

Steven Durland

“Censorship, Multiculturalism, and Symbols”

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Steven Durland is editor of *High Performance* magazine. In this selection, Durland hypothesizes that the controversy over NEA funding is at root an attack on members of minority groups by racist, homophobic, and sexist white males who dominate American society.

Eventually you will have to ask: who is doing the art that's getting censored? Mapplethorpe was gay, Serrano is Hispanic. Scott Tyler is black. The San Diego billboard group is multicultural, promoting a black cause. While this censorship crisis may be a surprise to many, any multicultural, gay, or feminist artist can give you a litany of examples. Were I to make the charge that these acts of censorship were motivated by racism, homophobia or sexism, I'm sure most of the perpetrators would argue vehemently that such was not the case. And I think they'd honestly believe it when they say it. So what gives?

What gives is that the voice of the dominant culture has never understood what it actually means when it so graciously legislates racial, sexual and gender equality. Subconsciously, they think they're giving everyone a chance to be just like them. A chance live like white men. A chance to make art in the great Euro-Western tradition. They've failed to realize that few want to be like them. Rather, they want the freedom to be themselves, living their religions, and their own histories, and their own cultures. Just like it says in the Constitution. And that is definitely a threat to a country that, in spite of its "Bill of Rights," imagines itself to be white, Christian, heterosexual and male.

There are some overriding art world ironies here. For years national, state and local funding agencies have made it a priority assure that at least token funding go to representatives of these groups. You seldom hear of a peer panel review any more doesn't make a point of noting sex and ethnicity in the distribution of money. What the people at the top have failed to realize, though, is that when you give a voice to people who've been denied for long, what you're going to find out is that these people are pissed* (pun intended) off. No "Thank you, massa" here. They immediately take the opportunity to point out racist governments and sexist religions and Christian hypocrisy. Sure it may be raw. But it's exercising the same right, used with a much greater sense of real "American" morality, that the dominant culture has used for so long to keep women in the home, blacks in their place, and gays on their death beds.

It's a fact that only ten percent of the families in the U.S. are representative of "male provider, woman in the home with the kids." Perhaps these men with their "women in the homes" have more time to write letters, and that's why this small population is

dominating our cultural debate. I don't know. They've certainly managed a voice that vastly outnumbers their membership. Perhaps, in this particular instance, the art world is to blame for its own problems. Any elected official would recognize in an instant that no matter how much artists protest, when it's time to go to the polls, Wildmon's* supporters are going to make their wives go out and vote, while the poorly networked and apolitical members of the art world are deconstructing sitcoms. A sad thought when you consider that the art world potentially has much more clout. ... [*A reference to Donald Wildmon of Mississippi, a social activist and leader of the American Family Association. Mr. Wildmon has been active in opposing works of art deemed obscene or irreligious.]

The final, overriding irony in all this is that all parties involved—the artists, the conservative right, the Congress—are in the position of not being able to do anything about the things that are really upsetting them. To compensate, each group, in their own way, is attacking what is perceived to be a symbol of its antagonism. For the artists, those symbols may be the crucifixes of religious zealots, the flags of racist governments, or the sexual mores of oppressive cults. (Excuse me, but why aren't fanatic Christians who give lots of money to dubious ministers considered cultists? Where are the de-programmers when you need them?) For the conservative right, the art they attack is, for them, symbolic of a general breakdown in moral fiber. For Congress, this is their Grenada: a symbolic show of power directed toward a tiny, defenseless agency in a government over which they've lost control.

For the artists, working with symbols is the stock in trade. For the others, it's a cop out. The artists have done their job. They've called attention to some of our social, cultural and political failings. If Helms or Wildmon wants to "kill the messenger," they're just not doing their job.

To quote Hilton Kramer, "What we're being asked to support and embrace in the name of art is an attitude toward life." He's right. But unlike Mr. Kramer, I would see it as very positive to support an attitude—even a government supported policy—that champions freedom of expression. Especially when we're faced with the alternatives—the ones we generally associate with such names as Hitler, Stalin, Khomeini and Deng Xiaoping. Need we add Helms to that list?

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