



CULTURE

Smithsonian artists and scholars respond to White House list of objectionable art

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The painting by Rigoberto A. González, *Refugees Crossing the Border Wall into South Texas*, was described in the White House letter as "commemorating the act of illegally crossing." It was a competition finalist at The National Portrait Gallery in 2022.

The official White House newsletter has posted an article titled "President Trump Is Right About the Smithsonian." It calls out some of the institution's artwork, exhibitions, programs and online articles that focus on race, slavery, immigration and sexuality. That includes works at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, The National Portrait Gallery, and The National Museum of the American Latino.

A Smithsonian Institution sign is seen on the National Air and Space Museum on the National Mall in Washington, DC. In March, President Trump signed an executive order to reshape and remove content that "portrays American and Western values as inherently harmful and oppressive" and promote "American greatness" at the Smithsonian Institution, and its collection of 21 museums, 14 education centers and the National Zoo.

The list of objectionable content comes a week after White House officials sent a letter asking eight of the Smithsonian's museums to submit their current and future plans for exhibitions, social media content and other material. The institution's director Lonnie Bunch was told it had 120 days to comply for what the administration says will be a "comprehensive review," in order to bring the Smithsonian in line with Trump's cultural directives ahead of the country's 250th anniversary celebrations.

The administration has directed the museums to replace "divisive or ideologically driven language with unifying, historically accurate and constructive descriptions."

NPR reached out to the White House asking for comment about the article highlighting the Smithsonian artists. They have not responded.

The list of artists and content seems to be drawn from art that was highlighted in a recent article in *The Federalist*. The conservative online magazine argued that the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, for example, was filled with "wall-to-wall, anti-American propaganda."

The Smithsonian's press office declined NPR's offer to comment on the White House list. In June, it sent out a statement saying the institution is committed to remaining "free from political or partisan influence."

While some of the artists and scholars NPR spoke to said they fear being further targeted, others said that being called out by the White House is a "badge of honor." Some referenced other times, in the U.S. and around the world, when art provoked a strong political response; and some said they fear that Trump's call for "anti-woke" art will have a chilling effect on artists, museums and galleries.

Rigoberto A. Gonzalez

The White House newsletter singles out a 2020 painting by Rigoberto Gonzalez, titled *"Refugees Crossing the Border Wall into South Texas,"* which was a competition finalist for The National Portrait Gallery in 2022. It depicts an immigrant family descending a ladder propped up at the U.S.-Mexico border wall. The mother holds a baby, and next to her is the father and their other son, who step onto an American landscape filled with "dangers they encounter now that they've arrived in the United States," Gonzalez says: a discarded fast food container symbolizing "an overindulgent American diet," a Victoria's Secret ad representing "oversexualized consumerism," a crumpled iPhone case that depicts "social media addiction."

The White House newsletter spotlights Gonzalez' artwork for "commemorating the act of illegally crossing" the Southern border.

Gonzalez denies that his painting promotes border crossings; rather, he says, it depicts realities. His painting is currently housed at the Varmar Private Collection.

The artist, born in Tijuana, is an American citizen whose work often explores the border region at the southern edge of Texas, where he lives.

Gonzalez says, at first, he was shocked to see his name listed by the White House. "But then I was a little bit glad," he says. "My work is political, and that painting in particular was questioning the anti-immigrant sentiment of the time. So I'm glad that it got a response from a presidency that is very clearly going anti-immigration."

Gonzalez says the White House list reminds him of the "degenerate art" exhibitions in 1930s Germany. "The Nazis gathered modern artists they deemed to be not within the

context of their ideals," Gonzalez says, adding that he believes the current Trump administration "has an agenda, and clearly they do not see it in my work."

The thought of getting a visit from Immigration and Customs Enforcement is a concern for many immigrants, even if they are in the U.S. legally. Gonzalez says he's not fazed or intimidated; he's now thinking about doing a painting about the current ICE raids that are rounding up, imprisoning and deporting immigrants.

Ibram X. Kendi

The White House newsletter calls Howard University history professor and writer Ibram X. Kendi a "hardcore woke activist."

The author of the book *How to be an Anti-Racist* says he's not surprised. "Those of us who study racism, who engage in rigorous research to try to explain what racism is have been typically described as activists, as opposed to what we are: scholars and intellectuals using research and analysis to try to present the truth," he says. "So it's a way to discredit me and distract from my scholarship and to continuously try to make me into this boogey-person who should not be taken seriously. Because, frankly, I could see this White House not wanting their supporters to take my work seriously, because I think if they did, they wouldn't take the White House seriously."



Ibram X. Kendi in a 2020 portrait. The author and his 2019 book *How to be An Antiracist* were featured in an online educational series published by the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. That series and Kendi were among the material listed in a page published by the White House this week.

Steven Senne/AP

Kendi's book has been featured at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. In it, Kendi guides readers to "actively deconstruct racism, unlearn racist ideas and recognize racial equality."

"That type of transformation and learning is in direct conflict to an administration that's trying to convince the American people, particularly white Americans, that they are under attack or that they are being harmed or that racism doesn't exist, or they're the primary subject of racism," says Kendi.

He says his work teaching about the history of racist ideas and practices and policies in the U.S. has made him a target.

"I've been on lists like this for years, particularly over the last five years," he says. "They don't want white people and others to actually read my work... so that they won't be transformed by it."

Kendi says the White House actions remind him of the Jim Crow era, when segregationist politicians and leaders "were firmly against our public museums presenting an accurate picture of slavery, or the Civil War, of civil rights activism." Even before then, he says, some leaders tried to present slavery as being "good" for African Americans. "There were efforts to downplay or downgrade the level of horror and torture and terror that the Black people faced," says Kendi.

Amy Sherald

Last month, before she was listed in the White House newsletter, painter Amy Sherald canceled her upcoming show at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery.

Sherald is known for her painting of first lady Michelle Obama, and the canceled exhibition would have included her painting of a trans woman with pink hair and a blue gown, holding a torch. It's called "Trans Forming Liberty."

In April, Sherald talked to NPR about how Trump's rhetoric was affecting her work. "We're talking about erasure every day," she said. "And so now I feel like every portrait that I make is a counterterrorist attack ... to counter some kind of attack on American history and on Black American history and on Black Americans."



Sherald's painting, *Trans Forming Liberty*.

Courtesy of the artist and Hauser and Wirth. © Amy Sherald. Photograph by Kevin Bulluck

Hugo Crosthwaite

In 2022, the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery commissioned artist Hugo Crosthwaite to create a study of Dr. Anthony Fauci, former director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and chief medical advisor to President Biden.

Crosthwaite animated 19 drawings he made, depicting Fauci dealing with the HIV/AIDS crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Dr. Fauci didn't want the idea of a painting of him with a big shield fighting a virus or something like that. He didn't even like the idea of a portrait of himself," says Crosthwaite. "But I thought I could do this stop-motion animation that basically tells the narrative of his 50-year career."



Anthony Fauci, then-chief medical adviser to President Joe Biden and director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, was honored with a portrait at the National Portrait Gallery's annual Portrait of a Nation Gala in 2022. The stop-motion drawing animation from artist Hugo Crosthwaite is one of many items and exhibits listed in a White House announcement.

Tasos Katopodis/Getty Images for the National Portrait Gallery

The animated Fauci portrait remains on the National Portrait Gallery's website and on YouTube. Crosthwaite reckons that the White House singled it out because it depicts someone who promoted the technology and creation of vaccines — a once apolitical issue that has become increasingly partisan.

"It seems like they just came up with the idea, 'oh, this is about Fauci. So then we hate it now,'" he says. "And they probably haven't even seen it."

Still, Crosthwaite says the attention he and the other artists are getting now isn't all negative.

"I was kind of honored to be included in the list of great art pieces celebrating diversity," says Crosthwaite, who was born in Tijuana and lives in San Diego. "They're trying to censor artwork. But I always feel that it always kind of backfires; it usually draws more attention to it, which I think is wonderful."

Patricia Cronin

Brooklyn-based artist Patricia Cronin's bronze sculpture "Memorial to a Marriage" is part of the National Portrait Gallery's permanent collection. Her 2002 work depicts two women (herself and her now-wife) embracing on a bed.

"You see hardly any LGBT monuments in our public spheres anywhere in the United States, so it was very subversive," she says. "It was a poetic protest when I made it – before same sex marriage was legal – and when [it] became legal, it became more of a celebratory icon. Now, it's starting to veer back into the poetic protest status, given the culture that we're in right now."



While "Memorial to a Marriage" is not on the White House's list of objectionable art, Cronin fears it could be in the future. She says that kind of threat alone gives pause to many artists. She says going after the Smithsonian could end up silencing other museums and galleries.

After creating the original marble sculpture for New York City's historic Woodlawn Cemetery, Cronin made three bronze casts of her piece, *Memorial To A Marriage*.

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Chuck Close. © 2002 Patricia Cronin

"Part of this whole censorship is to erase our history, but also erase our lives," says the Brooklyn College professor at the School of Visual, Media and Performing Arts. "If we're not allowed to be in public, or museums aren't showing the American story in its fullest

complexities, it's going to be terrible for many artists who are making work that reflects their human experience. And I'm terrified. Absolutely."

She says the current political climate is daunting, and during dark times, people look to the artists to respond. "I'm here to tell you the artists are always doing the work," she says. "But do the gatekeepers let you see the work?"

"People are definitely scared," she adds. "And other museums are cancelling exhibitions. I've had exhibitions canceled. Institutions are scared. And yes, it's very dire. And it's exactly why art matters."

Fears of self-censorship

Art historian, and Stanford University Professor Richard Meyers says the White House messaging about the Smithsonian has him confounded. "I've never seen a list like this," he says. "I mean, it does remind me a bit of McCarthyism."

He says calling for a review of the Smithsonian museums seems to have a "strategic vagueness." He adds: "Is it some sort of 'enemies list'? Does it mean the works will be removed from the public?"

"It's becoming very difficult to know exactly what is happening, who is making these decisions, how the art is being treated and at what point is it censorship?" he asks.

Meyers says this current movement is less clearcut than the U.S. culture wars of the late 80s and early 90s. Back then, there were political fights over Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photographs that some considered "obscene" and over Andres Serrano's 1987 photo "Piss Christ," showing the figure of Christ on a cross in a pool of urine. Both works led to a crusade by then-Sen. Jesse Helms against the National Endowment for Arts.

President Trump has called for the elimination of the NEA, and has begun cancelling the agency's grants.

Meyers, director of the American Studies program at Stanford University, wrote a book called "Outlaw Representation, Censorship and Homosexuality in 20th Century American Art."

He says art censorship has always provoked strong responses. "Sometimes it's lawsuits, sometimes it's protests," he says, "and some of those responses are going to be other artworks."

Meyers says he fears that up-and-coming artists will begin censoring themselves — which he calls the worst kind of censorship, "because you never see the work or it's never made."

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