

Controversial student art and the discussion it started

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By Michael Casselli



We are more polarized than ever as a country. What are our options? How can we move forward? How do we push back? How do we respond? How do we build for a better world when there is so much disagreement on what that should look like?

When Eva Buttacavoli, executive director of the Dayton Visual Arts Center, asked me to curate this exhibition, we both agreed the it was important to feature the work that ninth-grade students at the Dayton Regional STEM School produced just prior to Black History month in February 2016 — work that was removed by the City of Dayton two days after it went on display.

As with nearly all of the projects that the students of DRSS take on, their scope of study was not limited to simply reading about and discussing these issues in the classroom; the students were also producing artworks to be put on display at the Dayton Convention Center, with the intent of depicting “U.S. history from behind a black lens, referencing contemporary phenomena like the recent police violence against black men such as Freddie Gray and disproportionate black incarceration rates.”

One student helped create “The Experience of Women,” a tri-panel piece depicting magazine covers of women’s societal and cultural expectations from the 1800s to today. As she described it, “In U.S. history this year, we went through, not chronologically like wars and

stuff, the different experiences of groups: African-Americans, women, LGBT, Native-Americans, just different groups that would have experienced (history) differently than what is told in the typical narrative.”

Using the work of artist Kara Walker as an inspirational as well as structural point of departure, the students designed their projects using a form that Walker developed early on in her career, the silhouette. The work laid bare many of the issues that the black community as well as other marginalized groups have been forced to confront historically, and point up the similarities to the ongoing struggles today. By creating work that visually exposed the struggles of these groups, the students sought to add their voice and their artwork to an ongoing critique of the structures that continue to marginalize individuals as well as communities in the U.S. By combining images that merged these histories, the work was able to point to similarities that tie the experiences to one another and question where we are as a culture when faced with reality that little if anything has fundamentally changed.

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After the work was taken down, the City of Dayton issued the following statement: “Due to the political nature of the STEM school art display’s content, complaints from our tenants, and guests who visit the Dayton Convention Center, we made the decision to remove the artwork. The City of Dayton has reached out to the STEM school and explained our criteria for displaying art at the Dayton Convention Center. We have offered them another opportunity to display art in our building in the future.”

Dayton City Commissioner Joey Williams added, “I want to make it perfectly clear that I, and I’m sure other members of this commission feel similarly. We too, are very disappointed in what those young people had to endure. As I was briefed about what happened and learned about what happened, I certainly understand the disappointment and those feelings out there. Those young people went through a whole lot of work, they were invited to put their artwork into the convention center. I’m sure they were extremely disappointed. So, to those young people if you are listening, please hear from me and others we do apologize. That was unfair and we should have been more thoughtful in the front-end of that.”

In the ensuing months, the conversation around the works removal and its impact on not only on the students but on the city as a whole continued. Dayton Regional STEM School Art teacher Jenny Montgomery and history teacher Kevin Lydy, both deeply involved in the project from the start, continued their work with the students and the City of Dayton.

“The students had range of feelings,” Montgomery recalls. “Some students said, ‘You know, we understand, we understand the policy, we understand why this happened.’ Some students also expressed that while they understood, they felt frustrated. Not just because they had spent so much time and effort on the project and it wasn’t seen, but that adults were having a

hard time discussing issues that needed to be talked about and they felt like they were sweeping them under the rug, not necessarily the people from the convention center, but in general people who were complaining about having the work up. They felt like these issues are in their face, in their realities every day, it's all over the news, and it's important to be able to have these discussions – and not talking about it is dangerous.”

Within a week of the work coming down, members of the Convention Center came to talk to the students about the removal of the work and the frustrations the students had concerning the way in which the events unfolded. The Dayton Human Relations Council also worked with the students to provide multiple outlets for their concerns to be heard.

As I think back to last year, I realize that the removal of the work acted to catalyze a conversation that may have not happened if the work was allowed to remain, something not lost on the students, one of whom said, “Obviously, when we heard they had been taken down from the Convention Center, we were all heartbroken 'cause we had put our blood, sweat, and tears into it, but it was something that got a conversation going, which was the point in the first place.”

The aim of this exhibition is to open up that dialogue to a larger audience, making it possible for the students to have their work seen in a space that welcomes their contributions and seeks to engage with the issues raised by this powerful work.

It would be misguided to think that a single exhibition could provide any of these answers — before we have answers we need to recognize what we have in common. I am more interested in the the idea of creating commonality and community between each other, recognizing the space we share and developing lasting alliances that will help as we move forward expansively. I am interested in listening, listening deeply and holding my voice so that others can speak. I am interested in pushing back, pushing back against the ideologies that take us further away from each other, pushing back against the actions that reinforce a separation based on being on the “winning side,” pushing back so we can breathe more deeply than we ever have before.

Michael Casselli, associate professor of sculpture and installation at Antioch College, was guest curator for DVAC's “Breathing Deeply, Pushing Back” exhibition. He wrote this essay for the exhibition.

Art censorship doesn't pop into the news that often, but when it does, it's worth taking a closer look.

The Dayton Visual Arts Center is currently presenting “Breathing Deeply, Pushing Back,” a group exhibition featuring works by artists whose work explores themes of social justice. It's on view at DVAC's downtown Dayton gallery through Sept. 22 (daytonvisualarts.org).

The exhibition was inspired by a 2016 project of the Dayton Regional STEM School ninth-grade Art & History class which explored racial and gender inequalities through essays and artwork and which was subsequently exhibited and then removed from the Dayton Convention Center because of complaints about its controversial nature.

“Breathing Deeply” features three components: 13 of the original student works; three installations in response to the student work by nationally recognized guest artists Carris Adams (Chicago), Juan-SI Gonzalez (Dayton), Christina Springer (Pittsburgh); and 20 juried selections from an open call to the local art community.

The exhibition was guest curated by Michael Casselli, Assistant Professor of Sculpture and Installation at Antioch College. Today we present several of the artworks, Casselli’s essay on the show, and a conversation with Eva Buttacavoli, DVAC’s executive director. — Ron Rollins

About the Author

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