

EDITORIALS

Paintings on a wall

Eureka's mural dilemma

SHOULD ARTISTS be allowed to mount paintings on a cracking outdoor wall owned by the city of Eureka Springs—regardless of how offensive some passersby might find them? Or should a city arts council decide what gets hung on its own wall? That's the question.

Now known as "The Artery," the 150-foot-long wall features 26 oversized paintings by artists from various Arkansas cities. Before a councilwoman named Charlotte Buchanan transformed the wall back in 2005, it had been just a mass of blank concrete. But once Mrs. Buchanan got the city council's okay and began to manage the artwork displayed there, it became an outdoor gallery.

There were no problems for The Artery's first three years. But this year has been a different story. Faced with increasing complaints from tourists about The Artery's more provocative paintings, Eureka's mayor—Dani Joy—decided city government needs a written contract with Mrs. Buchanan that would have her answer to an appointed arts council. That council would screen submissions and decide which were suitable for public display.

The Artery's 2009 theme: "Icons, both religious and cultural." You can guess what happened next in a free-spirited community like Eureka. Among the artworks being shown—and protested—were "The Divine Mother," by Michelle Levy of Eureka Springs. It depicts the Virgin Mary breastfeeding baby Jesus beneath the caption, "Does this halo make my face look fat?" Then there's "The Temptation of Alice" by Beth Post of Fayetteville. It shows Alice in Wonderland standing beside a man wearing women's lingerie. Another painting that riled some folks shows a kind of goat that some call a "demonic" image.

Mrs. Buchanan deserves thanks for launching a project that helps artists and attracts tourists. Nevertheless, our Bill Bowden reports that the city will soon be assuming control of The Artery. An arts

council is to be formed, and a manager selected. Here's hoping that manager will be Mrs. Buchanan.

Not so fast, says Charlotte Buchanan. It seems she and her husband have registered The Artery as their own non-profit organization. "It's trademarked and a foundation," she says. A number of local artists who've participated in The Artery's displays now have threatened to pull out should the city take control. They consider the city's taking over Mrs. Buchanan's baby an act of censorship.

Rather than an arts council, Mrs. Buchanan has been using three local gallery owners as a committee to select who and what can be displayed at The Artery. Participating artists were selected up front and given several months to complete what they wanted to display and offer for sale. To launch into Artspeak, the exhibit has been "curated" rather than "juried," to quote Mrs. Buchanan.

Naturally a flap has ensued. Mayor Dani Joy asserts: "Any place you go, in any city, art is always juried before it goes up." Mrs. Buchanan retorts: "Are we a gated community or are we a place where people come and be inspired by us?"

Lawsa mercy, people! Can't full-grown adults with a great idea just play nice? A few relevant facts: First, this old wall belongs to the city. Second, the art isn't confined to the walls of a private gallery. It's open to the public. Also, the city would seem to have a responsibility for whatever it lets be shown on its wall.

Finally, "Icons, both religious and cultural" will run only until September. So in 12 shorts weeks, this mural dilemma will resolve itself. When all the smoke and arguments clear, let's hope Mrs. Buchanan is allowed to continue her contributions to art and artists—and those who enjoy both—in a city known for not being ordinary. She has earned that. Besides, it's a relief to have folks arguing not politics or sports, but art. It's a step up. And as with most disputes, the key to a happy ending is mutual tolerance.



