

Art Spurs Controversy at LAX

A bare breast and other images offend some airport visitors and workers. The tapestry is ordered removed, then allowed to stay.

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A provocative, 150-foot-long tapestry on display at Los Angeles International Airport has touched off a Janet Jackson-style debate about what kind of art is appropriate in public places.

The canvas tapestry, created by a collective of 115 Latino, Chicano and African American artists in the weeks after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, was unveiled Jan. 23 in a plexiglass display case lining a ramp that leads arriving passengers out of the Tom Bradley International Terminal.



VINCE COMPAGNONE Los Angeles Times

IMAGES: Passengers pass a controversial display at the Bradley International Terminal at the Los Angeles airport.

A heated discussion about the artwork's merits followed.

In a series of e-mails obtained by The Times, city officials called the panels "bizarre" and "scary."

The exhibit, titled "Eye-

Speak," includes images inspired by the attacks, such as a bare-breasted woman holding a bleeding heart with the World Trade Center's twin towers on

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LOS ANGELES

Provocative Images Spur Some Complaints

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fire behind her.

The project, conceived by local artists Jane Castillo and Joseph Beckles, features pencil sketches, paintings, false hair sewn onto the canvas, and other media. It was meant to be a bridge between the Chicano and Latino and the African American communities, artists said.

Passengers and some city employees who were offended by the images demanded that the city remove the scroll.

"This is worse than the Janet Jackson incident," an airport employee said Tuesday, referring to the Super Bowl halftime show in which Justin Timberlake ripped off part of Jackson's costume, revealing a breast. "It's sick." The woman asked that her name not be used for fear of retaliation from her supervisors.

After receiving about 10 complaints, the airport agency ordered the city's Cultural Affairs Department to remove the artwork. Cultural Affairs officials select and ad-

"If the lights are off on the display, and the lights [are] still on the photo posters of various tourist spots in Los Angeles on the opposite wall, the passengers/visitors/employees walking by will focus their attention on the lit photos," wrote Nancy Castles, the airport agency's director of media relations, in a Jan. 26 e-mail to Day and other airport executives. "If someone asks what happened to the lights in the display, we can just say someone forgot to turn them on."

Under pressure from airport officials, the artists agreed last week to take down the work this Thursday.

That all changed Tuesday. After receiving inquiries from The Times, airport officials reversed their order to remove the tapestry and decided it could remain through its originally scheduled date of May 3. Officials turned on the lights in the display case.

"This is an important artwork by a group of fine local artists," airport spokesman Paul Haney said in a statement. "Af-

ment to remove the artwork. Cultural Affairs officials select and administer art for the city's airport department.

"The problem is not the artwork, but that the artwork is inappropriate for the airport," wrote Kim Day, the agency's interim executive director, in a Jan. 28 e-mail to Carrie Roche, public art administrator for the city's Cultural Affairs Department. "We are not a museum, and we need art that does not offend anyone, and does not in any way add stress to an already stressful experience."

The two artists who conceived the work called the airport agency's order — later rescinded — censorship.

"It's insulting that they're trying to silence an entire community of artists in Los Angeles in 2004," said Castillo, 33, an elementary school art teacher who is co-curator of the exhibit. "On Rodeo Drive they

just put in a nude torso of a woman in the center of the street and no one bats an eyelash, and people come from all over the world to Beverly Hills."

Castillo is a large-installation artist in the vein of Christo who has shown her work widely in Southern California, and co-curator Beckles, 53, is a sculptor whose wood and steel pieces have been shown internationally.

Castillo said they conceived the pieces to represent artists' interpretations of the first year of the new millennium. By coincidence, artists began work on the project at Glendale Community College and Los Angeles Southwest College in the weeks after the skyjackings.

"Bewildered by the events of those few days, many of us [evidently] created art work that related to those feelings of loss, confusion, impending war," said Victoria Delgadillo, 52, a Highland Park painter who created the bare-breasted woman holding the heart. "The piece I did was a woman; it could be myself, feeling very vulnerable. It's kind of hopeful; she's holding her heart together in this crisis."

Another artist painted a winged image on a nearby panel jumping from a skyscraper to the ground, where chalk figures lay on a city sidewalk. In another panel, a skull lurks behind black cross bars. Nearby, a hand holds a reddened torch above the words: "There is a movement, we are still still." Only about 40 feet of the 150-foot tapestry is on display along the Bradley walkway; artists hoped to unroll the canvas to unveil other images over the next three months.

A second 150-foot scroll is on display near the terminal's baggage claim area, but has not generated significant complaints.

This is not the first time that controversy has surrounded art at LAX. City officials papered over an exhibit featuring several nude men sandblasted into the granite floor in Terminal 4 in July 2001. This time, airport officials chose to turn off the lights in the plexiglass case enclosing the tapestry.



VINCE COMPAGNONE Los Angeles Times

DISTURBING: Parts of the 150-foot-long tapestry conjure images of chaos and loss, which unsettled some people.

local artists, airport spokesman Paul Haney said in a statement. "After review and reflection, it has been decided that it will remain in place for connecting international travelers to enjoy until spring."

Advocates of the 1st Amendment said the city's decision was good, but questioned whether the debate would invite censorship of art projects submitted for future airport displays.

"It would have been much better if they would have realized that there were important artists in the show before the imminent threat of bad publicity," said Svetlana Mintcheva, director of the arts advocacy project at the National Coalition Against Censorship. "We remain concerned about the process of selection of art."

The city's airport agency pays the Cultural Affairs Department \$88,500 a year to choose and administer rotating exhibits for several

display cases at LAX and Ontario International Airport, according to an agreement signed in May 2002.

The controversy over "Eye-Speak" put cultural affairs officials in an awkward position between the airport agency, which said it had not reviewed the scroll before it was installed, and artists, who did not want to rotate the tapestry ahead of schedule to hide the controversial images.

"We're treading lightly here," said Roche, a public art administrator.

Roche said airport officials have signed off on art displays before they were installed in the past. Airport officials said Tuesday, however, that they are not qualified to judge the merits of artwork and do not want to be intimately involved in selecting artists.

The dispute over the tapestry at LAX is the first time the two agencies have been faced with an issue that has confronted scores of cities with laws setting aside a portion of construction costs for public art at major developments. Critics say these programs, and the commissions set up to review the projects, invite censorship.

In the last year, several art displays have been hotly contested in cities around California. Last fall, Fairfield city officials ordered artist Jim Kimberly to remove a sculpture known as "The Super Imposer" from a gallery at the Fairfield Center for Creative Arts.

The piece featured a two-sided panel with the American flag on one side and Osama bin Laden on the other. It was attached to a stationary bicycle that optically fused the images when it was pedaled.

Nevada County officials ordered the removal of all artwork being shown in the Annual Open Studios Art Show at the county's Rood Administrative Center in October after a debate erupted about five works that contained partial nudity, including a stylized image of a bare-breasted ancient Egyptian goddess.