Group protests ICA's Mapplethorpe exhibit

By Patti Hartigan
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

The American Freedom Coalition of Massachusetts held the first public protest yesterday of the photography exhibition "Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment," which opens Aug. 1 at the Institute of Contemporary Art. At a news conference yesterday, AFC president, Rev. Sargon Y. Ibraham, called for the abolition of the National Endowment for the Arts and for an immediate cutoff of ICA funding from the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

The Mapplethorpe retrospective includes floral still-lifes and portraits, along with seven much-discussed, graphic homoerotic images and two photographs of nude or partially nude children. The exhibition organizers – not the ICA – received $30,000 from the NEA.

Calling Ibraham's demands "unfortunate and frightening," ICA director David Ross said, "This is an opportunistic attempt to get air time for an agenda that would control the behavior of Boston citizens based on his religious perspective."

AFC describes itself as a national patriotic organization that lobbies for such issues as the affirmation of God, family values, anti-communism and a strong national defense. It has about 5,000 members in Massachusetts, said Ibraham, who is pastor of the Maple Street United Methodist Church in Lynn.

In response to the demand to end state funding of the ICA, Rick Schwartz, an MCC spokesman, said, "That's a ridiculous request that the council has no intention of honoring. The ICA is one of the premier contemporary arts museums in the nation."

But Ibraham vowed that his organization will continue its campaign against the NEA and ICA, explaining that he had sent a letter to 200 local ministers and was collecting signatures on an anti-NEA petition to send to Congress. Taking a position he himself called paradoxical, he called for the citizens of Boston to make up their own minds about Mapplethorpe while also demanding an outright cancellation of the show.

The event bore significance as the first public display locally against the exhibition, which has drawn protests elsewhere and led to the arrest on obscenity charges of a museum director in Cincinnati. Several local groups have been pressuring Attorney General James Shannon to prosecute the museum on obscenity grounds. But Shannon told the Globe early this month that his office does not believe the exhibit violates obscenity statutes.

Meanwhile, the Attorney General's office will be notifying AFC, because the AFC is a year behind on the annual financial reports it must file as a nonprofit organization.

Ibraham displayed photocopies of Mapplethorpe photographs at yesterday's event. According to ICA board member and attorney Ike Williams, use of the reproductions most likely violates copyright laws, because the Mapplethorpe Foundation owns and controls rights to the images in question. Foundation attorney Michael Stout said he was considering whether to take action against AFC. In a similar case, artist David Wojnarowicz has taken legal action against the Mississippi-based American Family Association for reproducing and distorting his paintings.

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