

San Diego artists fight 'obscenity witch hunt'

By Divina Intusino
Arts Writer

Lynn Schuette scrutinized the replica of Picasso's "Guernica" hanging on the wall at a downtown restaurant "Har-rump!" she said as her eyes narrowed. "Maybe we can find something to censor in that."

As director of Sushi, the city's most avant-garde performance gallery, Schuette was only half-joking. The downtown gallery is on the front line of a freedom-of-speech controversy hounding the national arts community, one that is taking place on several fronts.

The most public has been the turmoil at the National Endowment for the Arts, the \$171 million, federal arts-funding agency, lifeblood for a multitude of arts endeavors in nearly every community in the country. It has been under terrific pressure over alleged obscene projects it has funded.

Other battles, meanwhile, are being waged in popular music (paraphrased by the raucous, profane band 2 Live Crew) and in film (focused on the sexually explicit

"The Me Up, The Me Down" and "The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover," both of which received X-ratings from the Motion Picture Association of America).

Sushi has often presented Karen Finley and Holly Hughes, two of four provocative performance artists awarded grants recently by the NEA, only to have them rescinded by agency director John Frohnmayer. In her performance, Finley, among other things, smears foodstuff on her nude body and howls angrily at the audience.

Frohnmayer's action, some claim, was the result of political heat from Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., and a coalition of conservative groups leading a charge against the NEA.

If Sushi brings Finley and Hughes back to San Diego (and they've already been booked for later this year), the small arts organization could risk losing NEA funding, according to Schuette. "They (Finley and Hughes) are hard-working professionals," she said, "artists of integrity, and I have no intention of not booking them again. The last thing I want to do is self-censor."

Schuette's commitment to business as usual echoes the reaction of

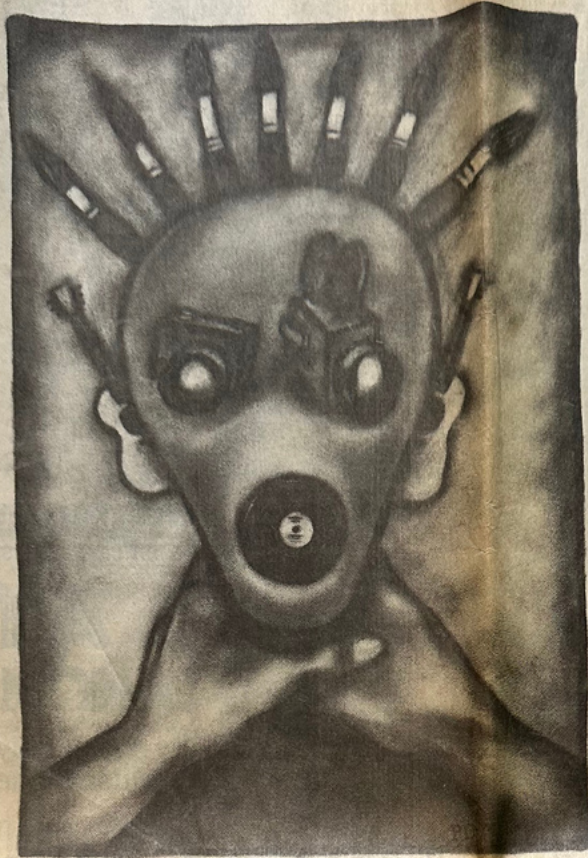


Illustration by Phillip Dvorak

Strangling the arts

San Diego's arts community, despite what some have termed "the obscenity witch hunt" afoot in the country. In a series of interviews with *The San Diego Union*, local artists and arts groups, all of whom receive NEA money, say they will fight any attempt to inhibit their choices of material and their artistic independence.

"I will not do the censor's work," said Arthur Ollman, executive director of the Museum of Photographic Arts in Balboa Park. "Nothing that we've done has been obscene. If something has artistic value, it is not obscene." The museum's current show, "Revelations:

The Art of Manuel Alvarez Bravo," contains photos of nudity and graphic violence.

"I didn't censor myself before I got an NEA grant, and I don't intend to now," said Deborah Small, a San Diego artist who specializes in socially critical installations and was featured recently at the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art in La Jolla.

"No one is going to bully me," said Des McAnuff, artistic director of the La Jolla Playhouse. "I refuse to be pushed around by prudish thugs." The playhouse's recent "Life During Wartime" contained scenes of graphic sexuality.

people determine what we do." The theater's production of "Burn This," which closed yesterday, contained frank sexual situations.

Photographs spurred debate

The artworks that provoked the debate — graphic homoerotic photos by the late Robert Mapplethorpe and a photo titled "Piss Christ" by New York artist Andres Serrano, who has since received death threats — are among the works funded by 81,000 NEA grants during the past three decades. The furor has made Finley, Mapplethorpe and Serrano — once obscure artists operating on the fringes — into topics for debate over the family dinner table and in Congress.

One side argues that tax support allows lawmakers to set limits that go beyond the prohibition against constitutionally defined obscenity. The other side — which includes most artists — says grants shouldn't come with strings.

They note that peer review panels screen NEA grant nominees on the basis of artistic merit. To Helms, depictions of same-sex affection are automatically suspect. The Helms amendment, tacked onto the appropriations bill last fall, bans "homoeroticism."

The Rev. Donald Wildmon's American Family Association, of Tupelo, Miss., a group that led the protests against the film "The Last Temptation of Christ" two years ago, was the first to call attention to Serrano's work depicting a crucifix in urine.

The fallout from that controversy prompted the Corcoran Gallery in Washington to cancel Mapplethorpe's exhibit. A Cincinnati museum curator, Dennis Barrie, faces a jury trial on misdemeanor obscenity charges for bringing Mapplethorpe's work to Ohio.

Christian groups around the country, including the San Diego Family Forum, have held press conferences to denounce federal money for the arts and called for the dissolution of the NEA.

"The government should stick to building up the military and stopping drugs and crime," said Pastor Mac, of the Christians United Church in Southeast San Diego, at a recent press conference. "The government doesn't fund the church because it is out of their realm, and so is art."

The conflict over the NEA "is a hysterical overreaction to a handful of images out of millions," says Cathleen Sullivan, Harvard law professor and First Amendment specialist. "It's like saying, 'Let's shut down the Pentagon because of

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Robert Plant
To perform here Thursday

Robert Plant Whole lotta desire to leave past behind

By George Varga
Pop Music Critic

His innate sense of rhythm notwithstanding, Robert Plant is a man out of time.

Not with himself, not with his music, but with a massive number of rock fans around the world who would prefer that, rather than continue to grow and experiment, he remain firmly grounded in the past.

It is there, nearly two decades in the past to be exact, that millions of rock fans savor their fondest memories of Plant, who rose to fame as the quintessential singer in the quintessential rock band of the late '60s and early '70s.

The name of the band is Led Zeppelin. And, for better and worse, it is a name that will always be synonymous with Plant, who in 1968 joined the fledgling blues-rock quartet formed by ex-Yardbirds guitarist Jimmy Page, veteran studio session bassist John Paul Jones and brash young drum dynamo John Bonham.

Quickly casting off its blues-rock trappings, Led Zeppelin became the prototypical heavy-metal band — and one of the biggest pop successes ever — until Bonham's death by "alcoholic misadventure" in 1979 brought the English group crashing to a halt with a loud, ominous thud.

Today, 11 years later, the band that defined heavy-metal 22 years ago with its self-titled debut album still lives — on countless "classic rock" radio stations, home stereo systems and most certainly in the hearts of the countless fans who breathlessly await the frequently rumored reunion tour by Zeppelin's three remaining members.

"I don't think anything we did was revolutionary," Plant mused of the band he soared to fame with all those years ago. "We just had a ridiculous kind of power, but I don't think we were doing anything other than playing white blues, initially."

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Gutsy ballet from Down Under knows no fear



Maina Gielgud, a hands-on director of the Australian Ballet.

By Anne Marie Welsh
Arts Critic

Ask Maina Gielgud what makes the Australian Ballet different, and she names "gutsiness, vitality and energy," the same stuff Aussies — at least the men — are made of.

Dig a little deeper, however, and this company director reveals her theatrical lineage as great-great niece to legendary British actress Ellen Terry, niece of Sir John Gielgud, and daughter of Hungarian actress Zita Gordon.

"The dancers have interpretive skills that go right through the ranks. Every corps de ballet member is intent upon the drama," Gielgud said. "I was flabbergasted with the difference between them and the English or French companies. In Australia, you could never tell it was a dancer's first time in a role. I don't know why, but they are unembarrassed, unafraid of drama."

The Australian Ballet, bringing mostly dramatic works and a satchel of strong reviews from New York, opens a week of performances at the Orange County Performing Arts Center on Tuesday night. Gielgud, an international ballerina herself, took over the artistic direction in 1983.

Date book

What: The Australian Ballet
When: 8 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday; matinees at 2
Where: Orange County Performing Arts Center, 600 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa
Tickets: \$14 to \$47
Information: (714) 740-2000 or (714) 656-ARTS.

Before this summer's tour, the Australian Ballet had made only one visit to the United States. The 1976 tour served mostly as a vehicle for the lingering charms of ballerina Margot Fonteyn in Sir Robert Helpmann's frothy dance version of Franz Lehár's "The Merry Widow." Critics were kind to see more of the Australian talent — Lucette Aldous and John Meehan and others who later distinguished themselves in European and American companies.

and the very high cost of touring kept the company away from the United States until now. When Gielgud, now 45, signed on, she says, there was already a very good repertory in

Australia, including the classics "Swan Lake" and "Giselle." John Cranko's best full-evening work "Romeo and Juliet" and "Onegin," as well as others. The great Danish dancer Eric Bruhn staged his "La Sylphide" just before he died three years ago. Then Gielgud made it her business to acquire ballets by Jerome Robbins, George Balanchine, Anthony Tudor, Sir Kenneth MacMillan, Glen Tetley and Sir Frederick Ashton.

"Then I brought in several ballets by (Maurice) Bejart," said the former dancer who had distinguished herself as a guest with Bejart's Ballet of the XXth Century. "Now we have several very talented young Australian choreographers."

The state-subsidized company operates out of a new building in Melbourne with eight studios and, as Gielgud puts it, "huge airy windows I fought for. The production department is located opposite the stage door of the theater. It was all built by the government."

A majority of the company's 60 dancers are graduates of the company school, a three-year course that gathers students from all over Aus-

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