

Features

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Section
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Censored!

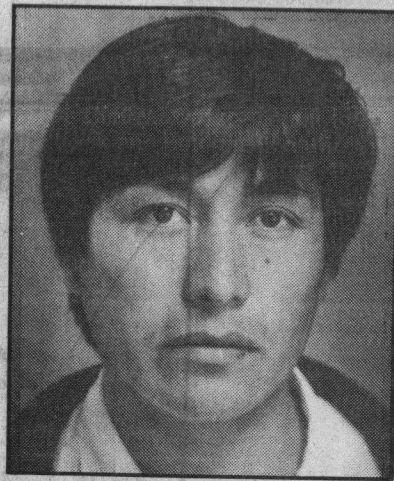
Viewers rebel;
artists fear
growing trend



Robert Tager's 'Rejoice' was banished.



Painting by Malaquias Montoya hangs in Watsonville City Hall as part of El Salvadoran exhibition.



'We have a small white minority who are opposed to any changes here.'

— *Jorge Chino,*
art show organizer

"There is so much violence evident in our society, and yet a picture which is something of beauty can be taken from public view, presumably because it showed part of the human form and someone didn't like it." — Robert Tager, president of the Santa Cruz Art League.

By **TRACIE WHITE**
Sentinel staff writer

ROBERT TAGER describes his photograph entitled "Re-joyce" as "a subtle nude from above the waist with graceful arm gestures, dark and dimly defined, wearing a Balinese mask."

Apparently, not everyone sees it that way. The photograph, which sold Saturday, now hangs at the Santa Cruz Art League. It was moved there last week after being censored from a Peace Day exhibit at the County Center. Complaints had been filed that it was "objectionable" for a public place.

Tager, who is also president of the Art League, folded his arms across his chest, looked at his photograph and shook his head. He's still shocked.

"I never was given a reason that my photograph was removed," he said. "I thought mine was a particularly good example of how far you can go. This can very easily get out of hand."

Tager's photograph was one of three cen-

sored from the third annual "Peace Begins at Home" art exhibit held in conjunction with Peace Day on the third floor of the Santa Cruz County Center. Like many local artists, Tager is still deeply disturbed by the event.

"I'd always thought of Santa Cruz as being open to freedom of expression. Lately I've been very disappointed."

Tager is referring to four recent events:

- The removal from a second floor exhibit in the County building of a sculpture depicting a penis emerging from a flower where the flower's pistil would normally be.

- The removal of the three photographs from the third floor of the county building, two of which showed bare breasts. The other showed bare breasts and pubic hair.

- Attempts by employees at Watsonville City Hall to remove an El Salvadoran art exhibit called "Espiritu de El Salvador" from the City Hall walls because, they said, it was anti-American.

- Complaints from Watsonville High School staff and parents which temporarily stopped work on a mural by students which, they said, depicted gang-like images.

Add to this an event about a year ago at an exhibit held by India Joze restaurant, and, Tager said, he's worried. At India Joze, Media Watch — a feminist group which watches for degrading images of women — posted a label on a photograph warning that the piece of art "led to women hating."

"I've lived in Santa Cruz for 11 years, and I've never seen anything like this," Tager said. "I think it's like a domino effect."

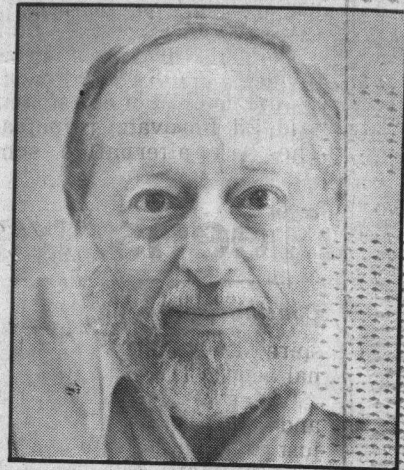
Tager draws parallels between recent events at a national level and local censorship of artwork. He maintains that attempts to censor Robert Mapplethorpe's photography exhibits, and place artistic restrictions on grants by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) for funding the exhibit, can't help but trickle down to the local level.

"It does concern me that it's a trend," Tager said. "It does seem to be happening nationally — triggered by, or given impetus by, the Mapplethorpe exhibit. It concerns me because the issue is freedom of expression. Museums and galleries with any federal funding are frightened, and they're not showing exhibits that may raise doubts."

Wendy Chapkis, an instructor at UC Santa Cruz and one of the founders of the Bulkhead Gallery, which features alternative art forms in Santa Cruz, said the gallery lost its lease last year when the building's owners became concerned about shows featuring homosexual content.

"There really is a kind of new phase in trying to control the arts," said Chapkis. "You see how these things affect local communities. It has a chilling effect on even progressive communities like Santa Cruz."

Please see **ART — B3**



'You might like it or not. It might upset you greatly. That doesn't mean it shouldn't be shown.'

— *Robert Tager,*
artist

Art



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While local artists are complaining about infringements on their artistic expression, some protesters are complaining that their attempts to express dissent are often quickly dismissed as "censorship."

"Censorship is a term used to silence any opposition or anyone voicing an opinion," said Ann Simonton, founder and director of Media Watch. "My intention was to start a debate."

Simonton said she found the photograph at India Joze objectionable because the woman looked unconscious and it further stereotyped Asian women.

She also objected to seeing the photograph in a public dining place.

"I don't want to gag on the food in a family place," she said.

Government officials, like Ben Angove, have been caught in the middle of this battle, struggling to balance public demands with issues of artistic freedom. Angove, the county's director of Parks, Open Space and Cultural Services, was ultimately responsible for the removal of the four pieces of artwork at the county building.

The critical factor at the county building is that it is a public place, Angove said.

"Not only is it a public place, it's an office building where you're a captive audience. That's the only reason I've allowed myself to be dragged into this kicking and screaming. I don't know what I would have done if the artists said absolutely not."

The county has contracted the Cultural Council for the past eight years to exhibit about five displays a year at the county building. Since that project started, only



Latinos in the way of art and cultural events."

The show, which was exhibited last month at the Coco-Mexican Style gallery in Santa Cruz, is described by Rick Murno, a curator at Coco's, as "very, very political and critical of American policies."

"We thought that it was too political to be in City Hall in Watsonville," Murno said. Many of the staff at City Hall obviously agreed. Now they're angry that their protests are being called racist.

"The issue is that this is my work place," said one employee who asked not to be named. "Something offends me. It's too bad we don't feel free to express that publicly. I think we should have as much freedom of expression to be able to say it offends us without being accused of being racist."

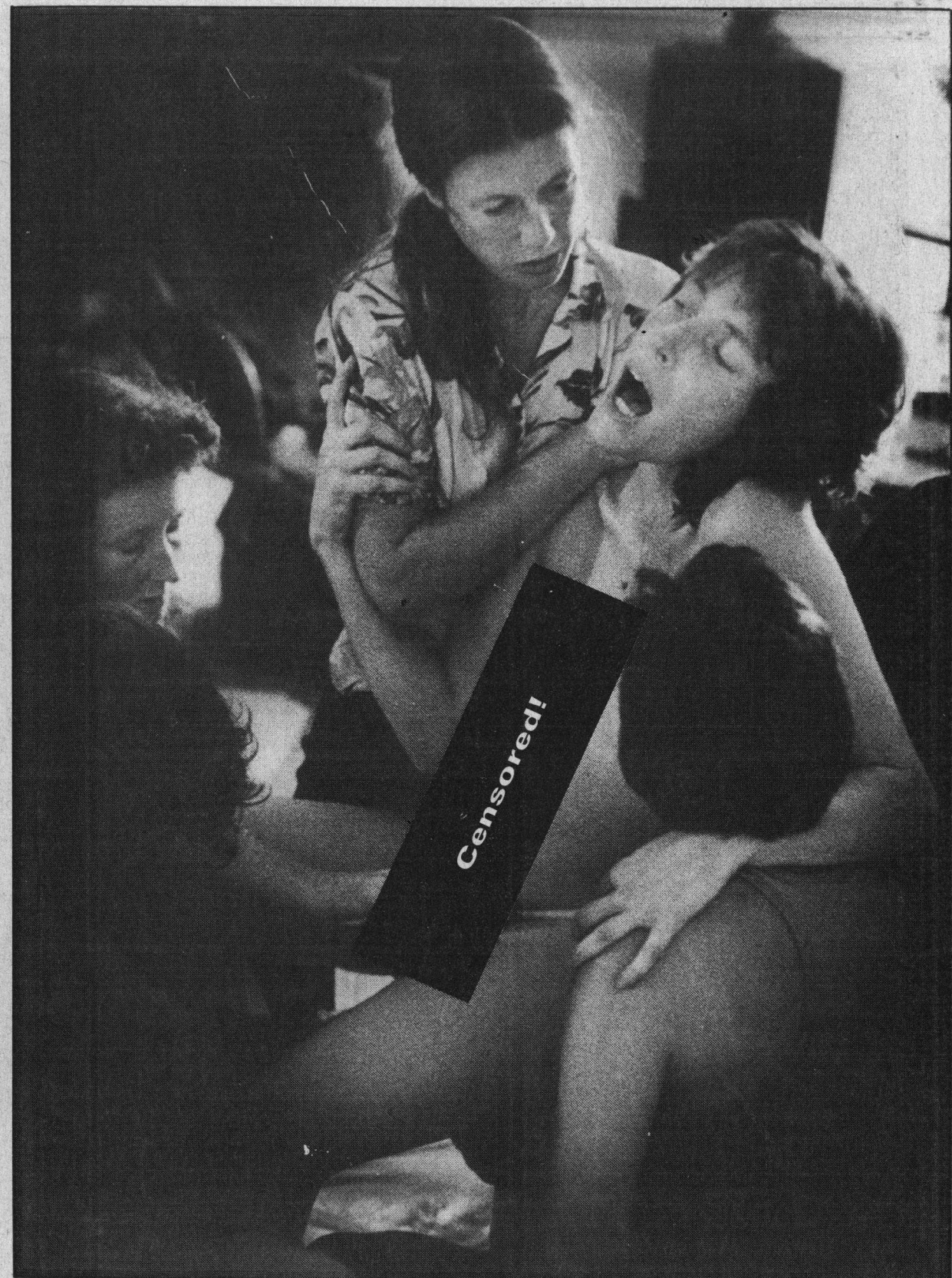
The exhibit is offensive because it's anti-American, the employee said.

"We're offended by the Ameri-

say, 'What do you expect, putting a penis out there?' This penis looks like a flower. It's not offensive in any way. They allow kids to see violence on TV every day. It's a very peaceful image. I don't quite get the standard. You can go kill somebody, but you can't make love?"

"It's hard to know where one person's offense ends and another begins," Chapkis said. "But it really alarms me that somehow the arts are considered something that should be inoffensive rather than a challenge. That should be part of the definition of art."

"If art is expressive it will hit an emotional cord," added Tager. "You might like it or not. It might upset you greatly. That doesn't mean it shouldn't be shown."



Three pieces removed from the Peace Day exhibit at the County Building were the photograph of lovers on a beach by Catharina Marlowe, top left; sculpture of a sexually explicit lily by J. Adrian Berry, left; and 'Home Birth' by Shmuel Thaler.

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Since that project started, only

ist.

The exhibit is offensive because it's anti-American, the employee said.

"We're offended by the American flag being worn by a woman holding dead babies. I have to come every day and work here. I go to get a drink of water, and it's right there. It's like having something shoved down my throat. I'd rather have holes in the wall than have to look at something that insults my government."

'I don't want to gag on the food in a family place.'

— Ann Simonton,
*objected to a photograph
in a public dining place*

about two art pieces have been taken down because of public complaints, Angove said.

"And it's only when there's an overwhelming reaction," said Angove. "We've had numerous calls. Once the notoriety on the first piece (the sculpture) got out, it brought other people out."

Angove has asked for changes in the Cultural Council's selection process for future exhibits, which includes seeing every piece of art before it is displayed. But he still insists that "there's not a guideline that one should or could write for the selection of art." He just hopes that in the future, it won't be up to county officials to decide whether to take something down.

Photographer Shmuel Thaler, whose photograph of a woman in labor pains was removed from the county building, agreed that what is acceptable in a government building should be different from what is acceptable in a museum.

"I don't think things pornographic, exploitative or having gratuitous violence should be shown in a public place," Thaler said. "I also don't think any of the photos censored from the show fit that category. There's a difference between a picture being hard to look at and violating community standards."

"I think that my picture might fit into the category of something that's hard to look at. I certainly can't imagine why its offensive. I believe that bringing children into the world is an affirmation of peace."

AT WATSONVILLE City Hall, the City Council considered a petition signed by 26 city employees to remove the El Salvadoran art exhibit, but decided ultimately to keep it up. Instead of taking any action now, they plan to develop guidelines for future exhibits at City Hall.

Many employees aren't happy with the decision, but they're keeping quiet about it. The issues of art censorship at City Hall have been tied to issues of racism in the city. Jorge Chino, organizer of the art show and editor of *El Andar*, said that attempts to remove the exhibit have "everything to do with what's happening in Watsonville."

"We always encounter this type of resistance," Chino said. "We have a small white minority who are opposed to any changes here. We are trying to open avenues for

SETTING STANDARDS for what is and is not "acceptable" artwork is always going to be difficult, and few people seem to want to even attempt to do so. But local artists seem to agree, the fewer the restrictions the better.

"It really is so ridiculous," said J. Adrian Berry, the sculptor whose flower depicting a penis was removed from the county. "People