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Art
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**'Difficult subject matter'
is dangerous only as a political term**

The past two generations of Americans grew up with the sure knowledge that George Orwell's Big Brother resided in Soviet Russia and other totalitarian states. The dividing point between the free world and those ungodly Soviets was governmental control of the arts. What made our government so special was the freedom of expression guaranteed by city, state and federal governments in every document of incorporation. The fact that modern art was not sanctioned in Russia was anathema to every American artist who lifted a brush.

Last week, when Anne-Imelda Radice, acting chairwoman of the National Endowment for the arts, told Congress that she was prepared to veto grants for art projects that deal with "difficult subject matter," it became clear that America has completed the transition from the "land of the free and the home of the brave," to a country that was timid, manipulated and oppressed. If the Congress had truly represented the people they would have booed her out of the building, for she was not speaking as a private individual. Instead, as head of the NEA, her words expressed the official government attitude toward the arts.

In constitutional law, artistic merit has always been the prime factor in examining public expressions that stretch ideas of public morality and question accepted values. Art has always carried the standard of freedom and made possible a rule of government where neither the whims of despots nor the tyranny of the majority has destroyed personal freedoms.

It's obvious that the conservative attacks on the NEA by Jesse Helms, Patrick Buchanan and their hoary ilk is directed toward furthering political doctrine, the acquisition of personal power and the weakening of constitutional rights.

Bush's firing of John Frohnmayer to appease the conservatives only points out the manipulative political nature of the art bashing that has brought forth the idea of safe art. There is only a small step to the puritanical answer espoused for safe sex: "Don't Do it!" Essentially the message we are receiving from Radice is prohibitory. It's alright to do flowers, cute dogs and ducks but there will be no rewards unless we leave that "difficult subject matter" alone.

The artist's right to pursue the truth of art, no matter where it leads, is not negotiable. Our freedoms under the constitution are not negotiable. Only a cynical and corrupt government would perceive them to be so.

Two special exhibitions in the downtown warehouse area off of San Jacinto and Wood streets would give the art police of a reactionary future apoplexy. At Mother Dog Museum of Modern Art, 720 Walnut Street, is "**NAKED.naked.**" True to his word and

like **Venus on the Half Shell**, the artist delivers.

Runnels is undoubtedly one of the best conceptual artists around. Word poems, such as his **BLOUSE.BOSOM.BLOSSOM** points to the poetic and erotic imagery of his photographs. The exhibit doesn't contain the savagery of Mapplethorpe's homoerotic work and never becomes pornographic. The power of these image comes from the poetry and sensuality of the artist's vision.

A native of Hot Coffee, Mississippi, Runnels has pursued a lusty and uncomplicated vision of the world where children in a cage with rabbits cavort in innocent nakedness, far from the calculated lewdness of suntan ads. Naked deities and angels that glorify carnality turn out to be next-door neighbors or, sometimes surprisingly the artist standing next to you at an Art opening.

In **Bed of Fire**, from the series **How Some Women Sleep**, a mythic figure rests on a blazing funeral pyre in the woods. It is a powerful photograph, created by printing a reverse negative of the image. In other photos done in this simple technique, especially in **The Voluptuary series**, one suspects it is used to conceal the identity of the subjects, but in this instance it is a devastatingly effective esthetic device.

Night Blooms is a series of female genitalia. It is a subject handled with obvious reverence by the artist, but a series of male genitalia somehow seems flat, with the intensity of focus diffused.

One viewer of the exhibition observed that most of the figures were of females. As one views a Pan-like self portrait of the artist, it is obvious that John Runnels wouldn't have it any other way. He is clearly a man who loves women.