

Statement

Written by Bill Thomas

Regarding his Installation in the Houston Artists Windows Project, which was Censored by Foley's



March 13, 2000

I was one of 17 Houston area artists invited by FotoFest 2000 to create artwork for a display window in Foley's downtown store, as part of the Houston Artists Windows Project. Prior to installing the work, I informed Foley's PR department about my idea for the window. I explained

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that my piece dealt with my own family history involving Foley's, and local civil rights history which Foley's was involved in 40 years ago. After considering my proposal, they enthusiastically endorsed the project.

On Thursday, March 8, around 4:30 PM, Foley's censored my installation, and concealed it from view by covering the windows with black cloth. The window had been on view to the public for five days. I was asked to de-install as soon as possible.

I was told the decision was made by company CEO, Tom Hogan. Foley's store management favored keeping the art on view. Black community leaders asked Foley's to not remove the artwork, as these historical events are important and need to be remembered. Foley's released a statement, jointly with FotoFest, explaining their reason for removing the work. It reads, "Foley's removed the artwork in response to a few complaints by African American employees who were offended by the noose imagery. While most people saw it as a very strong positive message, we believed it was important to be sensitive to those who did not."

The large black and white image referred to by "noose imagery," is titled "Racial Tensions." Seen in a bleak but formally striking landscape under a freeway, a black man and a white man, are balanced on opposite ends of a see saw. Both have nooses around their necks, attached to the concrete beam above, and their hands appear tied behind their backs. Balance must be maintained for them to survive, and any attempt by one to harm the other, will result in mutual destruction. Put simple, if one hangs, they both hang. It is understandable for someone to be uncomfortable with the vocabulary of hanging, per se. However, it is completely unfair and unreasonable to ignore all other elements in the image, except the noose on the African-American man, and then take exception on the grounds that it only references his lynching. Objections which were the result of a gross misinterpretation by "a few employees," are an absurd basis on which to silence this exhibit. The right of objection should not transcend the right of expression.

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Prior to the decision to eliminate the installation, I, FotoFest, and Foley's store management offered to meet with those who were offended, and work to resolve the misunderstanding. One of the capacities of art is that it can provide us with a neutral ground where we can safely gather and examine our differences and opinions. But, this proposal was dismissed by Hogan, along with any opportunity to reach a compromise.

<http://zonezero.com/magazine/articles/thomas/thomas.html>