



The IB Visual Arts Senior Canvas was transformed from its initial depiction of meme cultural to a commentary on art censorship in light of recent school controversy.

## EDITORIAL

Photo by Casey Collins

Art and controversy are two words that often go hand in hand. There's the controversy over blurred lines between art and pornography, graffiti and street art, the purpose and placement of public art, and so much more. Recently, however, the subject of controversial art entered the halls of Richland Northeast when the school removed specific pieces from the annual student art showcase. These pieces, removed by members of the administrative staff, were taken down mainly for nudity and perceived violence that were deemed inappropriate. The nudity, administration argued, was much more prevalent this year due to an IB visual art class concentration that was centered on the censorship and beauty of the female form.

Art students who had their work taken down quickly responded with protest signs in place of their removed art, in addition to social media posts to explain their outrage. Some students went so far as to remove their entire exhibitions from the art show, claiming that administration or outside groups should not be able to determine what art is, and if that couldn't be understood, then the school didn't deserve their art.

Many art students whose work was not removed participated in these ventures of dissent against the school's art show, with the IB year two visual art class completely revising their group senior canvas to convey a message about negative effects of censorship in art. Students whose work was removed also expressed anger at the way the pieces were taken, with administration not informing the students about the removal, as well as not immediately laying out a return process for students to retrieve their work.

In response to these demonstrated outrage from students both in and outside of the Northeast art classes, administrators removed the protests signs in the art

show and conducted open door meetings for students who wanted to voice their opinion on the subject. In addition, principal Sabrina Suber also recommended the creation of a private gallery for more explicit pieces in the future, arguing that the artwork still deserved to be displayed as long as it could be in a location where people could see it by choice rather than by obligation when they pass through the science atrium. Although many of the upset students support the idea of creating a separate gallery for works deemed explicit, most do not agree with the sentiment of censorship behind it, arguing that the works deserve to be displayed publicly.

This sentiment of outrage over art censorship that rippled through the Northeast student body acted as a catalyst for discussions within the school about what should be considered inappropriate in a young academic atmosphere. In light of these discussions, questions have arisen over whether art should be allowed to blur lines of propriety for the sake of student expression and adolescent exploration.

Though it is important to ensure that the school setting is respectable for the students who are meant to be engaged within it, along with the faculty, it's crucial to remember that a respectable atmosphere for an arts curriculum is centered on the freedom of self-expression. If it were an art showcase for an elementary school or a middle school, then this would be a different story. However, it's frankly a bit absurd to believe that high schoolers haven't been exposed to the concept of sex, nudity, drugs, and other more explicit material. As long as these themes are explored in artwork in order to convey a message, then it shouldn't be considered inapplicable to a school setting.

According to federal law, the rules of what artwork should be displayed and what should be removed follow the idea of

"the principal decides." This means that it is the principal's choice if artwork is considered too inappropriate for a school setting. While Suber clearly appreciates the arts curriculum at Northeast and did inquire to those above her about the decision to remove the artworks, it suffices to say that lacking appropriate guidelines and entrusting such a decision to one individual is not the best strategy for handling the arts. Art has always been a subjective concept that no one single person can define. Each individual is required to create their own definition for the arts when they view it; therefore, having one person determine whether art is inappropriate seems counterintuitive to the concept of art itself. While the situation at Northeast is preferable, as we have an administration who encourages and supports the idea of having the explicit arts displayed in a separate location, not all schools are as fortunate. With this sort of system in place, a school administration with a narrow definition of art could widen the reach of what is deemed inappropriate to not just subjects such as nudity, drugs, and violence, but also to subjects that they deem personally inappropriate in artwork, such as morbid references to death or religious symbolism. Guidelines are absolutely necessary to determine what should be displayed in student art shows in order to ensure that the decision framework that justifies the removal of certain pieces is one that is created and considered by a number of people, a group that should include both educators who know what's best for the school, as well as those from the arts community who can suggest what's best for artistic endeavors into self-expression.

If art is so uniquely important to our school's identity, then this is the least we could do to ensure that the art produced within our walls remains true to the young minds it is meant to represent.