



'Artery' Exhibit Prompts an Art Attack in Arkansas Town

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By Katie Landan

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Exhibit A is a painting of Alice in Wonderland, by Beth Post of Fayetteville, Ark. Titled "The Temptation of Alice," it is a rendering of the iconic children's book character alongside the "Drag-Queen of Hearts," a man wearing women's lingerie. The two of them are surrounded by rabbits that are, ahem, busy making more rabbits.

Exhibit B is a painting of the Virgin Mary, by Michelle Levy of Eureka Springs, Ark. Titled "The Divine Mother," it depicts a bare-breasted Mary nursing the baby Jesus, with text above the Madonna that asks, "Does this halo make my face look fat?"

Welcome to the "Artery" exhibit, a collection of 27 8-foot-by-4-foot paintings that has been on display in the town of Eureka Springs since September, and whose current theme — popular icons in religion and culture — has raised more than a few eyebrows in the small northwestern Arkansas town.

Those concerns have led some city council members to draft a contract that would take control of the public art exhibit from its curators — and have led some artists to cry censorship.

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The paintings line a 150-foot long retaining wall that was transformed from crumbling rock to public art space in 2004. The project's creator, Charlotte Buchanan, told FOXNews.com that [the Artery](#) is the lifeblood of the community, hence the name.

Its first exhibit revolved around the theme of fruits and vegetables, which was well-received, according to city council member Joyce Zeller. But the new exhibit is no bowl of cherries, she said. "It's just this year that the subject matter got offensive, and we started getting phone calls. We said, 'Wow we need to do something.'"




Eureka Springs survives on tourism — more than 1 million people visit the town every year, Zeller said — so the city elders are very concerned about image.

"We market this community as a vacation spot," she said. "We want everything in public property to fit in with that marketing idea."

Dani Joy, Eureka Springs' mayor, told FOXNews.com that the city needs to be careful about what it displays on public property. "In the public eye, that is city property, the city condones anything that is going up," she said.

If the city council's proposed contract becomes law, each piece of art will be scrutinized by six members of the city arts council and six members of the city council, who will decide whether it is appropriate for public display at the Artery.

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But not everyone is happy with that arrangement. The idea of policing artwork encroaches on the quality of the art and constitutional rights of the artists, some critics are saying.

"You'll end up with a billboard rather than art," explained Nancy Foggo, a local artist. "It's something that is commercial rather than artwork."

Another local artist, John Rankine, says those who are offended by the current paintings need to "lighten up a little bit."

"The art is a little provocative," he said. "It's nothing you have to shield your children from in horror."

Besides, says Buchanan, the project's creator, deciding what is appropriate is subjective: "Depending on your emotional background, you could see something offensive in your spaghetti," she said.

And her husband, artist James Yale, thinks the city should give the artists a little more credit. "We aren't children — we have common sense enough to police ourselves," he said.

Buchanan said she is concerned that the proposed law may violate the artists' First Amendment right to free speech. "The way the city is trying to take control of a project that has legs, and has been in public view for five years, is censorship," she told FOXNews.com.

But Andrew Koppelman, professor of law at Northwestern University, told FOXNews.com that there is no censorship issue in this debate.

"If the city were to try to change what is on the art gallery's property, that would raise a severe free speech problem," he said. "But the art gallery has no constitutional right to use the city's property to display its art."

Joy, the mayor, agrees. "I didn't see it as censorship," she said. "I see it as taking care of the property that we've been entrusted to."

The city council will present the contract to Buchanan on June 8. "We are hoping that we will have a final draft that will be acceptable to Ms. Buchanan and Mr. Yale," said James DeVitor, a city council member. "We hope it will be over at that point."

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