

## MINUTES FROM ART CENSORSHIP COMMUNITY FORUM ON MARCH 10, 2010

### —Begin Prepared Presentation, 6:40pm—

Text in *italics* was read, and presented via PowerPoint. Regular text was spoken by Staci, unless indicated as a panelist's response.

[*logo & images from upcoming MMAC shows*] Hello and welcome everyone. My name is Staci and I'm the director of the Arts Council. Thank you all for coming. Before we officially begin, I want to say a few things. First, if you came to debate whether the UCM staff and administration made the right decisions, you've come to the wrong place. Frankly, I've invited you all here for a very selfish reason: the Arts Council just might choose—or not choose—to hang controversial art in this very building some day, and I'd like to know what to expect from the community in response. So, I want to start today's conversation with a few definitions and ground rules that I need us to agree on, some comments from the panel, who I'll introduce in a minute, and then hear from the audience.

Let's agree, just for the sake of this conversation, that this is what we mean when we say "art." *Art is the process or product of deliberately arranging elements in a way that appeals to the senses or emotions. It encompasses a diverse range of human activities, creations, and modes of expression, including music, literature, film, sculpture, and paintings [and photography]. The meaning of art is explored in a branch of philosophy known as aesthetics.*

Again, for the purpose of tonight's conversation, let's agree to think of censorship as this. *To censor: to examine in order to suppress or delete anything considered objectionable (censor the news); also : to suppress or delete as objectionable (censor out indecent passages).*

It certainly has a negative connotation. But the fact is, it's in our lives every day, and we even do it ourselves.

- *Galleries and museums*
- *News outlets*
- *K12 schools*
- *Radio, local and cable television*
- *Individual people*

So when is it OK and when is it wrong? If you know the definitive answer, write a book and make your millions. OK, so we're probably not going to pin down any answers tonight. So what's the point? *I hope that each of you leaves with more questions than you had before you got here. I hope you see more grey area than you expected to. I hope you continue this conversation, not just safely with like-minded people.*

By now you're thinking, "Thanks a lot, lady. You said this was a discussion, but really you're just going to monopolize the night with your lackluster definitions and hand-picked panel of experts, that we haven't even been introduced to yet." You're right. Let me ask each panelist a question, so that you know why I invited these particular people to help me. At any time when you have a question or comment, write it down and give it to any of the volunteers hanging around in the audience. After the experts are finished with their opening remarks, then I'll ask/state the audience's questions/comments and open up the floor for conversation.

*Write name and comment and/or question on card.*

*Give the card to volunteers.*

*Be prepared to clarify your comment or question, and to respond to what the panel and the audience have to say.*

Let me introduce the panel.

*Professional artist and lecturer, Karen LeCocq is a mixed media sculptor who has shown nationally and internationally in galleries as well as major museums, among them: The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, The Armand Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA, and the The Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA. Her work has gained international recognition through its use in the Absolut Vodka Signature Artist campaign. Her work has been pictured in numerous publications, among them: Art In America, Art News, Artforum, Art and Antiques, Manhattan Arts, and Time Magazine and has been reproduced in the books The Power of Feminist Art, Sexual Politics, The Absolut Book, California Artists, Through the Flower, By Our Own Hands, and in her autobiography, The Easiest Thing To Remember.*

*Carole Cameron holds a BA in Art, Studio Option, with a focus on painting and printmaking, and an MA in Humanities, focus on Art History. Carole owned and operated art galleries in Monte Sereno, Los Gatos and Baywood Park. Her work has been exhibited in USA, France and England. Recently she was featured in an award-winning documentary Inner Eye, addressing her work with developmentally delayed adults in Stanislaus County. She is currently teaching art appreciation and humanities at Modesto Junior College and art history at Merced College, as well as the art director for Inner Eye Gallery, part of Howard Training Center, Modesto. Soroptomist International awarded her Woman of Distinction.*

*Tom was a pilot in the United States Air Force from 1960 to late 1981. For his retirement, his wife gave him a present that would change his life: a photo workshop in Yosemite National Park with a seasoned photographer, Ernest Braun. After going back to Merced College, to earn an Associates degree in Photography (markedly different from his previously earned Computer Science degree) he assisted Braun in many workshops. Along the way, Tom discovered the Merced Camera Club and the San Joaquin Camera Club Councils, where he has been a member for several years. In his retirement, Tom volunteers for Kiwanis Club of Castle-Atwater, the historic Merced Theatre, Playhouse Merced, and Leadership Merced. He has been a juror for art shows in Fresno, Stanislaus, and Merced County Fairs. Finally, he is also the ombudsman for the Merced Sun-Star.*

Karen, you recently had a retrospective of the Feminist Experiment of 1970. Can you tell us about the experiment, and what the general public's response was at the time? Is that different from what you experienced this time around, 40 years later?

Karen's Response:

- \* 1970, radical poetry came
- \* Started showing paintings/portraits with revealing body parts
- \* Since then things have changed.
- \* People seem more open
- \* Piece in 1971 "Feathered Cunt"

Carole, as an art historian, what relevance does controversial art have in society? Do the artists who make it ever have a genuine purpose or do they just have an axe to grind?

Carole's Response:

- \* Political correctness is stiffening everything
- \* People are afraid to expose themselves, political criticism
- \* Hide of a rhinosaurus, will of a dinosaur
- \* Art is supposed to shock, report
- \* Chris – piece is called "Virgin Mary"

Tom, The Sun-Star's readers—at least the ones who write letters and comment—are a pretty tough crowd to please. What's it like to deal with your audience when editors have to censor them by either editing their submissions or not printing them at all?

Tom's Response:

- \* Letters to editor get edited/censored put individuals sometimes believe message gets changed
- \* Not every comment gets read

Mr. Kiriara, I don't mess with a man with a gavel. You're the boss.

*Moderator: Honorable John Kiriara, presiding judge of the Merced County Superior Court*

A few *Ground Rules* during the discussion:

- *Be open-minded*, even to people that you think are close-minded.
- *Listen*. Really listen to what each other is saying.
- *Be respectful* of varying opinions and experiences.
- *Dare to share your thoughts*, even if you don't think they're the opinion of the majority.
- *Stay on topic*. This is not a platform for your personal agenda.

—E ND Prepared Presentation, about 7:05—

## —Begin Audience Questions/Comments—

Participants' questions and responses are anonymous, unless by a panelist.

1. Karen was right about the feminist aspect of changing over time
2. Is Merced ready for feathery vaginas?  
Karen – Raised in Merced, she doesn't know  
Carole – Asked if Merced is redneck So-Cal or cosmopolitan?  
Staci – Say's she doesn't know what would happen at MMAC, all entries get reviewed  
Carole – right to choose what she thinks is politically correct  
Tom – has a right to show it but, have to follow the rules is Merced ready? We'll see.
3. How many people like Lady Gaga? She's an expression herself and some people don't understand her messages
4. Protect innocents from art? Who's responsibility is it to make viewer ready for the piece?
  - a. a viewer's responsibility to inform themselves
  - b. Academics & parents
5. If it's good art, should it be shown everywhere?  
Karen - If it's good enough for New York it is in Merced, too  
Carole – agrees  
Tom – Artist should pre-screen art, be prepared for their viewers, wants right message
6. Who decides?
  - a. Audience, viewers decide
7. Are standards subjective?  
Karen – part is, galleries pick what they want to show
  - a. Academics need to help educate
  - b. Academics have too much pressure
  - c. After people go to jail for graffiti they take their art elsewhere, look at the bigger picture
  - d. Art Hop – Kevin & Kim design the posters, Staci almost didn't approve of one for having graffiti on itStaci – Committed to hosting a forum similar to this one on graffiti
8. What is good publicity for art?
  - a. censorship can be good publicityCarole – people are attracted to the negative or shocking stuff  
Karen – artists like to shake people up but shouldn't be allowed to censor someone else's art
9. Tom - A picture of a soldier who passed away was shown in the Merced Sun-Star, should it have been shown?
  - b. two people said no, rest said yes
  - c. family should be considered & listened to
10. Community standards?
  - a. What's constructive or destructive
  - b. Can't limit, promote art but, educate viewers and if they want to view it, they can
11. Do artists censor themselves? Why?  
Karen – Yes, they're afraid  
Tom – has gotten letters about what he's written but, doesn't care, it's what he thinks  
Carole – artists need to shock & get out there
12. Will Irene's artwork change what artists submit?
  - a. can't wait for next show
  - b. galleries are supposed to be a safe place for artists

- c. if galleries don't show, should it still be available, where is the line drawn? If artists know it's not right, take elsewhere
  - d. artists worry if people will appreciate their work but, artists should stand up for their artwork if a show accept their work & a viewer doesn't think it should be shown
13. Human body—God's creation—shouldn't be subjective, shouldn't be ashamed
14. More political correctness now then in the 70's
- a. trendsetters start change
15. Anyone can find anything offensive, political correctness has his hand down and attacks everything
16. Should someone have different censorship standards for different viewing spots (ie, gallery vs park)
- If viewers don't like & vote it down, artist should be acceptable to knowing their art isn't appropriate
- Karen – people should want to be able to see or hear what they want, not have someone tell them what they can or can't view
  - Carole – as long as the community can meet like this, gathering is feedback & expresses how everyone feels
  - Tom – meeting in town hall to give feedback

**—End Audience Questions/Comments, about 8:15pm—**

Special thanks to the panelists and moderator and event volunteers, including last-minute volunteer note-taker and typist!

As you read in the prepared presentation, to avoid losing control of the conversation, my plan was that the audience would write their comments on index cards and hand them in, so that I could sort them and ask questions on their behalf. In reality, people were civil and the cards never became necessary. Still, a few people turned theirs in with comments, and they were read aloud by Staci or Judge Kirihara towards the end of the event. Here are those comments.

“The human body is ‘supposed’ to be God’s creation. Why or why not is it then subjected to the most censorship?”

“Art should be a free expression of the artist’s emotions, feelings, etc. Manet, Picasso and [?] were considered obscene in their day!”

“Will Tang’s artpiece open up doors for future artists in Merced? Or will her work potentially scare art students to express themselves?”

“It seems Tang’s experience is a prime example of the role that exposure takes. What was shocking in the 1970’s is now [routine?] to those who’ve been well-versed in the art world. This is due to repeated exposure to art as free expression and even if a [creation?] is considered tasteless or offensive, we embrace the artist’s right to be tasteless or offensive according to the viewer’s standards. Perhaps the question, “Is Merced ready for this?” is more a statement of the degree of exposure this city has had—and it will never be ready until the process of exposure has begun.”