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Elizabeth Krastor

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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 artists advocates condemned the move, and the Washington Post 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 am appalled," said WPA Director John Reynolds. "I am amazed that people are this fearful of art and the government is so fearful of it that they indicate 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 Gerstein 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 dissuised. 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.

"At no meeting called an hour and 15 minutes before it happened," said Gerstein, "it wasn't on an agenda I received. It was a stunning piece of news to me. I don't approve of censorship.

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