

Photographer's exhibition proceeds at Library after 'censorship' claims



Art by local photographer Yafang Shi is now on the walls of the Aurora Public Library (APL) as the artist envisioned after a dispute over alleged 'censorship' last week.

On Saturday, the Aurora Public Library Board voted to allow Shi's exhibition to continue after the Library voiced concerns over two images planned to be featured, as well as some details of the artists' statement.

As reported by the CBC last week, the two images in question featured messaging related to Premier Doug Ford as well as former U.S. president Donald Trump which, it was argued, was in violation of the APL's public art policy.

Following Saturday's meeting and the Board's decision to allow the exhibition to go ahead, they also voted in favour of a review of the policy itself.

'I am very pleased that the Board made the decision to review the Public Art Policy and allow my exhibit to proceed uncensored after the conversation among me as an artist, the Library, the community, and society at large on how to make the Library's policies and the implementation of those policies guarantee artists' rights to freedom of expression.

'The Aurora Public Library has made great efforts to make the Library space diverse and inclusive through its programs. I believe that our Library will be further strengthened after its Public Art Policy is reviewed and amended according to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Charter-proof policies and the implementation of those policies will be good for the Library, for the artists, for our community, and for society.'

These sentiments were shared by Reccia Mandelcorn, the Aurora Public Library's Manager of Community Collaboration.

Public libraries, she says, are guided and supported by these policies on everything from membership, collections, staff codes of conduct, and public art.

'All libraries require their policies to be reviewed and updated, and in our library, policies are reviewed over the term of a Board,' she says. 'This last review of this particular public art policy was done on 2018. The Board will be doing a thorough review with attention to our community and to give everyone a common point of reference.

'The Public Art policy, requirements for the submitting artist and the responsibilities for curation on the part of the library' is not meant to censor controversial work but to ensure consideration of the public nature of the Library's facility and community service for all. Our Library Board will be engaging now in a fulsome review of the current policy with regard to the application and

approval policy so that we can provide a public art policy that is consistent, clear and articulates the expectations of our diverse community.?

Since the Aurora Public Library opened its Colleen Abbott Gallery on its second floor in 2009, the space has hosted exhibitions by more than 40 artists and artist collectives, including the work of Newmarket photographer Greg King, whose show, Come Together, featured images taken in solidarity with the Women's March on Washington in 2017.

?I think the current conversation shows the importance of context because visitors to exhibitions have different responses to art depending on the space that it's in,? says Ms. Mandelcorn, referencing a blog post from the University of Toronto's Museum Studies department, which stated that when visitors seek out galleries they often do so to view specific exhibitions or work from specific artists, whereas it might be a different story for people viewing art in public libraries.

?When they come to libraries, it may be for a whole variety of reasons and this means art displays in libraries face different challenges and considerations to art and galleries and our spaces are simply not the same. From a Library perspective, we take great care to make respectful decisions that reflect the expectations of our community, which is diverse. I have every confidence that when our Board reviews the articulation of what is in our policy and what is expected from both artists and the curation process, we will be able to offer many more exciting and important exhibits to our community.?

Yafang Shi's exhibition, Fire II, will be on display in the Colleen Abbott Gallery through April 15. "Yafang Shi is a journalist, photographer, and poet who documents social movements for women's rights, Indigenous rights, workers' rights, and peace,? says the APL in its introduction to the exhibition. ?Her work speaks to an intersectional and transnational feminist perspective that highlights the multiple oppressions women endure due to factors such as gender, race, class, and political injustice. Shi hopes that this exhibit will bring awareness of the struggles women face to the community and urges us to consider the world we inhabit and our responsibility to work towards positive change.?

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