

Ferlinghetti art too racy for S.F. office building

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Apparently some of the tenants of the former Bank of America tower at 555 California St. in San Francisco don't care for poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti's expressionist and satirical paintings. At least not the huge oil-on-tarp pictures - a couple of which contain sketchy female breasts, another with a splotchy form that some might see as phallic and one with an abstract Christ figure - that were on view in the building lobby until the manager had them removed Tuesday.

"I don't know how many people complained," said Jan Casey, the San Francisco art consultant who arranged the show, which featured a suite of 11 Ferlinghetti tarp paintings, the biggest of which is about 6 by 10 feet, from 1992-93. She said she got an e-mail from the building manager Monday, three days after the pictures went up, saying tenants had complained about them and that all but two were unacceptable.

"You do have to be careful when you're dealing with 'corporate art,' but I think it's good to push the envelope on occasion," said Casey, who places art in buildings around town. She'd shown small reproductions of these works to representatives of 555 California St. - which is managed by the Shorenstein Co. and filled with lawyers, stockbrokers and insurance companies - and although "they weren't crazy about some of the pieces," Casey said, she thought the whole suite of pictures should be seen.

"That building is full of highly educated people who I thought would appreciate the work," Casey said. "I felt because of who he is - people are pretty familiar with Lawrence and his poetry - that people would understand the art is a bit tongue-in-cheek. I think the paintings are humorous and thought-provoking." When Casey told the building manager, Fatima Vegas, that "there's nothing here you wouldn't see in a museum," Casey said the reply was, "This is not a museum. It's a private building."

Vegas referred questions to company spokesman Tim Gallen, who said building managers met with Casey months ago to talk about the artworks that would be right for the space and "thought they had an understanding as to what was being installed. But it turned out to be things that were not appropriate for the space. Several major tenants expressed their concern that nudity was not appropriate for a business setting. So we asked them to remove the art and replace with other pieces by Mr. Ferlinghetti."

Rather than leaving up the two works deemed acceptable, Casey opted to take

down all the paintings, which went back to Ferlinghetti's Hunters Point studio. She replaced them with colorful abstractions by James Leonard and Daniele Girardi.

"It's an insult," said the famed poet, City Lights bookseller and publisher, who has been painting for decades to mixed reviews. "They're censoring my painting. There's nothing erotic or pornographic about those nudes. I am surprised that people would be bothered by those." He described the works as "lyrical and satirical. One verges on political. Another is a pretty mild religious statement, kind of a joke, called 'Jesus Discovers America.' "

Said building spokesman Gallen: "To call this censorship is creating a tempest in a teapot. The fact is, the people who own, use and inhabit this building have every right to choose what is appropriate art to display in their 'house.' "

Ferlinghetti is represented by the George Krevsky Gallery in San Francisco, which has images of the offending tarp pictures on its Web site, *georgekrevskygallery.com*.

"I just don't get it," said Krevsky, whose gallery isn't big enough to show more than a few of the pieces at a time. "Here's a guy who's beloved in San Francisco, who's iconic. These paintings are not offensive by any stretch of the imagination."

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