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Corcoran Decision Provokes Outcry

Cancellation of Photo Exhibit Shocks Some In Arts Community

By Elizabeth Kastor
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Corcoran Art Gallery's effort to avoid a brewing political debate by canceling a potentially offensive photography exhibit touched off its own controversy yesterday as a number of arts advocates condemned the move, and the Washington Project for the Arts considered booking the show so the work can be seen in Washington.

At least one member of the Corcoran's board of trustees said he was "embarrassed" by the decision and heard about it only after it was made.

Corcoran Director Christina Orr-Cahall said the cancellation of an exhibit of photographs by the late Robert Mapplethorpe, announced Monday, was intended to prevent the museum from getting entangled in a fight over National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding of artistic work that may offend political, moral or religious sensibilities.

"I'm appalled," WPA Director Jock Reynolds said. "I'm amazed that people are this fearful of art and the power of art, and it's appalling that an institution dedicated to art—and that's what the inscription says on the Corcoran building—should be so fearful of supporting individual artists' work in a situation like this."

Orr-Cahall said Monday that the move had the support of the board and staff, but board member Marvin Gerstin said yesterday that he heard of the decision at a dinner party Monday night, after it had been announced. He said he was not told that the issue would be discussed at a Monday board meeting and so did not attend, and believed that other board members were similarly distressed. About half of the museum's 65 board members attended the Monday meeting, and the decision to withdraw the show was approved on a voice vote.

"It was a meeting called an hour and 15 minutes before it happened," said Gerstin. "It wasn't on an agenda I received. It's a stunning piece of news to me. I don't approve of cen-

See REACTION, B9, Col. 1

Corcoran

REACTION, From B1

sorship, I don't approve of the politicization of art. I know there are other board members who feel as intensely as I do."

But board member Elinor Farquhar defended the decision. "There was very strong unanimity" among board members attending the meeting, she said. "If you are an art museum you would like to show art on the cutting edge," she said. "But we felt it was not an artistic decision, it was a political decision."

The Corcoran's move comes at a time of considerable tension in the federal arts community. The NEA faces criticism from Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) and a number of other senators and representatives for funding a fellowship program in North Carolina that in turn funded an artist whose work many find religiously offensive. Some arts advocates fear that the controversy may harm the NEA during the budget process, and perhaps a federal fund that directly supports major District arts organizations.

Mapplethorpe's work, which has been highly praised by critics, is often frankly sexual, and the show that was scheduled to open July 1 at the Corcoran, "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment," includes a number of homoerotic images as well as nudes of children. The 150-piece retrospective was already seen in Philadelphia and Chicago (a Philadelphia Inquirer reviewer called the works "among the most compelling photographs created in our time"), and a major retrospective of Mapplethorpe's work held at New York's Whitney Museum of Art last year received very favorable reviews as well. A spokeswoman at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Conn., the exhibit's next stop, said the show will appear there as scheduled.

"Never in my experiences over about 25 years as an art dealer have I ever heard of anything like this," said New York dealer Robert Miller, who represented Mapplethorpe, who died in March at the age of 42. "When one thinks of the terrors that Washington generates and sends out into the world, the thought that depiction of the naked human body might be disturbing to Washington seems ludicrous."

In a statement through a museum spokeswoman, Orr-Cahall said yesterday that the museum withdrew from the national tour of "The Perfect Moment" because "our mission is providing education, not potential political platforms."

"We decided to err on the side of the artist who had the right to have his work presented in a non-sensationalized, nonpolitical environment, and who deserves not to be the hostage for larger issues of relevance to us" all. If you think about this for a long time, as we did, this is not censorship; in fact, this is the full artistic freedom which we all support."

The spokeswoman said Orr-Cahall had received a number of supportive phone calls from colleagues in other museums and that "we've received as many calls in support [from members] as calls of the opposite."

Although the North Carolina program and the Mapplethorpe show have no direct relationship, and the Corcoran received no NEA funding for the Mapplethorpe show, the NEA did fund that show's organizers at the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art. Arts supporters on the Hill reportedly have said recently that the presence of the Mapplethorpe show at the Corcoran this summer could only increase the NEA's troubles.

NEA Acting Chairman Hugh Southern said yesterday that the NEA "absolutely had not requested" the Corcoran cancel the show. "We did have some conversations with Christina Orr-Cahall in which we let them know they were absolutely free to make a decision about this, it was in their hands and we had no opinion either way."

"I think they were in an immensely difficult situation, and I think they thought deeply and responsibly about it, and made their call. I find it hard to be critical of that."

But a number of curators and museum administrators did not find it hard to be critical, expressing dismay at the decision and concern over the precedent it sets.

"To me, it's absolutely shocking and upsetting," said Washington photography collector Joshua Smith, who is curator of "The Photography of Invention," now appearing at the National Museum of American Art, and who has contributed pictures to the Corcoran. "There are two ways to look at it. One way, you can understand all the considerations for the museum's own supporters and funding, and . . . the NEA. But this capitulation is a very shocking thing, and will have very grave ramifications for the Corcoran and possibly for all of Washington."

"Washington for years has been a sort of backwater in the area of contemporary art, and it's only recently been making strong efforts. . . . [The Corcoran's decision] just makes Washington and the museum look bad. . . . Why are we, here, in a different situation than other places? Why should we think that in Washington there's something we can't handle?"

Smith and others raised the issue of artistic freedom, but Corcoran board Chairman David Lloyd Kreeger said yesterday there were other concerns involved as well.

"They could have upheld the artistic freedom to show what the professional curators felt was the appropriate thing to show—and that would

have been commendable and an act of courage. But on the other hand, because of the rumblings already going on on the Hill about the contents of this exhibition, and the attempts of some rather conservative congressmen and senators to criticize adversely any deviation from prudent subject matter, anything that might be the least bit controversial could react very adversely to the appropriations to the National Endowment," he said.

Kreeger said the Corcoran's withdrawal from the show's tour will have some financial ramifications for the museum, "but not serious" ones.

In addition to the possibility of WPA showing the Mapplethorpe exhibit, a new arts space opening in Adams-Morgan this weekend will show several Mapplethorpe pictures "to make a statement that the Corcoran has ceased to exist as a vibrant part of the art community," said lawyer Aaron Levine, president of the District of Columbia Arts Center.

Although some arts insiders yesterday speculated that the Corcoran may have overreacted to the situation, others said the mood on the Hill is such that controversy can easily explode into crisis.

"Twenty years ago no arts institution would have done anything but go ahead with the exhibit," said Anne Murphy, executive director of the American Arts Alliance. "But when you've got a climate of accusation by innuendo, as we have in this country right now . . ." Murphy did not finish the sentence.

Southern, who went to the Hill yesterday to discuss the NEA's own controversy with concerned members of Congress and has said the NEA will examine its funding procedures, said he does not underestimate the seriousness of the situation.

"I think it's very serious when a large number of senators are upset at the way a federal agency is spending funds. I think we can, in fact, justify our processes and our attention to quality, and the fact that the overwhelming predominance of what the endowment does meets with the approval of the public."

"I also think we can say it's a very difficult and unreconcilable dilemma, and that when federal funding is involved in supporting the arts and we are advised by panels of artists—these will be subjective decisions. . . . Once in a while they will make a recommendation that will be offensive to some people, and sometimes to many people."

"I think this is the price in the end of living and working in an open and contentious society in which honest people can disagree radically."

And the controversy is expected to continue. A spokesman for Helms said, "The fact that the Corcoran is not going to open the show is not the end of the matter."