

International Examiner

'Controversial' Tiananmen art show casualty of flap over NEA

by Alan Lau

This should have been a good year for the Asian American Arts Center (AAAC) and its director Robert Lee. His organization along with P.S. 1 Museum had co-sponsored a huge exhibition, "China: June 4" Put together in response to events in China after the Tiananmen Square massacre, it elicited an enthusiastic response from artists from all sectors and included Chinese artists as well as known and unknown artists around New York. Following an initial opening at P.S. 1 Museum in New York, it also toured Hong Kong and Los Angeles. "Arts in America," a national arts magazine mentioned it as one of the major exhibitions of the year.

Trouble began when Lee organized an offshoot of this show soliciting new work from multicultural artists responding to Tiananmen Square.

The Tiananmen Memorial Art Exhibition was composed of works by artists from America and Hong Kong. Lee curated the American portion of the exhibit. He found sponsorship from the private nonprofit Congressional Human Rights Foundation (CHRF) and the office of Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass) who

had agreed to speak at the opening on June 26.

But less than two weeks before the show was to have opened in the Senate Rotunda of the Russell Building in Washington, D.C., Lee received a call from CHRF director David Phillips who said that the Senate Ethics and Rules committees had objected to two of the works selected and wanted them removed from the exhibition.

Lee instead withdrew the entire American portion of the show a week before the scheduled exhibition opening.

The board of the Asian American Arts Center wanted Lee to fight the case but this was happening at a time when Congress was questioning both the funding and the role of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Lee had also conferred with Richard Andrews, currently director of University of Washington's Henry Gallery and a specialist on issues of censorship. He advised Lee not to get it into the press because the NEA was in a delicate situation and Sen. Jessie Helms (R-N.C.) would use it to attack the NEA, recalled Lee.

He also did not want to hurt the NEA's precarious position while Congressional funding was being considered. AAAC receives roughly one-fourth of its funding from NEA.

As could be expected, the artists were outraged. "Many of them wanted me to stage a press conference and put together a traveling protest show of the artwork. At that time I was simply burning out," said Lee.

The two works in question were

Hongtu Zhang's "Last Banquet" and Hong Yiu Wa's "The Wall." A few days later, a third piece, Byron Kim's sculptural installation, "The very, very small number of people," was added to the rejection list by Nancy Soderberg, a legislative assistant to Sen. Kennedy.

According to Lee, Soderberg argued that "the committee has to consider work that wouldn't offend a four-year-old girl from Iowa."

Zhang's painting, a take-off on Da Vinci's classic, "The Last Supper," replaces the saints with figures of Mao. Soderberg told Lee that the committee found it offensive on religious grounds.

Hong's painting, which shows dead parents with their baby, was interpreted as support for the Chinese regime's pro-abortion policy. The Kim sculpture which depicts a figure in a cage surrounded by 64 vials of blood allegedly reminded the committee of voodoo.

Listening to Lee's account and reading Luis Francia's story of the fiasco in the July 31 issue of the *Village Voice*, this tale of threatened censorship behind closed doors conjures an image of Lee battling a phantom hydra while falling down a bureaucratic labyrinth.

Francia could find no one accountable. He says that Phillips, head of the sponsoring CHRF denied any issues of censorship and said it was purely a contract dispute and that Lee asked for more money and was refused.

Lee contends that money was never the issue and resents any insinuation that he would be willing to censor the show if given more money.

Soderberg said that the content of the exhibition was entirely the foundation's responsibility.

Jim King, staff director of the Senate Rules Committee told Francia that his group does not preview art work but simply allocates time and space. According to King, preview of any work is left to the sponsoring senator. Phillips says that Kennedy did preview the work in slide form, but his staff would neither confirm or deny this.

One can only speculate that the Helms attack on the NEA has a lot of people taking cover before any shots are fired. In a sense this fear of controversy is a more effective tool of censorship than naming names and pointing fingers. This chilling climate and fear of reprisal paralyzes our "supposed" freedom of expression.

Now that Robert Lee has had a chance to recover from his experience in the Capitol, he is thinking of mounting a traveling exhibit of the work that was originally scheduled for Washington, D.C.

While in Seattle researching a project on Asian American artists, Lee said that he was disappointed in the lack of press coverage after the show opened. "It seemed like after Tiananmen Square, the media treated it like a dead issue."

Lee concedes that the Asian American Arts Center failed in its goal of organizing the community around this issue. "How to bring the arts to a political issue that the community cares about? That's still an elusive goal to me. I don't support the use of force and the theory of 'might makes right' but I also have to recognize the limitations of what people can do."