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San Francisco Chronicle

SACRAMENTO

Painting of U.S. in toilet raises GOP hackles

Attorney general asked to remove work in state-owned building

[Greg Lucas, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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Sacramento -- A painting of the United States sinking into a toilet now on display in the cafeteria of the state Department of Justice has raised the ire of the state Republican Party, which is demanding that Attorney General Bill Lockyer remove the image.



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The painting -- part of an exhibit of more than 30 works by lawyer artists and pieces with overt legal themes -- has an American flag-painted continental United States heading into a toilet. Next to it are the words: "T'anks to Mr. Bush."

The artist, Stephen Percy, a Berkeley lawyer with a house in Sacramento, won earlier notoriety for hanging an effigy of an American soldier on the outside of his home here with a sign saying "Bush lied, I died." Angry residents tore the effigies down.

"I don't know why we need to tolerate the cheap artwork of a gadfly with a world view that is so offensive to a majority of the people," said Karen Hanretty, a spokeswoman for the California Republican Party.

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One Web log, Conservative Schooler, had collected 55 signatures by late Tuesday afternoon for a petition calling on Lockyer to remove the painting because it desecrates the flag, and "material that is offensive to most people does not belong in a government office."

Although the debate centers on the appropriateness of art in public places, the exhibit was neither commissioned by Lockyer, nor did he participate in selecting the pieces, and no public funds were spent on the show.

"We played no role in developing the guidelines on what the curator of this exhibit could pick or not pick," said Nathan Barankin, a Lockyer spokesman. "His only constraints were his creative muse and space limitations. "

Barankin said all the works in the exhibit would be on display until the show ends Aug. 31, a likely result since Lockyer, for most of his political career, has kept a representation of a man with a hand over his mouth on his office wall. Beneath the man are the words: "No Censorship."

The art displayed in the first floor cafeteria at the Department of Justice on I Street includes paintings, sculptures and photographs and runs the gamut from a copy of Vermeer's "Girl with a Pearl Earring" to Blind Justice cowering in a prison cell with red paint splashed across the frame, apparently to symbolize blood.

The sponsor of the show is California Lawyers for the Arts, a nonprofit group founded in the Bay Area in 1974 to aid artists with their legal issues.

"You may disagree with what is being expressed by one particular painting in the exhibition, but we can't censor the artist for his right to express his own opinion," said Ellen Taylor who heads the Sacramento office of lawyers for the arts. "We have freedom of speech and freedom of expression and art is speech according to every law in the land."

The exhibit's curator, Chuck Miller, said the Percy piece was not included in the collection

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to antagonize any, including the Republican Party.

"In the context of the show and what it's about, the painting is perfectly alright," he said. "... It's just one point of view."

Hanretty countered that Lockyer, a Democrat and staunch supporter of free speech, would not have allowed art to be displayed that gays or lesbians found offensive or promoted violence toward women.

Pearcy's painting is in a second, smaller room at the far end of the cafeteria and is only visible by diners sitting in that room.

To the right of Percy is a poster with a dove above the head of a Palestinian peering grimly from behind barbed wire. Across the top are the words: "Palestine -- Stop U.S. Financed Genocide in the Middle East."

Pearcy could not be reached for comment Tuesday, but in a statement that accompanies the exhibit he said he had made the painting on July 4, 2003, to "show the direction this country was (and still is) headed under the Bush administration." The painting also "confronted the absurd display of 'fanatical patriotism' following 9/11," he said.

To support his thesis, Percy recites a litany of government actions he objects to including torture of detainees, censorship, hiring "more cops rather than teachers," SUVs and lack of corporate accountability.

In front of Percy's painting is a pair of ceramic Western boots whose creator, Corrine Singleton, said represented Western justice.

Other artists also expressed political sentiments:

John K. Landgraf, who created the Blind Justice in her cell with blood spattered across it, said "the current administration's constraint and abuse of Justice (for whatever reason) cast an ominous shadow over our nation's moral integrity."

Another artist called for an end to genocide in Rwanda.

Others merely painted a Monet-like pink water lily or a brightly abstract portrayal of shadows and dying light dancing across Folsom Lake at sunset.

"There is a good spectrum represented in the show, pieces that are 180 degrees from some of the others. And if you don't like something, you don't have to look at it," said Miller, the curator, who is an art consultant and former owner of the Michael Himovitz Gallery.

Larry Brecht, who has run the cafeteria since 1999, enjoyed the "nice personal drawings" of high school students at the Natomas Charter School, the previous exhibit.

"I don't mind the art," Brecht said. "It does add to the facility but some of the art, in my opinion, hasn't been much too look at. Abstract stuff just doesn't float my boat, but if they wanted to get some conversation generated, they really have."

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Page B - 1

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