

National Gallery of Australia cancels Sensation exhibition

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Just weeks after New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani failed in his attempts to force the closure of *Sensation*, the controversial collection of work by young British artists now on show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) announced that it will not be staging the exhibition previously scheduled for June next year.

Giuliani's campaign against *Sensation* focussed on Chris Ofili's "The Holy Virgin Mary," a painting that uses elephant dung and cutouts from pornographic magazines. The New York mayor, who did not see the exhibition, claimed Ofili's painting was "Catholic-bashing" and an "aggressive vicious, disgusting attack on religion".

In Australia, NGA director Brian Kennedy effectively solidarised himself with Giuliani on November 27 when he issued a brief press release announcing that the gallery had cancelled *Sensation*. The statement declared: "As a publicly funded institution, the Gallery will not proceed with a show which has been the centre of a furore in New York over issues which have obscured discussion of the artistic merit of the work of art."

This extraordinary act of self-censorship establishes the NGA as the defender of artistic and cultural conservatism and prevents ordinary Australian residents from viewing an exhibition that has attracted hundreds of thousands of people in London, Berlin and New York. It was followed by a series of lame excuses from Kennedy about why *Sensation* would not go ahead as planned.

According to Kennedy, the gallery did not have enough room to stage the exhibition, contracts were not finalised and the NGA was concerned about the "commercial ethics" of hosting a collection of art owned and promoted by advertising millionaire and art

dealer Charles Saatchi. "It is not tenable for the National Gallery of Australia to take on an exhibition which... has been too closely aligned to the commercial market," he declared.

This is bogus and cowardly. Space problems and "commercial ethics" were not mentioned two months ago when the NGA announced that *Sensation* would be the centrepiece of its 2000 program. Moreover, this year the NGA staged *An Impressionist Legacy*, a major exhibition fully funded by the transnational food giant, the Sara Lee Corporation. Neither Kennedy nor any of the NGA directors said anything about commercial ethics at that time when the Sara Lee Corporation, which owned every one of the paintings on show, paid all costs and provided airline tickets and hotel accommodation to the US for Australian art critics to preview the exhibition.

In reality *Sensation* was axed from the NGA's program after Kennedy contacted the Federal Minister for Arts Richard Alston and discussed the exhibition with him, his deputy Peter McGauran and other members of the Howard government. Alston, who has been described by one critic as "the most raucous advocate for censorship Federal government has seen for decades", asked Kennedy to provide him with a copy of the exhibition catalogue after Rudolph Giuliani began attacking the Brooklyn Museum of Art over the exhibition.

Kennedy later told the media, "We do have an accountability to those who fund us. It is not in our interest to wrap the government in controversy."

In other words, Kennedy will not stage any exhibition that might jeopardise funds from the government. He has decided to allow a vocal minority of extreme rightwing elements to determine the NGA's program and suppress any artistic and intellectual expression

that challenges the status quo. In fact, if Kennedy's policy were applied to Picasso, Klee, Braque, Kandinsky, Munch, Chagall, Grosz, Dix, or countless others deemed to be controversial in their day, the work of these great masters would never be on show at the gallery.

Most of the media coverage of the NGA decision has either endorsed it outright or prominently featured Kennedy's excuses. Among those supporting Kennedy was Giles Auty, chief art critic of Murdoch's *Australian*. In an article subheaded "Bravo Brian Kennedy for canning bad art" Auty said that censorship was necessary and normal. Aborigines received special treatment under Australian law, he argued, claiming that those opposing the NGA's axing of *Sensation* were discriminating against Christians. "Why should Christians be an exception?" he wrote. "There are many more practising Christians in Australia than Aborigines. Why should the sensitivities of a sizeable proportion of our society count for nothing?"

Auty's appeal to the most backward and narrow-minded layers in society is a diversion. The central issue is not whether the art on display is anti-religious, offends Christians, Aborigines or anyone else but the democratic right of anyone to view the exhibition and make up their own mind about the merit or otherwise of the work on display. NGA director Brian Kennedy, Arts Minister Richard Alston and rightwing Christian pressure groups are entitled to hold any opinion they choose about *Sensation* or other exhibitions; they cannot be allowed to prevent artists, students and working people from all walks of life from viewing the exhibition and forming their own views.

While one or two critics and gallery directors or owners have politely opposed the NGA decision none have explained its artistic and political implications. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, one of the country's leading contemporary art museums has not issued a statement and no protests have been organised by any of the leading figures in Australia's contemporary art scene to raise the alarm about this attack on democratic rights.

The decision to axe *Sensation* comes in the wake of an increasing number of attacks in Australia on artistic freedom. In October 1997, the National Gallery of Victoria closed down an exhibition by American photographer Andres Serrano, whose photograph "Piss

Christ" became the subject of physical and verbal attacks by right-wing Christian groups.

Last year two films were banned—Pasolini's *Salo* and the documentary *Sick: The life and death of Bob Flanagan—Supermasochist*—whilst this year witnessed an attempt by Liberal MP Trish Draper, backed by several other government MPs to have the movie *Lolita* banned from Australian cinemas.

The NGA's decision to axe the *Sensation* exhibition has set a dangerous precedent, one that strengthens the most bigotted and backward layers in society. The faceless figures that lobbied behind the scenes to axe the show have achieved their aims without having to mount a public campaign or to justify their attack on artistic freedom and democratic rights.



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