

# SNARLS & STRIPES

## *The Phoenix Art Museum's U.S. Flag Exhibition Brings Out The Worst In Arizona's Conservatives.*

By Margaret Regan

**THE FIRST TIME** Kate Millett's flag-in-a-toilet art piece was exhibited, in the *People's Flag Show* in [New York](#) back in 1970, the New York County District Attorney not only shut the exhibition down, he had the show's three organizers arrested on charges of flag desecration. They were convicted too.

And in 1989 when Dread Scott put together his flag-on-the-floor installation at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Veterans of Foreign Wars picketed, the school lost several thousand dollars' worth of funding and President George Bush called for a Constitutional amendment banning the desecration of the flag.

Shades of Phoenix, 1996.

The Millet and Scott pieces are the most controversial pieces in a traveling show of some 80 works, *Old Glory: The American Flag in Contemporary Art*, at the Phoenix Art Museum. Ever since the exhibition opened March 16, it has been picketed by protesters, a lot of them wearing American Legion regalia. They've zeroed in on Millett's "American Dream Goes to Pot" and Scott's "What Is the Proper Way to Fold a U.S. Flag?"

Government officials haven't been silent either. One state representative has called for the prosecution of museum leaders who allowed the art to be shown. Another rep has taken punitive action on an unrelated arts funding bill.

Rep. Don Aldridge, R-Lake Havasu, added an amendment to House Bill 2448, which would bar a proposed arts endowment fund from paying for art that "disgraces flags or religious objects." The House approved the amended bill earlier this week.

"I am outraged that taxpayers' money would be used to stuff a flag into a toilet," said Aldridge, who has not seen the show. "These people call themselves artists. They don't have any talent. They're the scum of the earth."

But the tax dollar argument does not hold much water. Two private foundations paid for the Phoenix showing of *Old Glory*. And the museum is a private non-profit that gets most of its money from individual and corporate donors, said museum spokeswoman Amy Carr. In a total budget this year of \$3.2 million, the state contributed only \$77,000 via the Arizona Commission on the Arts for general operating support.

Rep. Scott Bundgaard, R-Glendale, who did see the show, asked the Phoenix City Prosecutor, Kerry Wangberg, to look into whether the show violates a 1978 state statute that outlawed the desecration of the flag. Bundgaard wants the offending art removed. He hopes that even the hint of prosecution will get the job done.

"We don't want to prosecute anybody, to be honest, but we want them to remove those pieces that are clear examples of the desecration of the flag," Bundgaard said. "With the potential of prosecution, we think



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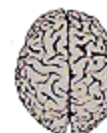
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they'd be willing to comply."

A 1989 U.S. Supreme Court ruling held that burning the flag is political speech protected by the First Amendment. Millett's work was unprotected back in 1970, but Scott's, coming along after the ruling, went unmolested. And Bungaard may be underestimating his opposition in any case.

"Our position is that we have an exhibition and it will stay up until June 16," said Carr. "The whole concept of the show is free expression."

Interestingly, *Old Glory*, which originated at the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, also traveled to famously conservative Colorado Springs. It didn't ignite protest in Cleveland or Colorado Springs. If "that's a sad commentary of the values of Americans in other cities," as Bungaard put it, it may also be because the show is a relatively sober historical survey of 50 years of flag imagery in American art, from Jasper Johns' famous flag paintings to today's found object installations. It chronicles the increasing politicization of the flag, and addresses the intense emotional response many people have to art about the flag.

The loud protest over the show, ironically, underlines the same rights to free speech that artists like Millett and Scott celebrate in their works.

"For these artists, the work is respectful," said David S. Rubin, the museum's curator for 20th century art. Rubin originally put the show together for the Cleveland Center and wrote the catalog. "The flag represents the freedom the vets fought for." And, Rubin adds, "We welcome (the protesters') participation."

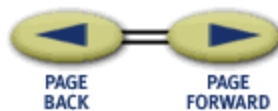
When artists use the flag as a symbol of the shortcomings of the U.S., they expect to push a lot of patriotic buttons. (The *People's Art Show* where Millett's piece first appeared was specifically designed to challenge a state statute banning flag desecration.) Veterans and others who rally 'round the flag as a sacred symbol of the nation complete the process by vocally registering their own protest against the dissident art. Artists are free to show what they want, and everybody else is free damn it to their heart's content.

"This is not a censorship issue," Bundgaard insists. But when the government jumps in and takes sides, as Bundgaard wants it to do, and officially promotes a single interpretation of the flag, it's censorship and nothing but. **TW**

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