July 30, 2024

Molly Eppard
Coordinator, Art in Public Places
75 S. Frontage Road West
Vail, CO 81657

Sent via email to meppard@vail.gov and publicinput.vailtowncouncil@vail.gov

Dear Ms. Eppard and the Town Council of Vail, Colorado,

I am writing on behalf of the National Coalition Against Censorship, a 50-year-old coalition of over 60 national organizations dedicated to upholding freedom of thought, inquiry, and expression. Our Arts & Culture Advocacy Program is the only national project dedicated to working with artists and cultural institutions in the service of protecting artistic freedom in the United States.

We are alarmed to learn about the May 2024 decision made by the Town of Vail, Colorado, to cancel Danielle SeeWalker’s artist residency with the town’s Art in Public Places Program, which was to happen in June. The residency, which had been in development since January, was to include the commission of a new mural, a photo exhibition of existing work depicting contemporary Native American life, a workshop on creating parfleche, and public talk.

Our understanding is that the cancellation occurred because of community complaints about an unrelated artwork by SeeWalker that was created for a different exhibition. That work depicts a portrait of a figure wearing a keffiyeh adorned with an eagle feather, and is titled G is for Genocide. Per the artist’s explanation on social media, the portrait addresses the crisis in Gaza and considers the parallel experiences of Gazan and Native American populations. In statements, the Town of Vail explained its decision to cancel the residency arose from concerns that the unrelated artwork, along with SeeWalker's political views expressed on social media, could "politicize" the public art program.

In our increasingly political environment, cultural programs are faced with the very high likelihood of working with artists who happen to be politically outspoken in their artworks and/or in their public statements. In fact, the bulk of SeeWalker’s lauded body of work is undeniably political in its focus on the culture of Native Americans and the violence and inequalities they have faced since colonization.
In a democratic society, it should be anticipated and accepted that artists may wish to comment on political issues—both in their personal lives and in art. Artists’ right to political and civic expression must be defended, not punished.

Though the town claims that it canceled SeeWalker’s residency in an effort to make sure it wouldn’t “ politicize” the AIPP program, in abandoning months of discussions with SeeWalker and siding with the political views of a complainant who disliked an unrelated artwork, it does just that. For a town to censor art based on reaction to an individual’s specific political views is impermissible under the first amendment.

Per Vail’s stated intentions to “reexamine its approach and create robust and specific guidelines” for the future iterations of its Art In Public Places Program, we’d like to offer the following as guidance for establishing policies that promote transparency around Vail’s AIPP program’s artist/artwork selection criteria and uphold artistic freedom.

*Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy* is a document we drafted in collaboration with a cohort of national and international arts and museum organizations concerned with protecting artistic expression. Page four has a sample “freedom of speech commitment” that might be of interest.

*Exhibition Criteria Guidelines for State Arts Agencies, Museums, University Galleries, and Performance Spaces* offers frameworks for considering how to shape an exhibition criteria policy that upholds principles of artistic freedom.

Should you have any questions, or should you want any feedback or support as your department embarks on its declared path of “real transformation,” please let us know. We’d be more than happy to advise on how best to uphold artistic freedom in the process.

Sincerely,

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