

Growing condemnation of censorship of Australian artist Bill Henson

By Richard Phillips
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The unprecedented censorship of Bill Henson's work and threats of child pornography charges against the widely-respected artist/photographer and the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery on May 22 sent shock waves through Australia's artistic community. Although artists faced growing attacks on freedom of expression under the former Howard government, few were prepared for the latest assault and its encouragement by Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and New South Wales Premier Morris Iemma.

A day after the raid Rudd told national television that Henson's work was "absolutely revolting" and later declared that the law should take its course. Encouraged by these inflammatory remarks, police in New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory widened their censorship operations and demanded that galleries and Internet sites take down Henson's work or face prosecution under child pornography laws.

This assault on basic democratic rights has produced a wave of anger. Letters to the editor columns and Internet blogs of the corporate media have been swamped with protests. These include comments from artists, writers, former Henson models, victims of sexual abuse and even a former NSW police superintendent, defending Henson, denouncing the use of police and attacking Labor's encouragement of this assault on basic democratic rights.

A letter to Melbourne's *Age* newspaper from Antonia Green, an artist and former model of Henson, gave voice to some of these concerns: "As a child I was photographed by Bill Henson, along with my brother and father, and have known his work since I was seven. It has been an influence in inspiring me to become an artist.

"To me, these images have always communicated a fragile truth and a pure beauty in a dark world. There is, I think, a metaphoric darkness beyond the world of night that the models appear in. Significantly, these images of naked adolescents sit alongside other photographs of night skies, empty lit buildings and silhouettes of trees; it is a whole world he is evoking.

"Henson's work is poetic, not pornographic. If we censor the expression of what is dark and ambiguous in art, then a far greater darkness takes hold—that of ignorance, suppression and a numbing of imagination.

"If Bill Henson were convicted, this would set a precedent for curbing the civil liberty of artistic expression and a dumbing down of Australian cultural experience. As an artist, the prospect of making work in this country is looking bleaker daily."

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Judy Annear from the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), a few days after the

censorship of Henson's exhibition.

Annear, who was curator of Henson's 30-year retrospective at the AGNSW in 2004-05, said the censorship was "appalling". She repudiated the allegations of child pornography.

"I've known Bill's work for 30 years and we've been collecting his work since the early 1980s," she said. "We mounted a major retrospective in late 2004 and 65,000 people saw it here in Sydney and there were no complaints. We produced a book for show and it sold out—probably about 4,000 copies—and again there were no complaints. It then went to Melbourne and broke all records for a major solo show."

Asked about what had produced the hysterical attack on Henson, she replied: "You have to look at the broader social arena. Unfortunately I can only talk to you about his work as an artist but I will say that for politicians to conflate art and pornography is entirely inappropriate."

"Bill is not about exploiting or whipping up hysteria—these accusations are coming from somewhere else. The really important thing to consider is that stylistically Bill's work may change over time in all sorts of subtle ways but in essence it's always about the same thing. It doesn't matter that it's a landscape or city street or a crowd picture or a young person or an old person, whether they're clothed or naked; it's all about how to present a set of ideas.

"All artists—whether they're visual artists or musicians or writers—are working towards this. They want to produce the best and for people to understand something about themselves and the world around them."

Annear said: "It's important for people to take a step back and look rationally at what is going on because artists can't be artists in an environment of hysteria. Do we want to live in that sort of community? And where will it stop, does it mean that his books should now be pulped?"

The National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) has called for Henson's artworks to be returned and exhibited at the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery.

NAVA's executive director Tamara Winikoff told the WSWs: "It's obvious that the whole question of child sexual abuse is a very sensitive issue and one can see why something like this might happen. It's necessary, however, to step back and take a deep breath and ask, 'Is this really abusive?' You also have to ask about the context in which it has been made and shown?

"First of all, it is at an art gallery and not on a pornographic

website, and secondly you have to question the attitudes of mind that people bring to the work. After all, nudity is not an offence and for the last five centuries—in fact since the beginning of human civilisation—the nude figure has been a legitimate subject for artists. It is bread and butter for anybody that looks at art and appreciates art. This should not be problematic in the twenty-first century.

“Yes, it’s fine that Kevin Rudd and [federal Liberal Party leader] Brendan Nelson, and anyone else who wants to comment, to have their own personal opinions, but these opinions need to be tested and not just be a knee jerk reaction.

“Once all the blood and guts is over we need to calmly analyse the issue. Warning signs can be put on galleries if people think that something inside may be problematic, people can then judge whether they should go inside. But to censor it on the presumption that someone who goes inside is going to be perverted and come out as a child abuser, is a long stretch. Complaints from the public don’t constitute breaking the law.

“One of the purposes of art is to challenge people’s comfort zones and to call into question the appropriateness of public attitudes to anything. Censorship not only constrains the freedom of expression of the artist but it compromises the right of the community to access the work.”

Theatre critic and poet Allison Croggon, who authored the Open Letter of Support for Bill Henson, which was signed by more than 42 participants in the Labor government’s recent 2020 Summit, told the WSWS that scores of people had contacted her in the past few days wanting to add their names.

Croggon said that while artists were “horrified” by the censorship of Henson and the comments of Rudd, she had “always had been sceptical” about the new Labor government. “I wish I could say I was surprised by the responses of Kevin Rudd and Emma—their comments did nothing to make the discussion more rational—but I am very disappointed.

“Arguments are now being advanced,” she continued, “that nudity equals sexuality and pornography. This means throwing out the whole history of Western art.

“Children are not being protected by these outraged actions. All I can see is young people being demonised. And the reality is that there have been no complaints from models—on the contrary, former models have praised Henson. So there’s a qualitative difference between pedophiles and what Bill Henson is doing.”

Commenting on the Open Letter, Croggon said: “The warnings we make at the end of the letter are crucial. Historically, if you know anything about repressive regimes, artists are among the first to be targeted. Obviously there are political activists but artists are always targeted.”

Croggon believed that Rudd was not “being hypocritical or populist about this but has this moralistic core. Obviously he’s entitled to feel that way personally but his conflation of morality and the law is a bit too Talibanesque for my taste.”

“At the same time, I’m becoming encouraged by the response to the letter which has enabled people to contribute rational arguments to this issue. I think it’s a mistake to just concentrate on the shock-jocks and the extreme headlines because they only represent a vocal and very noisy minority.

“Most people just don’t feel this is a matter for the courts. If it were just a question of debate about Bill Henson’s work then you would discuss it. The problem that we’re dealing with is the police and possible prosecution, which takes it into a whole different area. And even worse, when people can’t even look at the work there’s little chance for Australia’s adult population to make up their own mind.”

Croggon suggested it was unlikely that Henson would be prosecuted: “He has a CV six miles long and artistic recognition everywhere”. She warned, however: “This doesn’t mean that they will not go ahead in the current charged atmosphere. They could try to use the case to test legal changes regarding the Internet. But if they did, it would be a very bad precedent.”

Playwright and theatre consultant Geoffrey Williams, who has organised an online petition condemning the censorship of Henson, told the WSWS that the police raid was “brutal and sinister” and seemed to “come out of nowhere”.

“As a sometime theatre maker,” he said, “I was very concerned that attitudes like this become all pervading. It’s starting in our art galleries but next it could be our theatres and our libraries. That might seem like an hysterical reaction, but a play of mine was threatened with a ‘Closing Order’ in London in 1991 because someone in the audience one night didn’t like the homoerotic content.

“I know what it feels like to suddenly find yourself feeling like you are a criminal in that regard. The damage it does to your esteem and the relationship to your creativity is totally destructive. It shuts you down ... and I was greatly concerned that Bill Henson would be going through a similar process of self-censorship.”

Williams said that although Rudd was a “popularly elected prime minister, as opposed to a wisely elected one, his responses to this issue have made it very clear that there is not only a financially conservative man behind the mask, but also a morally conservative one as well.

“I was not surprised by the reactions from the NSW ALP. Naturally, they would toe the line and with the government imploding on practically every political issue and infected with a real child sex-abuse scandal and sex scandals in one shape or another, they were always going to launch a display of rigorous over-policing. It’s the way they handle the fall-out.”

Williams told the WSWS that hundreds had signed his online petition over the weekend and he would send it to the New South Wales Director of Public Prosecutions. He planned to maintain the campaign for “as long as necessary”.

Williams concluded: “I was speaking to a friend of mine at lunch yesterday. He was very clear about one thing: if charges are laid, the art world will march on Parliament House in Canberra in numbers that will make Kevin Rudd’s head spin.”

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