

South Texan artist creates controversy



Nora Brodnicki and Stewart King, panelists, at the Town Hall style Forum held to discuss the artwork, "Two popes boinking".

Over 100 people attend forum to express views, opinions on controversial art piece

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Questionable Art?

The Art Forum to discuss "Two Popes Boinking," the work of artist Gene Flores that was exhibited at Clackamas and stirred controversy on and off campus in recent weeks, drew about 100 artists, students, instructors and interested citizens from the community.

The town hall-style meeting was held last week (2-26) in the Gregory forum, hosted by the art department and moderated by Bill Briare, head of religious studies for the social science department at Clackamas.

A Panel of Art Devotees

The panel of speakers was comprised of Cheryl Snow, executive director for the Art Action Alliance of Clackamas County, along with three Clackamas instructors—Bill Zuelke, department chair for counseling and career planning, an artist in glass and formerly a Catholic priest; Nora Brodnicki, art historian and art history teacher; and Stewart King, of the history departments at Clackamas and Mt. Angel Seminary.

Issues and Questions

Briare's opening remarks raised issues and questions.

"One of the things about art," he said, "is that it moves us, sometimes it distracts us, sometimes it really annoys us, it enlightens us, it challenges us and it angers us.

"What we love to look at, the person next to us loathes. Is the intent of the artist even important if the experience of the viewer is agitation? Should public money go only toward art that makes the majority feel good, or should we investigate themes that cause discomfort and allow us to plumb the depths of human expression?"

"Perhaps this forum will not resolve perfectly all the dilemmas that we face regarding public expositions, but it will give us insight and clarity into the variety of opinions that are available on the subject."

And so it did.

Titles, Location and the Press

Rick True, art department chair, said the publicity given the Flores exhibit, especially "Two Popes Boinking," raised concern and created misconceptions.

"I think the media always presents a partial point of view," he stated.

True acknowledged the responsibility of the artist in his title selection and of the art department for its placement of controversial art where a passerby may not have the choice to view it or not, as in a secure gallery. He also asked if the media, in publishing the work, assumes responsibility for the controversy.

Academic Freedom Selectively?

King, who wrote a letter published by the "Oregonian" Feb. 7 which questioned the "wisdom of the college exhibiting such a blatant piece of anti-Catholic propaganda," related artistic freedom for Flores, who painted "Two Popes Boinking," to academic freedom for his friend Dr. Donald Epstein, who recently "retired under pressure."

"No one (then, in that controversy about homosexual remarks by Epstein) spoke about academic freedom," said King.

"I believe the purpose of a college is to be a place for the discussion of all ideas, even ideas repugnant to me," King remarked, but "where were these people when Dr. Epstein needed them?"

Freedom and Cultural Change

Brodnicki spoke for academic and artistic freedom.

"As an academic institution," she said, "Clackamas ideally depends upon that freedom for its health and integrity and should promote conditions of free inquiry and further the public understanding of academic freedom."

The art history instructor called for the "right for us to present work that might be questionable or offensive."

Brodnicki also reminded the audience of the course of history:

"Conflict and disagreement have contributed to some of our most important cultural changes," emphasized the historian, citing the Protestant reformation and the women's suffrage movement.

"I don't think that work you hate

you shouldn't see," Brodnicki stated. "We don't move forward if we hide everything that's controversial."

Where's the Rub?

Bill Zuelke asked the audience to consider three "pitchpoints."

"Where does academic freedom and responsibility for the consequences of our actions and expressions...where do they begin to rub up against each other?"

"If I yell 'fire!' and everybody runs out and gets injured, that's libelous language—I don't have the academic freedom to express myself any way...students have a right to be in an environment that is not hostile to them."

Secondly, Zuelke again raised the question of placement of controversial art, and showing or not showing the title; and perhaps the need for a disclaimer with the art to warn viewers it might be offensive.

Zuelke's third "pitch point" was the question for identified classes of people, and if academic or artistic freedom has the obligation to consider what is objectionable to such "minorities," in this case, Catholics.

County-wide and Open Conversation

Cheryl Snow, through Clackamas County, works "to promote art and culture."

"Art is a singularly impactful method of communication," she said. "Isn't that proven true tonight by the degree of passion you've all exhibited, by the fact that this room is nearly full?"

"I'm always applauding when art creates dialog within our community. "If we can continue speaking about art...opening up conversations about the things which create passion in us, we will begin to resolve the issues that reside behind them.

"I feel very strongly that when we hide, we are allowing fear to power us. When we open up the veils, we disembowel the power of fear to guide our dialogs and interactions."

All this debate ensued amidst the beautiful strains of music floating across the hall from the choir—singing a Catholic mass.

The following comments were made last Tuesday.

"We have the right to not be in a hostile environment."

"This piece actually did a service to art and Catholics too. It awakened me to the sensitivity of Catholics—I did not know of attacks in this state; it has made us broader, and for me that the greater power of art."

"What is the redeeming value of that drawing?"

"I'm offended my tax dollars are being used."

"Let's draw a line between simple perversion and art."

"I will disagree with you to my death, and I will fight to my death for your right to say it."

"Freedom is always attached to responsibility."

Student poll
When students were asked if "boinking" by Gene Flores this



△ "I don't think it's offensive; I just think it's crap."
Rick Canham,
Mechanical Engineering



"It's just a picture, it's not that big of a deal."
Hannah Schoen,
General Education ▷



△ "I don't know if it's... Day... und..."