



EUREKA SPRINGS : Outdoor art exhibit draws ire, compliments

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EUREKA SPRINGS - The Eureka Springs City Council is drafting a contract to take control of an outdoor art exhibit that some people find offensive.

The Artery exhibit, which has been on display since September, contains 26 paintings, and includes the Virgin Mary and Alice in Wonderland as subjects. The exhibit's theme is icons, both religious and cultural.

Mayor Dani Joy said she's had several telephone calls from tourists complaining about The Artery, which covers a 150-footlong retaining wall along First Street.

"People would call in and say, 'How could you as a city let that happen?'" said Joy.

The Virgin Mary and Alice in Wonderland paintings are among the most controversial at The Artery. The Divine Mother by Michelle Levy of Eureka Springs has been criticized because it depicts the Virgin Mary breastfeeding the baby Jesus. Above her head are the words "Does this halo make my face look fat?"

The Temptation of Alice, a painting by Beth Post of Fayetteville, shows Alice in Wonderland standing next to a man clad in women's lingerie. The paintings can be viewed on The Artery's Web site, www.thearterysite.com.

"To me, it's just obscene," Margaret Miller, 50, of Owensville, Ind., said of The Temptation of Alice. "I would not want my children here with me or my grandchildren."

Miller and her husband, Dave Miller, 51, parked their motorcycle in a space in front of The Artery on Thursday morning after riding down from Indiana.

"I don't think it should be public art," said Dave Miller. "You pull in here with a carload of kids, and boom! there it is, right in front of you."

In her artist's statement on The Artery's Web site, Post states that her painting was

inspired by the Bible story of Christ being tempted by Satan in the desert.

The exhibit is scheduled to come down by September, but one artist removed a painting early to put it in another show. Normally, The Artery has 27 paintings on display. Each one is 4 by 8 feet in size. Previous Artery exhibits were up for one year.

The city owns the wall. Charlotte Buchanan, who founded The Artery in 2005, thought she was doing the city a favor by providing art where there was once only cracked concrete.

Until the current exhibit, there had been no complaints, said Joy, who has been mayor for three years.

"The previous sets she had up were good," Joy said.

After speaking with a lawyer for the Arkansas Municipal League, Joy said she decided a contract was in order between the city and Buchanan. That means the city is taking possession of The Artery, but for now at least, Buchanan still manages it.

The contract is still being drafted by the City Council. Joy notified Buchanan about the contract in a Feb. 26 letter, adding that the City Council would consider proposals from other people who want to manage The Artery.

Buchanan said she doesn't believe the city can take the project away from her and give it to another person to run. She and her husband have registered The Artery Foundation as a nonprofit organization.

"They don't realize what they're trying to do," she said. "It's trademarked and a foundation."

Joy said she plans to establish a Eureka Springs Arts Council, which will decide what paintings can be displayed on the wall. She has decided on eight members for the Arts Council, but there may be as many as 11. The wall fronts a parking lot, but the paintings are visible from Main Street, which has a considerable amount of foot traffic.

"We were inspired," said Denise White, 46, of Peculiar, Mo., who was walking by The Artery with her daughter Jenna White, 20. "We were up a couple of days ago. It seems unique that someone came up with this idea. My son would love this, whatever it is with the horns."

Denise White was pointing at a painting described on The Artery's Web site as Elpha's Levis Baphomet, by J.D. Davis of Eureka Springs. It appears to be a copy of Eliphaz Levi's 1854 drawing of Baphomet, an occult idol. Some people have complained that the humanoid goatlike creature in the painting is demonic.

"I hope they don't take them down because they are very cool," Denise White said. "We are back today to take pictures."

"If I wanted to remember Eureka Springs, I would take my picture here," said Jenna White.

Jenna White posed in front of several of the paintings while her mother took photos of her.

"They're cool," Denise White said. "I hope they don't take them down. It would be disappointing."

Buchanan, a former Eureka Springs City Council member, had the council's blessing when she started The Artery four years ago. She has three gallery owners who serve as her selection committee. They decide which artists will be allowed to display paintings. Buchanan said the artists were selected, then had several months to paint what they wanted to be displayed on the wall. The exhibit was "curated," not "juried," she said.

The Arts Council will serve as a jury for the proposed art under the mayor's plan.

"Any place you go, in any city, art is always juried before it goes up," Joy said.

"Are we a gated community or are we a place where people come and be inspired by us?" asked Buchanan.

"Charlotte did the city a big service by taking an area that was blighted and turning it into an outdoor art museum," said Karen Lindblad, a bookshop owner and another former Eureka Springs City Council member.

"Tourists come in all the time and say this is incredible," said Lindblad. "It reflects the artists who are in town because we are an artist's city. ... To me, if you put censorship on art, you're running the risk of not hanging the best art."

"It's not censorship as much as stewardship," the mayor said. "Unfortunately, there has to be responsibility. It's not a matter of trying to hurt anybody or not be about art because Eureka Springs is about art. ... If she had done this on private property, it wouldn't be a problem. But she did it on public property."

"If the city takes this away from Charlotte, there are a lot of artists who won't participate, including myself," said John Rankine, a local artist.

About 25 paintings have sold since The Artery went up in 2005. Sixty percent of the proceeds go to the artist, and the remainder go to The Artery Artist's Trust.

"We want Charlotte to keep this," said Carol Peacock, an artist who sold a painting through The Artery. Peacock said she doesn't mind giving 40 percent of the selling price to The Artery Foundation, but that money would go to the city under the mayor's new plan.

"I really don't think I would want to give 40 percent of my money to them," Peacock said. "Typically, when the city takes something over, it stops happening. A lot of people

don't understand art. It's often controversial and always has been."

But the mayor said the controversial art is best left to private galleries. The Artery is on a public wall.

"People happen onto it without meaning or choosing to," she said of The Artery.

If a person walks into an art gallery, "you're consciously making that decision," she said.

One of the paintings has been peeling badly from the elements because it apparently wasn't sealed.

Since The Artery began four years ago, only one painting has been vandalized. It was a painting of U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., called It Takes a Village, by Elizabeth Wolf of Eureka Springs.

"Somebody scratched her eyes out," said Buchanan.

But, in true Eureka Springs fashion, Buchanan decided the scratched out eyes had become part of the artwork. The painting had moved someone to act, she said. It's still on display at The Artery.

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