

BIAS AND HYPOCRISY IN BROWARD COUNTY

On May 27, a news story appeared in Florida's *Sun-Sentinel* regarding the "Controversy" exhibit at the Broward Art Guild. The article said that one of the artists, Michael Friedman, had complained to Mary Becht, Director of the Broward County Department of Cultural Affairs, about the "Yahoo!" entry by Alfred Phillips; it showed President Bush being sodomized. [Note: it was not because the work was anti-Bush that anyone objected, it was because it was seen as anti-gay. We know this because anti-Bush artwork that had nothing to do with gays or sodomy was not seen as controversial.]

Becht agreed it was offensive and told the guild's director, Susan Buzzi, to move it to "a less prominent space within the gallery"; it was subsequently "set near a corner of the gallery facing the wall." The irony is that Friedman's own contribution was allowed to stand: it showed Pope Benedict XVI surrounded by swastikas.

On May 31, William Donohue wrote a letter to Ms. Becht (which was faxed that day and mailed for next-day delivery), in which he said, "I would like to see equal treatment afforded the anti-Catholic art of Michael Friedman that you gave to the work by Alfred Phillips." In short, Donohue wanted Friedman's offensive work set next to Phillips' offensive work.

On June 2, Donohue left a message for Becht to call him explaining her response. She said she never received a letter, though we have proof that it was delivered and signed for by someone in her office on June 1. So we faxed it again. She faxed back an evasive letter that refused to come to grips with the request that was made.

Consequently, Donohue wrote to the following persons

requesting that they address this matter in a serious way: Broward County Commissioners; Broward Cultural Affairs Council Members; Broward County Administrator; President, Greater Ft. Lauderdale Convention and Visitors Bureau; Florida Arts Council Members; Secretary of State.

In his letter, Donohue explained the nature of his complaint and then offered the following remarks: "The decision by Ms. Becht to remove a piece of artwork she agrees is offensive while allowing an equally offensive piece to remain speaks volumes. It speaks volumes about her tastes and what offends her; it speaks volumes about her authority; and it speaks volumes about what is tolerated in Broward County."

Thus far, the responses we have received are all of the "art conveys different things to different people" sort of commentary. Now if this were true, then logic would dictate that the work by Phillips be put back to its initial spot in the gallery. After all, just because Friedman and Becht find it objectionable, who are they to speak for everyone else?

We suggest you write to Mary Becht, Director, Cultural Division, Broward County, 100 S. Andrews Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301.