focus on three elements of the response that, we hope, can still be corrected.

First, while offended students have a right to protest the exhibition on campus, it is unacceptable to allow their protest materials to be posted on the doors of the exhibition space. This prominent display of the protest poster reads as an official endorsement of the protesters' perspective, and its placement—intercepting visitors and framing the exhibition in a biased

manner—undermines the exhibition and the artist’s intended message. The posters should instead be made available at a location close to the gallery, where it is clear that they are not officially endorsed by the college.

Second, exhibition content advisories should be informational, not prejudicial. As of February 10th, a disclaimer on the gallery doors suggested that the exhibition is “upsetting,” “unacceptable,” and should be viewed “with caution.” Such wording prepares the audience to look for “upsetting” and “unacceptable” material, influencing their interpretation of the work before they even encounter it. The statement that follows on the disclaimer—that neither the College nor Gallery endorses the views of the artist or exhibition—is both redundant and suspect in its singling out of this particular exhibition. If the College wants to make explicit what usually goes without saying, it should apply this general statement to all its exhibition programming, not just to certain exhibitions.

Finally, to compensate for the reductive interpretation of the exhibition resulting from the controversy and its handling, we urge you to convene a talk with experts in religion, art history, social movements, and/or other related fields, to reflect on *TARAVAT* and offer nuanced approaches to reading the exhibition and its critiques. As a place of higher education, Macalester has a duty to engage and guide its student body as they consider and discuss various perspectives in the spirit of open inquiry and good faith.

We have attached guidelines drafted by the NCAC, the College Art Association, the Association of Academic Museums and Galleries, and others, which show how museums can uphold freedom of expression while exhibiting controversial material. We encourage you to draw from this resource as you determine your next steps in addressing this incident, and as you plan for future exhibitions.

Please contact us if we can be of any assistance.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Larison
Director, Arts & Culture Advocacy Program
National Coalition Against Censorship

Meme Omogbai
Executive Director and CEO
College Art Association

cc:

Lisa Anderson-Levy, Executive Vice President and Provost, Macalester College
Alina Wong, Vice President for Institutional Equity Macalester College
Kari Sheperdson-Scott, Chair, Department of Art and Art History, Macalester College

National Coalition Against Censorship

Since its inception in 1974, the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) has functioned as a first responder in protecting freedom of expression, a fundamental human right and a keystone of democracy. Representing 59 trusted education, publishing, and arts organizations, NCAC encourages and facilitates dialogue between diverse voices and perspectives, including those that have historically been silenced.

College Art Association

CAA, as the preeminent international leadership organization in the visual arts, promotes these arts and their understanding through advocacy, intellectual engagement, and a commitment to the diversity of practices and practitioners.