

Police close 'offensive' art exhibition

Police close 'offensive' art exhibition - Artist says he did not want to hurt feelings



An image from the collection that some Hindus found offensive

Authorities in the capital said yesterday that investigations are continuing over a controversial art exhibit that police closed earlier this week after complaints by members of a Hindu group that the paintings were offensive.

Police padlocked the Siddhartha Art Gallery in central Kathmandu on Tuesday after a confrontation between members of the local branch of the World Hindu Federation (WHF) and Nepalese artist Manish Harijan.

Harijan's exhibit, *The Rise of the Collateral*, opened on August 22 and was expected to run through September 20.

The exhibition includes 11 pieces that feature Hindu deities in the guise of Western superheroes, with one image depicting the monkey god Hanuman holding an alcoholic beverage.

Jupiter Pradhan, also an artist, said he was at the gallery with Harijan when angry WHF members arrived on Tuesday.

He said “a dozen hooligans came to our ongoing exhibit and almost beat [Harijan] up while threatening his life. Soon after, the police came and padlocked the gallery under orders from the chief district officer [Chudamani Sharma].”

Harijan dismissed the WHF’s criticism of his work as being based on nothing more than a misunderstanding.

“My intention is not to ridicule religion or hurt Hindu feelings,” he told ucanews.com after appearing for questioning by Chief District Officer Chudamani Sharma.

“In revealing the effects of globalization, I only wanted to fuse Eastern and Western culture.”

Sharma said after the questioning that “the gallery would remain locked until the controversy was resolved,” adding that no formal charges have been filed against the artist or the gallery.

Dhiraj Pratap Singh, spokesman for the Kathmandu Metropolitan Police, said authorities would continue to review the dispute.

“We are in the process of calling both parties together to investigate the issue.”

Gallery curator Sangita Thapa, who has also been questioned by police, defended the exhibition.

“As a Hindu, if I thought the paintings were derogatory towards Hinduism I would not have allowed

them in the gallery in the first place,” she said.

Thapa further criticized representatives from the WHF, one of which she said threatened her with violence.

“These extremists want us to apologize via every available media outlet and burn [Harijan’s] paintings.”

Axel Plathe, head of the UNESCO office in Kathmandu, said the heart of the matter was the right of artists to work without fear of reprisal.

“Tensions that may arise between artistic creation and religious and ethical values should be openly discussed instead of becoming the subject of intimidation or even death threats against the artist,” Plathe said in a statement.

Nil Bhandari, one of two leaders of the national branch of the WHF, said any complaints filed against the artist have come not from the organization but from individual members.

However Damodar Gautam, the second leader of the national office, urged caution on the part of artists working on controversial themes.

“Artists should be careful not to hurt the religious sentiments of any religion,” he said. “The rights of any artist are not limitless in that sense.”

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