

Art and Artists - 1990

Watsonville policy rejected by artists

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WATSONVILLE — Would you be offended by an artistic picture of a woman nursing her baby? What if you had to pass that picture on your way to paying your water bill?

A photograph by John Gilberto Rodriguez of Watsonville would have been part of the "Memories and Chances: Images of Culture and Heritage" exhibit organized by the Santa Cruz gallery Arte Latino and displayed at Watsonville City Hall this month.

The picture was one of three that two city administrators rejected because of nudity or political overtones, said Arte Latino Executive Director Julie Arizmendi. They are the first to come up against Watsonville's new art policy.

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And there were other works that never reached the city's review. Artist Ed Ramos of San Juan Bautista withdrew his paintings and sketches when he learned of the city's requirements.

"The whole thing has been censored," said Ramos. "I don't need that type of show."

"Why jump in an ant hole when I don't need to?" Ramos said.

Ramos was commissioned for the show before the city passed its policy, and he

said his anti-Columbus paintings and sketches would have been rejected by the city.

Rather than submit himself to city inspection, Ramos said he chose to skip the show altogether.

While Ramos said he understands the need for guidelines, he doesn't endorse the principle of requiring politics to be separated from art, especially with such political issues as the 500-year anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival in

America.

"To a certain extent, there should be a guideline. There are some things I don't want my kids to be exposed to," said Ramos. "But political and social statements are part of art."

City officials wanted exhibits that wouldn't create anger or resentment. Those were the reactions to a display in May 1991 entitled "Spirit of El Salvador." The exhibit had political overtones and anti-American sentiments, some alleged.

As a result of last year's problems, council members passed an art policy last month in which no works may "promote or condone violence against an individual or group."

The council also established an Arts Commission, which will approve the pieces of work before they go on display.

But the commission has yet to be established since nominations have not been made by council members, City Clerk

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'Mother with child' by John Rodriguez will not be shown.

Art show

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Lorraine Washington said.

"The make-up of the panel will be the most important thing," said Arizmendi.

The city permitted Arte Latino's May exhibit before the establishment of a commission on the condition that anything with the potential for controversy not be allowed in the show, Washington said.

Until the commission is in place, the council granted Washington, as city clerk, and City Manager Steve Salomon to review artwork for display.

Once the commission is in place, a community representative, a local artist and a representative of the Pajaro Valley Arts Council will join Washington and Salomon in reviewing the artwork.

"We talked to Julie and Jorge Chino (the editor of El Andar who helped organize the current exhibit) and they agreed they would remove any works that weren't approved," Washington said. "We would allow no nudes or anything that would cause controversy until the art committee was in place."

Another rejected work, by Trinidad Castro of Santa Cruz, portrayed an Aztec pyramid with a Catholic church built on top.

"My piece was censored because they thought it would be offensive to the Catholic community," said Castro. "We did want to have the show and didn't want to ruffle anybody's feathers, so I didn't make an issue of it."

"In a way, I felt kind of good," Castro said. "I thought, 'Oh, I'm controversial now.'"

Watsonville isn't the only city that has run into problems with displaying art in government buildings.

In December, Santa Cruz's Loudon Nelson Center caused a stir with its exhibit celebrating the 200th anniversary of the Bill of Rights. The city pulled 17 of 25 works because of their "explicit" content, said Loudon Nelson Supervisor Kristin Masters.



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This work by Trinidad Castro was rejected. The words translates as: 'There exists no document of culture that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.'

Since then, managers at Loudon Nelson have established a policy that doesn't consist of specific guidelines, Masters said.

"We approve or deny entire shows, instead of getting into the censorship of individual works," Masters said. "We'd have to get a real diverse group to come up with specific guidelines."

"We're different from a gallery, where you go to look at art," Masters said. "People need to come here either for child care or classes."