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900 Protest Corcoran Cancellation

Group Gathers at Museum In Support of Mapplethorpe

By Roxanne Roberts
Special to The Washington Post

On the eve of what was to have been the opening of "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment," more than 900 artists and supporters gathered outside the Corcoran Gallery of Art last night to protest the cancellation of the exhibition.

Using a high-power scenic projector normally used in theatrical productions, 10 50-foot enlargements of Mapplethorpe's black-and-white photographs were projected onto the 17th Street facade of the gallery. The slides, stretching across half the building, drew appreciative whistles and applause from the decidedly partisan crowd and curious stares from passing motorists.

"We're giving him his show," said Washington artist Rockne Krebs. The demonstration, the largest since the Corcoran on June 12 announced its decision to drop the controversial exhibition, was organized by the Coalition of Washington Artists and a number of local art organizations.

It may not have been the show, but it certainly was a media event. Reporters and camera crews crowded in front of the Corcoran entrance as the protesters, wearing "Freedom for the Creative

See CORCORAN, C13, Col. 1

Corcoran

CORCORAN, From C1

Mind" T-shirts, waved works by the artist under the words "Dedicated to Art" carved above the gallery's door.

Mapplethorpe, who died of AIDS in March at age 42, is regarded as one of the preeminent photographers of his generation. The slides, beginning and ending with a self-portrait of the artist, presented a range of his work, including male and female nudes and the highly inflammatory "Honey, 1976," which depicts a young girl partially exposed.

"It's hard to imagine what everyone's so upset about," said medical student Tim Pace. "They had the same pose in 'Three Men and a Baby' and everyone thought it was cutesie-pie America."

But the Mapplethorpe exhibition, which includes a number of homoerotic and sexually explicit images including nudes of young children, is at the center of an intense storm—swirling censorship, federal funding of the arts and charges of homophobia into a convoluted mass.

When Corcoran Director Christina Orr-Cahall announced the cancellation of the show, she said she wished to keep the museum out of

the congressional debate over federal funding of the arts. Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) and other members of Congress have recently questioned the National Endowment for the Arts for funding artists and exhibitions with works considered by some to be politically, morally or religiously offensive.

The Mapplethorpe show has appeared in Philadelphia and Chicago without incident. It is now scheduled to appear at the Washington Project for the Arts July 21 through Aug. 13, and then go on to Hartford, Conn.; Berkeley, Calif.; and Boston.

Most of the speeches targeted Helms as the enemy of free expression and the First Amendment. Denouncing the Corcoran for "giving a green light to a new wave of cultural McCarthyism," advocates from the art world warned that the cancellation set a dangerous precedent.

"If Jesse Helms doesn't like Robert Mapplethorpe, it's very simple," thundered Derek Guthrie, publisher of the New Art Examiner. "He doesn't have to go to the Corcoran!"

"I'm not an artist. I'm not involved in this on a day-to-day basis but I've been reading about it and thought this is screwy so I came," said Charles Atwell, who said he attended the protest out of concern that Washington is "being deprived because outsiders—the Jesse Helmses—can influence our city."

Atwell was one of the few at the protest who was not a member of the art community.

"This is not a demonstration against the Corcoran," said William Wooby, art dealer and owner of the Collector Art Gallery and Restaurant. "I love the Corcoran. It could be a fabulous museum. Mapplethorpe would have put the Corcoran on the map.

"It's a demonstration against Capitol Hill. Politicians don't care about the arts."

But Paris art dealer Harry Lunn Jr., who worked with Mapplethorpe from the early stages of his career, blames the Corcoran, not Congress, for lack of conviction.

"Congress seems to be more able to be amused by social issues of a prurient quality than real issues," said Lunn, who has lent two of his own Mapplethorpe photographs for this exhibition. "It's all camouflage for the WASP, stupid Corcoran board running—not walking—to the door at the first hint of any controversy. It's more ridiculous than disgusting."

No Corcoran officials were seen at the protest.

Krebs believes cancellation of the exhibition would have been "unlikely" if the gallery had more artists on the board of directors. "Artists are the only people who have a good handle on what's involved," he said. "Commerce cannot effectively run culture."

The true importance of the protest, said art consultant Grana Teresa, is the galvanizing effect the cancellation has had on local artists. "This has brought the art community together. The real issue is that artists have to support the NEA. We have to be more political. When this happens to an artist like Mapplethorpe, it could happen to any of us."

Mapplethorpe's brother, Edward Maxey, attended the demonstration and said his brother would have been very pleased.

"He'd be kicking up his heels—tap-dancing in heaven," he said. "In the early part of his career, he got a lot of criticism and he'd always say, 'It's press.'"

TAN DIANA TONES