

Complaint spurs investigation of Artswatch exhibit

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Acting on a complaint, Louisville officials are investigating an exhibit at Artswatch, a small art gallery on Frankfort Avenue, to determine if it violates city ordinances regulating adult material.

The investigation by the city's Inspections, Permits and Licenses office is the first involving a local art gallery and comes on the heels of the recent controversy in Cincinnati over the exhibit of

Beryl Williams looked at a display at the Artswatch gallery yesterday. Some work in the current exhibit, which closes June 30, is being called sexually graphic.

STAFF PHOTO BY JOSEPH A. GARCIA

City questioning whether display violates adult-material ordinances

sexually graphic photographs taken by the late Robert Mapplethorpe.

Artswatch officials said yesterday they were surprised by the city's interest in the 13 paintings, photographs and sculptures on display at the non-profit arts organization's one-room gallery at 2337 Frankfort Ave.

"It's kind of a lot of noise to make over a very small exhibit," said Artswatch board chairman Janice Litner, a Louisville attorney.

Some of the works depict male and female nudity, and a few contain images

of sexual activity between men. One sculpture, "Fundamentalist Dream Girl," depicts a partial torso of a nude woman with the vagina sewn shut.

The exhibit opened June 1 and will close June 30, gallery director Linda Speer said.

Speer said Artswatch warned in press releases and brochures that the exhibit contains adult subject matter. The warning is posted on the front door, and the gallery is not admitting anyone under 18, she said.

"We wanted to be sensitive to the com-

munity," she said. "I don't want to force the art on anyone who might be offended by it."

The exhibit is sponsored by the arts organization and a local group called Gays and Lesbians United for Equality, to mark Gay and Lesbian Pride Week, June 24-30.

Bill Schreck, director of the city's inspection office, said he will meet today with city Law Director J. Michael Brown to determine whether the city has jurisdiction over the exhibit. If it does, city officials will then view the exhibit to determine if any of the items violate city ordinances.

Brown said the city is not attempting to regulate art exhibits but has an obliga-

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tion to look into complaints from the public. Schreck said a caller complained last week about the exhibit.

The city sent an inspector to the gallery who asked to photograph some of the items. Speer said she declined the request after consulting with Litner; the two said they would prefer that officials view the entire exhibit.

Schreck said the city will try to determine whether it has jurisdiction under either of two ordinances, the adult entertainment ordinance and another that restricts the display of adult material with sexual content.

The adult entertainment ordinance, commonly applied to nightclubs, massage parlors and adult movie theaters, requires such establishments to be licensed and to operate under certain restrictions. They are prohibited from admitting anyone under 18.

The display ordinance restricts some stores from openly displaying items such as magazines or videocassettes with sexual content.

If the city determines that Artswatch violates either ordinance, it could seek its cooperation in removing the items deemed objectionable, Schreck said. If the gallery refuses, the city could bring misdemeanor charges against gallery officials, he said. The charges carry a maximum penalty of a \$100 fine and 50 days in jail.

In Cincinnati, the Contemporary Arts Center and its director, Dennis Barrie, were indicted on local obscenity charges for displaying the Mapplethorpe photographs.

More recently, officials with Liberty National Bank in Louisville decided to cancel an exhibit of Elvis and roadside advertisements from the 1950s because bank officers feared the works might be offensive. The exhibit has been moved to the Zephyr Gallery on West Main Street.

Speer and Litner said yesterday they doubt that Artswatch will remove any items from the exhibit.

"Artists need to be supported, not subjected to censorship," Speer said.

Louisville artist Debra Clem, who has a painting in the Artswatch exhibit, said she is disturbed by the city's actions and hopes officials are not singling out the small gallery.

"To be fair, they would have to make a wide sweep throughout the

arts community in Louisville," she said.

Speer said several visitors asked if any public funds are involved in the exhibit.

They are not. The exhibit was paid for with private donations, she said. She also said the arts association is not subsidized with public money. Operating expenses are paid with private donations and membership dues, Speer said.

Artswatch did receive two small outside grants last year, she said. The Greater Louisville Fund for the Arts provided \$1,000 and the Kentucky Arts Council, \$7,000, for several performances Artswatch sponsored, Speer said.

Lily Bifone, president of the local Citizens for Decency Through Law, said she has seen the exhibit and believes the gallery should be licensed as an adult entertainment establishment.

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