November 15, 2019

Jim Gash, President
Pepperdine University
24255 Pacific Coast Highway
Malibu, CA 90263
Tel: 310.506.4000
Email: jim.gash@pepperdine.edu

Dear President Gash,

As an alliance of national non-profit organizations united in defense of academic and artistic freedom, we were disturbed to learn of the plan to quarantine a Pepperdine student’s artworks from a forthcoming exhibition because they depict nudes. In doing so, the university would effectively discriminate against the student, stigmatize the artworks’ content, and infantilize the audience. We strongly urge you to install these artworks in the main exhibition space alongside the other works in the show as originally intended.

It is our understanding that the student, Alessandra Guth, who is a senior and an art major, produced a series of seven photographic works that reference The Seven Deadly Sins. The works are intended to encourage discussion around themes of the human body, religion and sexuality, and depict fellow students’ nude bodies (without displaying their faces) printed on canvas and suspended in frames. Administrators have decided to sequester Guth’s works, and will install them in a mobile art gallery adjacent to the main exhibition space for the night of the opening reception on November 21, after which, the mobile gallery will be moved off campus. Thus, while her peers’ work will be on view for the remainder of the semester, after the opening, Guth’s work will no longer be on display and effectively censored for the duration.

Since these works’ depiction of simple nudes is neither obscene nor pornographic, removing them from their cohort is unreasonable and needlessly discriminatory. If simple nudity were routinely considered reasonable grounds for excluding artwork from public exhibition, vast amounts of art, including many masterpieces, would be off limits. And if we were to remove nudes from art in the public sphere (which includes museums, churches and public squares), we would lose some of the most important and edifying artworks of human history, including works by Michelangelo (e.g. the Sistine Chapel), Bernini (e.g. public fountains of Rome), Titian, Rembrandt, Rodin, Degas, Modigliani and Picasso, to name but a few artists for whom the nude was central. By removing art that depicts nudes from public view, we remove access to a living language of visual expression and its centuries-old heritage.

Wrapping the human form in shame alienates us from our own bodies. While this is nothing new, it is puzzling, and the frequency of this kind of censorship poses a real threat to freedom of expression and the robust exchange of ideas.
complexity and fabric of our culture. Certainly, for a university dedicated to nurturing the inner and intellectual lives of its students, censoring artworks over their depiction of nudes is especially concerning. By quarantining and then removing these works, the university runs afoul of its mission to nurture the creative and intellectual wellbeing of its students and the core values of academic freedom. When they show their work publicly, art students have the experience of speaking to more than a group of art school insiders. The response to art displayed on a college campus should be the same as the response to ideas voiced in the classroom: discussion and debate, not censorship.

In 1990, the participants of the ‘Wolf Trap Conference on Academic Freedom and Artistic Expression’ adopted a statement of principles in support of artistic freedom on campus. The statement, intended to strengthen academic commitment to artistic freedom, was endorsed by the American Association of University Professors and has been endorsed or adapted by many individual colleges. It remains relevant today:

Attempts to curtail artistic presentations at academic institutions on grounds that the works are offensive to some members of the campus community and general public occur with disturbing frequency. Those who support restrictions argue that works presented to the public rather than in the classroom or other entirely intramural settings should conform to their view of the prevailing community standard rather than to standards of academic freedom. We believe that “essential as freedom is for the relation and judgment of facts, it is even more indispensable to the imagination.” In our judgment academic freedom in the creation and presentation of works in the visual and performing arts, by ensuring greater opportunity for imaginative exploration and expression, best serves the public and the academy. (https://ncac.org/resource/1990-wolf-trap-conference-on-academic-freedom-artistic-expression-statement)

We strongly encourage you to install Guth’s artworks in the main exhibition space as intended. Please inform us of the action you will take to reaffirm Pepperdine University’s commitment to academic freedom. Do not hesitate to call or write to us if you need assistance, guidance, materials or further information. We request your response by next Friday, November 22.

Best regards,

Joy Garnett
Arts Advocacy Associate
National Coalition Against Censorship

Cc:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Email</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michael Feltner, Dean of Seaver College</td>
<td><a href="mailto:michael.feltner@pepperdine.edu">michael.feltner@pepperdine.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradley Griffin, Dean of Fine Arts</td>
<td><a href="mailto:bradley.griffin@pepperdine.edu">bradley.griffin@pepperdine.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gretchen Batcheller</td>
<td><a href="mailto:gretchen.batcheller@pepperdine.edu">gretchen.batcheller@pepperdine.edu</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>