

NOTE: Mapplethorpe - Leis Cincinnati Case

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Trouble Right Here in Cincinnati: Furor Over Mapplethorpe Exhibit

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An exhibit of photographs that ignited a ferocious debate last summer over Federal financing of sexually explicit art is headed for Cincinnati, a city that casts itself as a bulwark in the war against pornography. And the ruckus has begun.

Local law-enforcement officials and anti-pornography groups have risen up against the exhibit, a retrospective of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs, which includes sexually oriented images.

Officials of the Contemporary Arts Center, which is to exhibit the photographs, say business leaders have put pressure on the center and its board members to cancel the April 6 opening, with some protesters even threatening to withdraw their business from board members' employers. The museum's chairman resigned last week amid boycott threats against his employer, a local bank.

The Cincinnati Police Chief has vowed to send officers to examine the exhibition and seize any photographs considered obscene. "These photographs are just not welcome in this community," said the Chief, Lawrence Whalen. "The people of this community do not cater to what others depict as art."

And the museum itself went to court Tuesday, seeking a ruling that the photographs are not obscene by Cincinnati community standards.

"We want to put a stop to the threats that have been going back and forth," said Louis Sirkin, a lawyer for the museum. "We want a decision on whether the work as a whole has serious artistic value."

The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington canceled the retrospective last summer amid a political battle led by Senator Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina, over the financing of the exhibit by the National Endowment for the Arts. The Washington Project for the Arts eventually showed the exhibit before it moved on to Hartford and Berkeley, Calif., where there were few protests.

But the work of Mr. Mapplethorpe, who died in 1989, faces perhaps its toughest challenge in Cincinnati, a conservative, straight-arrow city. Cincinnati, the headquarters of the National Coalition Against Pornography, has a virtual ban on any such material.

By law, Cincinnati has no peep shows, no adult bookstores, no X-rated theaters, no bars that allow nude dancing, no escort services and no massage parlors. Residents cannot rent adult movies at video stores nor buy hard-core magazines like Hustler. A recent production of the play "Equus" was reviewed by the police before it went before the public, and two years ago, when the movie "The Last Temptation of Christ" was released, no Cincinnati theater dared show it. Violating Community Standards? "Cincinnati is the pinnacle," said Phil Burress, a spokesman for Citizens for Community Values, a local antipornography group. "We enforce the law to the nth degree."

The group says that by allowing the Mapplethorpe photographs in their town, they would be violating community standards - the test established by the Supreme Court to determine what is and is not acceptable.

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"You have to know who Cincinnati is to understand why we're throwing such a fit," said Monty Lobb, president of the group, which claims a membership of 15,000 families. "We don't selectively enforce murder laws, so we can't selectively enforce pornography laws. Whether it's in a porno store or an art gallery, we have a right to speak up."

To be sure, these sentiments are not unanimous here. Museum officials said that in the last week as the controversy has peaked, the museum's membership has risen by 200, to 1,800, and there have been no cancellations.

Artists Stand Firm

Leaders in the arts, as well, have stood firmly on the side of the arts center's decision. "Twenty-five years ago, I left my native country, Hungary, to seek artistic freedom," said Ivan Nagy, director of the Cincinnati Ballet Company, at a recent news conference. "Twenty-five years later, as the Iron Curtain is falling, it's shocking that we have to stand here and fight this battle."

But museum officials say that the opposition to Mr. Mapplethorpe's work has gone beyond merely speaking up. "There has been a systematic, well organized campaign of letter-writing and anonymous phone calls to board members and their places of employment," said Dennis Barrie, director of the Contemporary Arts Center. "It's an organized minority trying to enforce their world view."

Ticket Prices Up

The arts center has taken several steps to mollify critics. The exhibition is being financed wholly by private donations and ticket sales. Museum officials are temporarily raising ticket prices to \$5 from \$2 to help pay for the show.

As opposition mounted, the arts center voluntarily excluded itself from the Cincinnati Institute of Fine Arts, an umbrella group that raises money for the arts, so that the institute's current fund-raising campaign would not be hurt.

Last year, the Contemporary Arts Center received \$257,000 of its \$1.2 million budget from the institute. Like other museums, it plans to display warnings about the sexually explicit nature of some of the photographs. But unlike the others, it plans to prohibit anyone under age 18 from viewing the show.

"We know we are not New York or Berkeley," Mr. Barrie said. "We could just say we're going to show it and blow the lid off this town. But there's been none of that. We're taking safeguards to deal with this in a sensitive way."

Not for Everyone

At the center of the controversy are a dozen or so photographs - actually a relatively small part of the exhibit - that depict children with their genitals exposed and adult males engaging in homosexual acts.

"It's the kind of thing you expect to find in a porno shop in somebody else's town," said George Ballou, president of a real estate company in Cincinnati, and a major contributor to the arts.

Opponents say they want the most troubling photographs removed. But museum officials say they are bound to a contract requiring them to show the works in their entirety, and that they would not want to censor them anyway. The center says it plans to separate the most explicit photographs from the rest.

The Mapplethorpe estate has joined in the museum's lawsuit to protect artwork that has become only more valuable with each controversy. The prints are valued at between \$11,500 and \$75,000, said Michael Stout, the executor of the Mapplethorpe estate.

"We can't have some sheriff going in and ripping up these photographs in the town square," Mr. Stout said. "We're talking about works of art here. We were simply not ready for this."

Neither, apparently, was Cincinnati. "We need to heal," said Lee Carter, chairman of the board of the Cincinnati Institute of Fine Arts. "If people turn against the arts as a whole, this city collapses as an arts center."

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH